

## Taking Up the Past: *Hamlet* and Time

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In twentieth century drama, the act of waiting has become almost a genre in itself. Beckett's *Godot*, Sartre's *No Exit*, and their dramatic progeny ask an audience to focus on the process of duration as the consciousness perceives it. Although the theatrical tempo of Shakespeare's play would never be mistaken for that of Beckett's, *Hamlet* makes a similar demand.<sup>1</sup> In *Hamlet*, however, duration as a distinct issue must be extracted from a network of questions about time that occur regularly in the critical tradition concerning both *Hamlet* and the Shakespearean canon at large.

A criticism aware of Shakespeare's stage practice has accustomed us to balance the demands of theatrical tempo with the demands of plausible chronology. We expect an acceleration to events and agree to overlook minor inconsistencies. We are accustomed as well to Shakespeare's assessment of human life within a Renaissance value system, where time is a measure of growth or decay in the individual or society as in *Troilus and Cressida* and *Richard II*.<sup>2</sup> But when the action imitated is the act of hesitation, we are not concerned with time as a way of keeping track of events but with the consciousness as a repository of duration. Hesitation increases the duration of an act, focussing attention not on the rearrangement of the world achieved by an action, but on the action as a movement through time.<sup>3</sup>

No Shakespearean play resists the reduction of time to a spatial analogue as completely as does *Hamlet*. And most of what we value in *Hamlet* depends on the distinction. Throughout the action of the play, Hamlet moves as quickly as his antagonists. Only his consciousness of duration tells him that their combat is taking place in slow motion. Hamlet agonizes over the pace of things because time matters

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to the human consciousness. Henri Bergson's well-known distinction between time experienced as duration and time conceptualized in spatial terms points toward a way of distinguishing the treatment of time in purely textual literature from the use of time in dramatic texts written with the expectation of theatrical performance.<sup>4</sup> Bergson remains more popular with literary critics than with philosophers. Philosophical objections to Bergson's view stem in part from his assumption that space is objectified before perception. If we go beyond him it must be in the direction of linking both space and time to perception.<sup>5</sup>

When we speak of dramatic form, we necessarily do so by means of a spatial description, which has been called a "heuristic metaphor animated by our intensely felt need to order the chaos of reality" (Kastan 11). The spatial metaphor expresses a sense of control. Yet in the complementary experience of felt chaos, the disposition to the spatial metaphor remains so strong that we typically express chaos as a failure of vision. The moral confusion of John Webster's plays characteristically culminates in metaphors of obscured sight. In *The White Devil*, a dying Vittoria laments, "My soule, like to a ship in a black storme,/Is driven I know not whither" (V.vi.5-6). Her brother Flamineo, dying with her, negates history, "I doe not looke/Who went before, nor who shall follow mee;/Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end" (V.vi.15-17). Our customary use of words seems inevitably to evoke space. Shakespeare expresses the power whereby the mind inquires into past and future in similar visual terms. For Hamlet, "He that made us with such large discourse,/Looking before and after, gave us not/That capability and Godlike reason/To fust in us unus'd" (IV.iv.36-39). Discourse creates visual images of time, but drama has at its disposal a means other than language to convey the inalienable subjectivity of time: the potential to control and segment the presentation of events during the time of performance.

The representation of phenomena in the theater is obviously unlike representation through a text in that the stage has at its disposal space and objects, and in that real time elapses as a performance takes place. Although the purposes of drama are usually served by a space similar, at least in its dimensions, to the places we normally inhabit, time is generally compressed.

The compression of time is generally achieved by means of two devices: an extraordinary concurrence of events and the insertion of gaps in the representation of time. The concentration of events in a short period of time (implicit compression) is not in itself a violation of the expectations of the audience. But because the concurrence of events is a structural characteristic of the climax of drama, a play which relies heavily on this device, *Oedipus Rex* for example, tends to

seem all climax. More commonly, compression is explicit: action is accelerated by gaps in the time scheme of the plot, which may be used to accentuate significant sequences of events or which may themselves be significant. When, as occurs frequently in Shakespeare's complex plots, the alternation of scenes from independent chains of events deliberately distracts attention from time or disrupts time,<sup>6</sup> duration is not an issue. But, alternatively, a gap in time may be emphasized to demonstrate changes in character which constitute the internal effects of what has transpired. In types of drama sufficiently traditional that the term character makes sense, an Aristotelian distinction is normally appropriate: a character who changes must show that change by making choices differently as a result of the assimilation of experience. It must take some stage time to establish that a change in behavior has occurred. One natural consequence of the disruption of events by time gaps is that both as audience and, in a more leisurely way, as analysts, we reconstitute a story from the plot. (The *fabula/sjuzet* distinction of the Russian formalists is the most potent modern formulation of this traditional act.)<sup>7</sup> In drama, the plot as acted text subordinates the story reconstituted from the plot to a greater degree than a narrated plot can subordinate the story it implies.

