

## Hamlet in His World: Shakespeare Anticipates/Assaults Cartesian Dualism

William W. Demastes

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (V.ii.10), Hamlet concedes in the latter stages of Shakespeare’s masterpiece. It is an idea Hamlet more vividly and memorably repeats moments later: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (V.ii.207), followed immediately by the almost Bottom-esque, “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” (V.ii.208-211).

The fatalism of these fifth-act words seems to reveal nothing less than a total mental capitulation of a man who, in the opening act, seems so determined to take the world in his hands and restructure, indeed remake, that world as *he* sees fit. Despite his first-act reluctance—“O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right” (I.v.188-89)—Hamlet dives into an ethical, epistemological, and ontological cesspool seemingly fully equipped to reverse the pattern of decay and rot plaguing Denmark. Bolstered by a library of modern ideas, Hamlet allows his mind the free play to step out from the shadows of the Middle Ages and bask in the Copernican sun of unlimited human potential. But by play’s end, Hamlet is a mere shadow of his former grand self. A man who seemed to be a colossus looming over his domain is reduced to humbly comparing his lot to that of a lowly sparrow.

So is this, as Ophelia prematurely notes in Act III, the tale of “a noble mind . . . o’erthrown” (III.i.150)? Are we seeing a “noble and sweet reason, like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh, blasted with [the] ecstasy [of madness]” (III. i.157-60)? To my mind, Hamlet’s story is centrally one of a precipitous rise and almost immediate revision of a dualistically fabricated renaissance mind. It is not a “fall” from, say, a grandly idealist and vital sense of universal human dominion to a reductively realist and mechanistic alternative worthy of heroically rejecting as beneath human nature to accept (so “like an angel” and “how like a god” [II. ii.302, 304]). Such a rejection would be a quaint, anachronistic, and rather appealing sort of Byronic romanticism, but it’s not Hamlet. Struggling with the limits of his dualistic presumptions and idealistic inclinations, Hamlet is initially repulsed by what he increasingly sees to be the triumph of the material/physical alternative

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William Demastes is Professor of English at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, and author of *Staging Consciousness: Theater and the Materialization of Mind* (Michigan, 2002) and *Theatre of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, Into Orderly Disorder* (Cambridge, 1998), among other studies in theatre and drama. An early version of this essay was presented at the 2004 ATHE Conference, Toronto.

in this realist versus idealist either/or universe. But what eventually occurs is a much more complex, maddening, and disorienting implosion of an illusory vision of a dichotomous world order—a struggle between ideal/immaterial and physical/material realities—coming together to suggest a new paradigm altogether. Ultimately, through the fog of apparent madness, Hamlet’s mind wraps around an integrationist, monist idea that the ideal and real dissolve as concepts in ways that were undreamt of in his previous philosophy. And we see that the theatre, of all places, is the best of all worlds for this turn of events to occur.

Remember that Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616, and *Hamlet* was first performed in 1601, times of religiously grounded philosophical turmoil of all sorts. One of the key elements of religious debate hovered around the physical/spiritual dichotomy encapsulated in the matter of religious iconography of the time. As Jonas Barish has observed:

The Wycliffe preacher in the fourteenth century may have grudgingly conceded the pedagogical usefulness of church images. His successors [i.e., the Puritans] will make no such concessions. [These successors were living in] a day when monasteries had been dispossessed and despoiled throughout England, when statues and stained glass had been smashed with iconoclastic fury. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Underlying the rising Puritan iconoclasm of Shakespeare’s time is the charge that truth, the real, the beautiful are ideals that transcend the contingent corporeality of the merely physical. Religious icons may have had pedagogical value among a generally illiterate early Roman Catholic populace, but their iconic truth was at best a pitiful shadow of that which true Christianity was holding up as real and true. A church could be built with stone, but The Church was built of truer “stuff” beyond the physically real.

Disturbing secular confirmations of how deviously the physical can be manipulated against the idealized true were systematized and presented to maximum positive effect by Machiavelli (*The Prince*) and Castiglione (*The Book of the Courtier*), among numerous others. The quality of *seeming* to be true/real that the physical could so easily assume could cloak the strictly *being* qualities of the ideal in ways that confirmed that seeming and being (the physical and its ideal/true correlative) could virtually never be trusted to coincide.

Hamlet, however, is not put off by any dualistic confusions or attendant depression. At least early on, he dons the unadorned black garb of a Puritan iconoclast and declares an independence from the illusory world of materialist seeming, scoffing at the very idea of seeming introduced by a troubled and confused Gertrude (“Why seems it so particular with thee?” [1.2.75]). He even proclaims, in

the process, a desire that his “too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew” (I.ii.129-30). Trapped by the putrifying inescapability of his flesh, Hamlet is clearly a man who prefers the ideal life of the mind found in Wittenberg to the carnal intrigues of Elsinore. So it’s no surprise that he curses his “fate,” the depressing point that *he’s* been born to set this corruptible physical world right.

If any idealist can remain uncorrupted by the physical world, it should be Hamlet, possessed as he is of virtually every virtue available to humankind. Aware of dualist traps set out against arrogant humanity, he catalogues for us a list of human affectations and then notes that “These indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play, / But I have that within which passeth show” (I.ii.83-85). Neither a Machiavelli nor a Castiglione (though aware of their tantalizing snares), Hamlet asserts that he is what he seems to be, no more, no less. So the line is clear and unambiguous in Hamlet’s mind: dualism is incontrovertible, the physical/material world is little more than a poor shadow of the Platonically ideal real (or the Christian truth), and seeming and being are easily distinguished by a shrewdly trained mind such as Hamlet possesses. Hamlet is a man who knows the difference and can operate, if necessary (and quite reluctantly), in both worlds, calling his ideal mind to grapple with and ultimately unmask the material world around it. He prefers the ideal but feels more than adequately equipped to wade through the too, too solid world of the physical if need be. This, at least, is where Hamlet stands at play’s beginning.

As the play unfolds, however, it becomes clear that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between seeming and being, despite Hamlet’s claims to know the difference. That seeming can mask being is no real surprise. Those are the insights of Machiavelli and Castiglione. Of moderate surprise, however, may be that Hamlet claims he can keep the two straight as he negotiates his way through Elsinore. This sort of arrogance will, of course, come back to haunt him. But more complicated is Hamlet’s reluctance to come to terms with a crucial point of the play, namely that seeming can actually alter being, as, presumably, *acting* mad can lead to *being* mad. He clearly initially rejects any notion that adopting a certain seeming behavior can in any notable fashion affect being itself. As Hamlet moves through Elsinore, seemingly in control of his outward behavior, questions begin to arise that even he seems incapable of answering with any certainty. Put another way, Hamlet’s actions and the play in general, at first, support the standard iconoclastic concerns that the material/real does not coincide with its ideal/true correlatives. The physical world is not to be trusted to reveal anything of certainty about the ideal/true world. This amounts to a simple confirmation of what Jonas Barish fully documents in *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, namely theatre’s lesson that the physical world’s ability to be somehow different from that which it manifests/represents (“What’s Hecuba to him [the Player], or he to Hecuba?” [III.ii.543]) is indeed cause for epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical concern—even if Hamlet (if no one else) can tell

the difference. But can Hamlet really tell the difference? Distinguishing between claims and actions, can Hamlet really/truly answer the following (just to list a few disturbing questions): Does he love or hate Ophelia? Does he or does he not want to avenge his father's murder? Does he love Gertrude? Does he have any true friends in