Modern theatrical practice has been intensely concerned with conveying immediacy, the moment by moment quality of experience. Dramatic theory shares this concern. Comedy permits and even encourages digression, but in a tragedy we attend to each moment with the implicit promise that it is significantly related to an imminent future. In Susanne Langer's terms, "literature creates a virtual past, drama creates a virtual future" (307).<sup>8</sup> If this concern with the moment is acknowledged, the craft of the playwright must balance the need for scope with the necessity of expressing immediacy through stretches of continuous time. For Neoclassical theorists, continuity is a necessary element of dramatic illusion, but the value of continuity does not depend on the assumption that theater is illusion. In a manner more compatible with Elizabethan theater, the modern focus on the experience of the audience preserves a sense of the actor's identity as distinct from that of the character. Herbert Blau formulates the conception eloquently.

The critical thing, then, in the institution of theater is not so much that an actor is there, but that an actor is so vulnerably there. Whatever he represents in the play, in the order of time he is representing nobody but himself. How could he? That's his body, doing time (134).

Although theater criticism like that of Blau is often anti-text, it describes, I believe, the climate of expectation which dominates our choice of those texts in the performance of which we continue to be actively interested, and in the analysis of which we continue to be actively engaged. Stephen Booth, for example, correlates the temporal reality of audience experience with the text of *Hamlet* in asserting that the audience "gets information or sees action it once wanted only after a new interest has superseded the old" ("Value of *Hamlet*" 183).

In its consistent concern with duration itself, *Hamlet* demands our attention to almost all the difficulties that the representation of time can create in the theater. The audience must accept for itself the task of understanding a protagonist for whom timing is essential and whose subjective sense of time changes as the play unfolds. Given the rapid tempo resulting from dramatic compression, the audience gropes for ways to assess Hamlet's judgment. Quantitative measure of time expressed in words is of little help. Early in the play, two months is a measure of extraordinary haste when it refers to Gertrude's remarriage and of extraordinary hesitation when it refers to Hamlet's failure to avenge his father's death. Yet in Act V, Hamlet feels that an interim of a few days is sufficient time for whatever he must undertake.

Conflicting indications of Hamlet's age have sufficiently complicated the assessment of Hamlet's behavior as to have created virtually an open house for psychological critics. Hamlet's actions have been assessed against norms ranging from those appropriate to Hamlet's adolescent behavior to those appropriate for mature behavior. Immature Hamlets are viewed as confounding the problems of normal development with those of his particular predicament. Older Hamlets seem unnaturally powerless. However, a larger issue, how the past and future impinge upon the present, directs the audience away from the limitations of regarding Hamlet as defined by any single stage in the process of maturation. Disturbed by an event in the past, his father's murder, and by a responsibility to avenge himself on his uncle in the future, Hamlet is incapable of acting decisively in the present. When he accepts that past and future, he possesses the present. Because this broader philosophical issue overrides, to some extent, decisions concerning Hamlet's age, the Hamlets of the theater do not diverge as widely as might otherwise be expected.

The play's chronology is an inevitable reference point for the discussion of time. *Hamlet* transpires in less than a year's time: soldiers complain of the bitter cold as the play begins; Ophelia drowns while gathering flowers just before the play ends. But for the bulk of the play the sense of season is muted: very little awareness of natural time penetrates to the interior of Elsinore. The play begins

less than two months after Hamlet Senior's death (Act I); shifts to an interlude of some week's time four months after the death (II-IV.iii); accounts briefly for events in Hamlet's absence (IV.iv-vii); and concludes swiftly after his return from the sea, perhaps a month later (Act V). This chronology would suggest that the play presents the last year of a Hamlet who we are told is thirty years old in the graveyard scene. Within the longer framework, Hamlet's stage appearances represent three short periods of time separated by significant gaps after his confrontation with the ghost (between Acts I and II) and during his sea voyage (after IV.iii). Harley Granville-Barker's perception of what he terms the three movements of the play, created by these gaps, has stood the test of time as a guide to the theatrical rhythm of the play.<sup>9</sup> Each of these gaps may be seen not merely as a compression of the action but as a significant duration during which Hamlet's attitude toward time can be seen to have changed. (In both instances, onstage action clearly established the time lapse before Hamlet appears.) In each of the three phases of his experience he is retrospective, but only in the final phase can his retrospection embrace more than the immediate past, and only in this last phase is his view of present and future undistorted by his retrospection.

In no other Shakespearean tragedy does the action of the play depend so heavily upon the protagonist's response to an event conceived as having transpired before the play begins.<sup>10</sup> Hamlet's dialogue with the past explores the multiple consequences of a crime far more economical in the doing than in the undoing. In the ghost's words, he was "Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd." Hamlet mourns for his father, feels his flesh sullied by his mother's hasty remarriage, despises the person of Claudius, regrets the crime of incest, and perceives himself to have been cheated of the crown. Assimilating the consequences of the murder requires a far longer duration than the act of committing it. Merleau-Ponty's observations on the difficulty of introducing historicity into the events of life suggest some of the problems of coming to terms with the crime.

My hold on the past and the future is precarious, and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment, bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn future developments in order to be understood (346).

The tragic protagonist, if he is granted a moment of recognition, is characteristically able to resolve the interaction of past and future

when the events of the past determine his personal future, traditionally the circumstances and significance of his death. At the beginning of the play, the difficult process of possessing his own time has not yet been simplified for Hamlet by imminent death, and an enormous burden of past events bears upon his present. As a consequence, not only is Hamlet lost in deliberation, but his antagonists are deprived of the opportunity to oppose him in dialogue which concerns his real objectives. The closet scene with Gertrude interrupts this introspection and the sea voyage seems to end it, but the beginning of the play displays the structural peculiarity of a protagonist whose internal focus disengages the other characters of the play from the core of its action.

In no action within the drama is Hamlet's antagonist Claudius efficient: his stratagems are foiled; his agents are inefficient; his conscience is strong enough to trouble him, but too weak to accomplish his salvation. Hamlet wins the stage encounter: his living presence in Elsinore taints Claudius' victory. He taunts Claudius, threatens him, and evokes his sense of guilt. As his father's namesake, Hamlet evokes an even stronger than usual sense of the father surviving in the son. Hamlet achieves his minor objectives as Claudius does not, yet each triumph renews Hamlet's despair. As Hamlet's certainty of the depravity of the present increases, his despair at being unable to redeem the time deepens. Time "out of joint" is dislocated history: every bit of evidence that increases Hamlet's certainty of the guilt of the King increases as well his awareness of the rift created by the King's crime. Hamlet's capacity for action in the present is undermined by his own successful inquiry into the past.

The first problem in analyzing Hamlet's relationship with the past arises through the initial conditions of the play. These conditions define the immediate past, and provide indications of Hamlet's age. Hamlet's presence at Wittenberg suggests an age closer to twenty years than to the thirty years that Act V suggests. As readers, if not as playgoers, we have evolved ways to evade being troubled by these boundaries. We allow the contradictory indicators of age to suggest attitudes toward Hamlet: a sense of the burden placed on extreme youth in the beginning; a sense of his manhood and sufficiency in the end.<sup>11</sup> Difficulties arise when we look for the psychological causes of Hamlet's reaction to his situation, by which we mean the psychological models for the imitation of behavior or personality that we find in the play.<sup>12</sup>

The difficulty does not simply disappear when we change nomenclature, demanding of dramatic imitation something less consistent than case history. Hamlet must still be acted. And he will probably be presented as a rebellious youth in one playhouse and an indecisive

entrant to middle age in another for as long as the play is performed. Psychoanalysis tugs the representation toward adolescence while the economics of the theater thrusts to the fore middle-aged actors with box office clout. But Shakespeare is not merely an innocent victim of a struggle for precision alien to Elizabethan theater conditions. He has posited a Hamlet whose relationship to Ophelia throughout the play generates concerns appropriate to the young lover, whereas his process of coming to terms with mortality suggests an older man. But because the sexual dimension of the usurper's crime, incestuous marriage with Gertrude, yokes sexuality with mortality in the central issue of the play, Hamlet is never exclusively concerned with the problems particular to a single age for a sustained period of time.

The initial circumstances of the play suggest problems more extensive than the conflicting indications of Hamlet's age. If Hamlet returned from Wittenberg when his father died, then the earnest wooing of Ophelia that alarmed Polonius and Laertes would be assumed to have occurred in the immediate aftermath of the funeral. It would be difficult to envision how he could have wooed her during this hypothetical period of time, but the consequences of the relationship are obvious enough. A father places obstacles in the way of his daughter's suitor. This simple situation is compounded by the naive complicity of the father with the murderer of the suitor's father. The suitor's consequent emotional confusion, rather than a clear sequence of events that would have precipitated it, is what the situation requires. From a critical standpoint we must be aware that though the presumed hiatus at Wittenberg explains many of Hamlet's characteristics, there are equally many characteristics, as suitor and courtier, that would be precluded by his having spent most of his time at a foreign university. The combined effect of these alternative personal histories is to make Hamlet a stranger to Elsinore even as he is intimately involved with it. His double past complicates our perception of even those relationships not directly affected by his father's death.

Wittenberg is not merely a sign of youth, but also a qualification to think seriously about metaphysics. On the battlements, Horatio is nominated by the soldiers to speak to the ghost because he is a scholar. Hamlet's own physical daring on the battlements depends upon his argument that his soul is safe: "what can [the ghost] do to that,/Being a thing immortal as itself?" Both scholars are assumed to be versed in what their world knows of speculative creatures like ghosts. Because the scholarship of Horatio and Hamlet makes them more ready than soldiers to encounter the other world, Wittenberg evokes a kind of experience rather than a kind of inexperience.

Hamlet's wooing of Ophelia far more clearly suggests his youth. Polonius is concerned particularly with the dishonor Ophelia might

encounter when "the blood burns."

These blazes, daughter,  
 Giving more light than heat, extinct in both  
 Even in their promise, as it is a-making,  
 You must not take for fire . . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 . . . . . For Lord Hamlet,  
 Believe so much in him that he is young,  
 And with a larger teder may he walk  
 Than may be given you. (I.iii. 117-20,123-26)

This assumption that intense desire is naturally linked to youth is sustained beyond Act I. Hamlet upbraids his mother in her closet for having committed her crime of incest at an age when "The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,/And waits upon the judgment . . ." That the sexual crimes of the play are committed by the old makes them more heinous, at least to the young.

O shame, where is thy blush?  
 Rebellious hell,  
 If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,  
 To flaming youth let virtue be as wax  
 And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame  
 When the compulsive ardure gives the charge,  
 Since frost itself as actively doth burn,  
 And reason [panders] will. (III.iv. 81-88)

The contrast between young and old focusses on the balance between reason and the ardor of the blood rather than on experience. It is not because the old have learned in the course of time to be wise, but because their physical capacity for passion has diminished that they are assumed to be capable of controlling their sexual impulses.

*Hamlet* ignores gradations of age: significant characters are either of Hamlet's generation or of his mother's. For the difference between twenty and thirty to be significant in assessing Hamlet, the play would have to focus on some experience that ought to occur in this decade. Hamlet's not having entered the fullness of royal responsibility may more reasonably be attributed to his father's continued reign than to the kind of dereliction we find in Prince Hal. Aside from the responsibility to succeed his father, Hamlet has, as prince in a country not at war, no public obligation. Nor can we expect the marriage of a royal prince to take place simply because he is old enough to head a household.



Hamlet's denoted age at his death, the thirty years since his birth referred to in the graveyard scene, is no more reliable than the expected age of an undergraduate as the source of a norm for Hamlet's behavior in the play. The same time reference would make "young Fortinbras," whose father was slain by Hamlet Senior on Hamlet's birthday, at least thirty. Yet Fortinbras is, in Hamlet's terms, "a delicate and tender prince" whose ambition spurs Hamlet's own "dull revenge." If the martial prowess of Fortinbras has the effect of making him a foil to the hesitant Hamlet, Hamlet's age can hardly be the issue. Nor could Hamlet be more than a few years older than Laertes, another foil, who had warned his sister of the dangers of Hamlet's youth. Each of the three, Hamlet, Fortinbras, Laertes, is viewed as a youth and each seems to undertake his first significant public act during the play. The play ultimately refers us to its internal gaps in time as the only significant durations subject to analysis.

When critics remark that Hamlet castigates himself for inactivity while an audience finds him feverishly active they are inevitably referring to the second phase of the play.<sup>13</sup> All of the stage encounters between Hamlet and the court subsequent to the ghost's revelation and before the sea voyage transpire within the space of a few days at most. The lapse of time before this action is fixed by Ophelia's comment at the mousetrap play; it is "twice two months" since Hamlet Senior's death, hence two or three months after Hamlet vowed revenge. Ophelia's reference is consistent with other time references in this section of the play (II.i-IV.iv). Polonius is sending a spy to inquire after Laertes' reputation in Paris, which we must assume he has taken some time to establish. The ambassadors to Norway have left, negotiated, and returned. Hamlet's unusual behavior has been noted; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent for and they have arrived. The length of time occupied by this phase of the action is most clearly indicated to the audience by the activities of the players, who arrive at Elsinore and rehearse and stage a play. Hamlet's departure for England in IV.iv crosses Fortinbras' army for what must be judged as thematic convenience. (They should not be there so soon.) But on the whole, the chronology in this passage is consistent, and the lapse of time since Hamlet vowed revenge is not merely denoted by a single reference, but emphasized for an audience by the comings and goings on the stage.

Thus a large part of the hesitation for which Hamlet criticizes himself is not time we experience as an audience but time between the scenes which is brought to our attention by Hamlet's self-reproach and by the stage devices which indicated that time has passed. James Calderwood has explored the devices of Shakespeare's craft which

make present this absence of action, a process he denotes "Naming of Delay/Naming as Delay" (144-48). He notes the power of language to create a "caesural presence," which must nonetheless yield to drama's "essential nature as a performance in time" (148). In the terms generated by linguistic theory, Calderwood explores Hamlet's resistance to an inevitably suicidal diachronic movement (action), a resistance which is also *Hamlet's* resistance to "an inevitably theatricidal diachronic movement (performance)."<sup>14</sup>

Critical attempts to provide reasons for Hamlet's hesitation are deprived of evidence outside his own consciousness. The analysis is further baffled by the play's metatheatrical naming of its own delay. More directly subject to scrutiny than the process of hesitation are the actions Hamlet undertakes when he spurs himself to activity. He approaches his task by indirection and he may be accused of playing a kind of Achilles and the tortoise game, constructing a series of actions which approach the killing of Claudius, but never attain it. Does not the Hamlet of Act I seem certain enough of his father's murder not to require the Mousetrap play to test the King's conscience? What blunts the purpose which seemed so strong?

Until the last act of the play, Hamlet's behavior is most influenced by what is immediate in his memory. In Act I his memory is focussed on his father as he was when living. His most tortured memories are of his mother's devotion to his father and his awareness of Claudius in the present is dominated by his comparison of Claudius to his father. But at the end of the time gap between Acts I and II, Hamlet's memory is focussed on the events of Act I. His father as ghost in his memory (and in actuality) reminds him of his duty to revenge, but his father as ghost is not identical in his mind with his father as he lived. The ghost is an occult phenomenon, whose request will be obeyed if his message is true, and Hamlet's initial attitude to the ghost is only partially filial. The possibility that the apparition is diabolical informs his first words to the ghost.

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!  
 Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd,  
 Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,  
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape  
 That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,  
 King, father, royal Dane. (I.iv. 39-45)

Hamlet's resolution is momentary. Both "spirit of health" and "goblin damn'd" remain psychological realities, and the ghostly father is never identical with the remembered father until the two images

are reconciled by the appearance of the ghost in the role of devoted husband in the closet scene. As long as all the nurturing impulses of the father are associated with his father in memory and the aggressive impulses associated with his father as ghost, Hamlet seemingly cannot reconcile that part of himself that heals with that part which wills to destroy. In the closet scene, Hamlet holds his father's portrait in his hand yet invokes the protective wings of "heavenly guards" when his father's apparition appears. When he appears in Gertrude's closet, however, the ghost devotes fewer words to urging revenge against Claudius than to confining Hamlet's anger against his mother to moral persuasion.

Do not forget! This visitation  
 Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.  
 But look, amazement on thy mother sits,  
 O, step between her and her fighting soul.  
 Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works,  
 Speak to her, Hamlet. (III.iv. 110-16)

After this appearance, his last, there is no further evidence of a split between ghost and father in Hamlet's mind. Hamlet adopts the struggle against Claudius as his own. Images of the father, not the questionable ghost, dominate his memory. In his retrospective self-reproach, "How all occasions do inform against me," he urges himself to action by citing his having suffered "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd." On his subsequent return from the trip to England he recounts having used his father's signet ring to seal the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He is later able to see the parallel between his troubles and those of Laertes: both have lost Ophelia and a father. When Hamlet is finally able to view what has happened to him as removed from the realm of the praeternatural, the human experience of loss has displaced the unnatural visitation which revealed the crime. Until the father is viewed in memory as a single figure, the past remains problematic and action in the present is inhibited.<sup>15</sup>

The models of human perception proposed by modern phenomenologists are particularly appropriate to the description of Hamlet because they view time as a continuous process of becoming. Through the human consciousness, the past is focussed on action in the future. Merleau-Ponty describes perception of the present thus: "A present without a future, or an eternal present, is precisely the definition of death; the living present is torn between a past which it takes up and a future which it projects" (333). Objectively, Hamlet's ability to make use of time does not vary a great deal in the course of the play. What does vary is the degree to which Hamlet is willing to

"take up" the past and to "project" a future. The play constructs a Hamlet whose restricted present early in the play constitutes a kind of living death in Merleau-Ponty's terms and whose full present in Act V constitutes a return to life even when his death is imminent.<sup>16</sup>

Hamlet's most strained reasoning occurs in the vast middle passage of the play that represents so few days (Acts II-IV.iii), and it is here that we find the heightening of his consciousness that constitutes the painful "eternal present." The Mousetrap provides Hamlet with evidence vital to assimilating the ghost's message, but almost immediately thereafter he decides not to kill the praying Claudius. Retrospectively, Hamlet perceives his thoughts to have been three parts coward and one part wisdom. In the midst of things he observes that "conscience does make cowards [of us all] . . ." The term "conscience" implied, to the Elizabethans, consciousness as well as conscience (as in contemporary French), and the complexities of the word are significant.

"Conscience" on the occasions when it inhibits Hamlet is not simply awareness of moral laws, but also fear of conjectured possibilities. The mere possibility that the ghost is diabolical inhibits Hamlet's impulse to revenge.

The spirit that I have seen  
 May be a [dev'l], and the [dev'l] hath power  
 T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. (II.ii. 598-603)

Whereas Hamlet's "conscience" explores the hypothetical, the "conscience of the King" which Hamlet will catch is more simply a heightened awareness of past crimes.

"Conscience" as consciousness appears explicitly in the most famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be," where conjecture rather than moral law is sufficient to eliminate suicide as an alternative. The potential of the mind to pose questions that it cannot answer inhibits action. The soliloquy, almost too familiar to need citation, asks "who would bear the whips and scorns of time . . .

But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have,  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all],

And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action. (III.i. 77-87)

The passage defies close reading because it reverses the polarity of words. "Time" is merely a quantitative measure of abuse. If "action" means the quest for nonbeing, sleep without dreams, then "enterprise" and "resolution" lead to nothingness and the "pale cast of thought" leads to survival. Speculation produces non-sense.

This crippling capacity to hypothesize peaks in the scene where Hamlet spares Claudius at prayer. Ignoring the more difficult question of whether Hamlet rationalizes to avoid murder in cold blood, we find Hamlet conjecturing about the state of Claudius' soul and that of his own father who has died "full of bread,/With all his crimes broad blown as flush as May . . ." Hamlet's own responsibilities to the Christian code that underlies his theological speculation are unexplored. A refusal to kill that would normally be attributed to "conscience" in the modern sense is here depicted as a product of consciousness.

Whereas Hamlet is incapacitated by conjecture, Claudius is weakened by awareness of past crimes. "Conscience" in Claudius' usage is always a kind of moral accounting. Polonius' platitudinous observation "that with devotion's visage/And pious action we do sugar o'er/The devil himself" provokes the King's guilty response: "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" His susceptibility to the Mousetrap needs little comment. Hamlet's principal accomplishment before the bloody confrontation of Act V is to bring the crimes of the past into the present through the medium of the King's conscience. Hamlet and the King battle to a standstill, each hampered by his own distinct version of "conscience." The vulnerability of the King's conscience is seemingly ended when Hamlet sheds the blood of Polonius. Claudius' final usage of the term is a mere abuse. Cozening Laertes into joining his last plot to murder Hamlet, Claudius appeals to Laertes' moral judgment. "Conscience" is here almost a matter of bookkeeping.

Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,  
 And you must put me in your heart for friend,  
 Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear,  
 That he which hath your noble father slain  
 Pursued my life. (IV.vii. 1-5)

Hamlet, the most conscious character in dramatic literature, antedates the entry of the term "consciousness" into the English language. The multiple meanings of the term "conscience" veil the essential difference between the effect on Claudius of the memory of past crimes and the effect on Hamlet of the ghost's accusation concerning these same crimes. The middle passage of the play consists largely of Hamlet's coming to terms with the possibilities generated by the ghost's message. Until this resolution, Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia is particularly vexed by the discontinuity of past and present. His ambivalence toward her pervades the play. We hear a doting letter he has written her. She presents a narration of his mimed grief, within the time frame of the play but already in the past when we perceive it. But these events are presented as relics. When we see them together, Hamlet is less loving. He makes Ophelia the subject and audience of a sermon; he subjects her to obscene, or at least inappropriately ribald, banter at the play. After she absents herself by suicide, he professes love, but does so in a bizarre manner. When he returns to Denmark after her death, he takes offense at her brother's exclamation of love and mocks him with bombastic protestations of his own. But by then their relationship is consigned to the past forever. As audience we are left to imagine the positive aspects of a relationship in which nothing positive occurs onstage during the play.

Hamlet's encounters with Ophelia parallel his soliloquy, "To be or not to be," in reflecting his ambivalence toward being. In confronting Ophelia, he questions her "honesty," chastity as a virtue in itself, but he also cautions her against being "a breeder of sinners." Earlier, in warning Polonius of how his daughter might conceive, he invokes morality, but courts nonbeing by denouncing fertility. In contrast, Hamlet's sexual banter at the play, mixed though it is with anger and subterfuge, reflects the active impulse to sexuality, the desire to be and to project a future. In large measure, Ophelia is for Hamlet not a lover but a metaphor for being. His contact with her entire family is distant, his relations with them mere representations of his inner turmoil. The death of Polonius is an accident, but it is the kind of mishap that could only be perpetrated by someone for whom the being of others isn't very real. We can only be astonished at Hamlet's subsequent perplexity that his victim's son feels anger towards him. We perceive Hamlet as a stranger, in part because the play defines him as having been away, but primarily because he defines himself as a stranger to the present, seemingly refusing to acknowledge the reality of his own behavior after his father's death.

In the last phase of his experience (Act V), Hamlet gives every indication of having assimilated the past. He conceives of his father

as a single entity. He is certain that Claudius is a criminal, and is certain of his own capacity for action. He is even capable of acknowledging how he has wronged Laertes and of perceiving that another can feel as he feels. The sense of urgency that accompanied his fevered and indirect efforts against the crown has been replaced by a sense of having enough time; he perceives the interim as his. His new sense of time is inextricable from his sense of destiny, a sense that the pattern of events seems to validate: he perceives the shape of his own tragedy. "Seeing the pattern" frees the protagonist not from suffering but from confusion about his identity. This liberation is experienced by an audience as spiritual power.

In the events subsequent to his exile, coincidence works for Hamlet rather than against him. Whereas his instinctive stabbing of the figure behind the arras had brought about the unfortunate death of Polonius, all his subsequent instincts are effective and all subsequent accidents serve to purge the kingdom. The high sounding principle, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will," is embedded in nothing more noble than Hamlet's account of how his restlessness at sea led him to open the documents carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to discover his death sentence there, and to substitute a document sending them to death. The context which is narrated does not suggest religious transcendence, but a sense of harmony is nonetheless evoked by the language and by Hamlet's own sense of well being at the moment in the play when he narrates the story.

The play's coincidences allow the fundamental conflict between revenge and Christianity to be sidestepped: the active machinations of Claudius ultimately create the tempo of a duel in which stroke and counter-stroke follow too swiftly for conscience to intervene. External events relieve Hamlet of much of the burden of choice. Ophelia drowns. Pirates return Hamlet to Elsinore. The King's plan to kill him with a poisoned foil provides a soldierly context for his final struggle. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup intended for Hamlet, joining him symbolically if not intentionally. What Hamlet discovers is not an intellectual or theological solution to Denmark's malaise, but an ability to recognize and feel a range of distinct emotions. Sorrow at Ophelia's death, regret for his behavior with Laertes, anger at the King, and affection for Horatio are not blurred by his preoccupation with the conflicts within his own mind. Yet his mind is fullest in these moments.

The reach of Hamlet's memory is longest in this final phase: He remembers his own childhood when the gravedigger unearths Yorick's skull. Although the graveyard still suggests the paradoxes of mortality, death is both accepted as the human condition and deplored by

the living. The skull of Yorick smells of decay, but the memories of Yorick's clowning are sweet. Though the consequences he draws are in the vein of the satirist, Hamlet affirms his childhood affections for the jester.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorr'd in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss'd I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning--quite chop fall'n. (V.i. 184-192)

Like his presumed residence at Wittenberg, Hamlet's graveyard contemplation of age, the passage of time, and mortality suggests potentials in Hamlet rather than defining his limitations. Hamlet's potential for kingship, later acknowledged by Fortinbras, is evoked by his contemplation of the death of kings. Alexander, at his prime at the age of thirty, must, Hamlet observes, have become a heap of bones that looked and smelled like the most common skull in the graveyard. In the general process of decay, the triumphs of princes wither. The perspective of the graveyard diminishes the importance of the moment; pain and haste seem no longer appropriate.<sup>17</sup>

Between the extremes of the shock of sudden death that begins the play and the inevitability of centuries that turn Caesars to dust stands the normal mortality of Yorick. The remembrance of things past evoked by Yorick's skull permits an understanding of the normal pace of time. When Hamlet was a child, he rode the shoulders of the clown whose skull he contemplates. The frame of mind in which Hamlet is philosophically ready to accept death, now or to come, yet feels uneasiness at an imminent encounter with danger, results from his having understood that violent death is a special case of human mortality. His ability to feel is crucial to his humanity: neither shock nor philosophical contemplation eradicates his sorrow.

Hamlet does not undergo a simple passage from one age of Man to another. Rather, he struggles to re-establish his ability to contemplate both the past and the possibilities of the future. Trapped as he is in Act I between horror of the immediate past and dread of the future, Hamlet is unable to see opportunities for choice in the present. It is necessary that he regain the fullness of his humanity, memory of the past and faith in the future, to evoke in the audience a sense that he is capable of action. Modern criticism has been willing to



embrace the alienated Hamlet without seeing that the reconciled Hamlet does not break with the rigor of the initial conception. Viewing *Hamlet* as a key text in his provocative study of subjectivity and subjection, Francis Barker, for example, finds its protagonist to be a discontinuous, quasi-Brechtian figure whose "incipient modernity is extinguished" as he begins to act (22-40). My examination argues that the hollow subjectivity which Barker discovers early in the play occurs because Hamlet is emptied of that which returns to him late in the play, his own past and future.

In the end, Hamlet is synchronized with the world. In part this occurs because the play's resolution aligns the actions of protagonist and antagonist in ways that do not mirror our expectations in life. But it is also true that within the assumed reality of the play, he is seen as using the flow of events in time to achieve his purposes. He no longer struggles to reject the present time, but turns what is to better purpose. Early in the play he is able to improvise by using neutral events, like the arrival of the players, to advantage, but later he turns negatives to advantage. Being kidnapped by pirates, he finds himself safer than before. Quarreling with Laertes, he discovers his own wrong in having killed Polonius.

In Act V, when the king proposes a fencing match, Hamlet feels uneasy: for the first time he acknowledges fear of the future. But at the same time he faces that future, accepting what his intuition suggests will be a struggle to the death.

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special  
 providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be [now],  
 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if  
 it be not now, yet it [will] come--the readiness is all.  
 Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to  
 leave betimes, let be. (V.ii. 219-24)

Hamlet has been reckless in the course of the play, but he has never before been "ready," prepared for the indeterminate. His readiness leads to the death of the usurper Claudius and his own death, perceived as "felicity" in the end. In some alternative time, as Fortinbras conjectures in epitaph, "He was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal." In his words, respect for Hamlet's capacity for action is re-established within the play.

Hamlet's relative youth is not the measure of what is lost in his death. That death reaches with equal significance into both past and future. His potential as king, "had he been put on," is no more valuable than the integrity of his past: his mythic birth on the day of his father's military triumph, his joys in childhood, his place in the

scheme of things in young manhood. Ultimately the play demands that we envision not ten years of the hero's life compressed into the span of the play, but life's entirety. The "indefiniteness" of the loss, to use Booth's term, implies the "sudden invasion of our finite consciousness by the fact of infinite possibility" (KL, MAC, *Indefinition* 85).<sup>18</sup> What we ask of an enactment of *Hamlet* on the stage is suggested by *Hamlet's* attitude before his death, vulnerability that is not diminished by increasing wisdom. Thus we should not be astonished that so many actors so diverse in age have triumphed in the role.

*Hamlet* is a play in which the protagonist mediates our attitudes towards the action through his control over our sense of time. If we evade his subjective view, as analysis often does, what we analyze is no longer the play we experience. Rather than estrange ourselves from this experience, we must stretch to the limits our capacity to link the moment by moment quality of theater to the text. In large measure, this involves tracing potential energies as well as actions. *Hamlet's* attitudes toward time make a moment of inactivity early in the play radically different, for example, from a seemingly similar moment late in the play. The case of *Hamlet* is a particularly significant instance of a general principle: the dramatic text is uniquely time bound, and the refusal to reduce time to its spatial analogue offers new possibilities of reconciling the analysis of the dramatic text with the theatrical experience.<sup>19</sup>

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## Notes

1. See Robert Hapgood for a discussion of *Hamlet* in terms of Drama of the Absurd.

2. See Quinones for an evaluation of Renaissance frameworks for time.

3. Sypher deals extensively with lived time, exploring both Renaissance concepts of time and those of modern philosophy (65-89). He argues that *Hamlet* ultimately accepts the moment without regard to past or future, a result which seems to me to dissociate *Hamlet* from his own life.

4. Bergson's *Time and Free Will* establishes the distinction and explores the implications for consciousness.

5. See Merleau-Ponty for such a critique (415).

6. See Charney (208) and Beckerman (194-95) for discussions of these mechanisms of interruption.

7. Keir Elam places the Russian theories in a theatrical context (119-20).

8. For her full development of the idea, see 306-66.

9. Granville-Barker's justification of the divisions is essentially inextricable from his reading of the play (24-260).

10. See the reading by Booth (KL, MAC *Indefinition*) of Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," in which he demonstrates the rhetorical fusion of time past with time future (95). In rough terms we might see *Hamlet* as

trailing behind it a shadow *Macbeth* which has imploded time, but has done so before the play has begun.

11. See the New Variorum *Hamlet* (xiv-xvii) for a detailed discussion of Shakespeare's double time scheme. See also n. 390-94 for the debate on Hamlet's age which we have yet to leave behind.

12. A few key studies may suggest the influence of psychological criticism. Ernest Jones, in an argument first published in 1910, establishes the Oedipal reading. Although for Jones himself, Hamlet should be in his late twenties, the issue of sexual confusion has suggested adolescence to theatrical practitioners. Erik H. Erikson focuses on Hamlet's value formation, fixing his age in the mid-twenties. Anna K. Nardo derives her model from Gregory Bateson's studies of the double-bind in disturbed children. Regardless of the age a psychological approach chooses for Hamlet, the tendency is to see his problem as arrested development. A more generalized anthropological view of rites of passage for the individual in Renaissance society, focussing less narrowly on the adolescent, is that of Marjorie Garber.

13. See, for example, Eleanor Prosser (144-45). The argument seems necessary to critics who "debunk" mainstream readings of the play. Bernard Grebanier argues that "the time element is of no consequence to the play" (177-83).

14. The linguistic model of action, with its fundamentally spatial orientation based on vertical and horizontal axes, is at odds with a phenomenological perception of time as always in the middle. For time, indeed, the wages of syntax is death.

15. Avi Erlich maintains that the death of the father is perceived as weakness, and that Hamlet subsequently needs to prove his father's strength. In an unusual study of the ghost as an active character in the play, Richard Flatter sees the ghost disappearing after the closet scene because Hamlet and his father are reconciled.

16. Sypher views the change in Hamlet as an acceptance of punctiform time that opens the possibilities of the instant (65-89). Maynard Mack, in his classic essay, sees the same change primarily as an acceptance of the existence of evil in the world (502-23).

17. Ricardo Quinones focusses on the graveyard scene as a central illustration of Shakespeare's concern with a universal time scheme in the tragedies (387-98).

18. Booth examines both tragic theory and tragic structure as means of coping with "human nervousness at the fact of indefiniteness" (85). See in particular 81-90.

19. See Elam (143-44). Elam's semiotic approach accedes to the spatialization of time at least to the extent of allowing spatial deixis "priority over the temporal." His subsequent analysis of dramatic discourse is consequently more divergent from his theatrical theory than it need be.

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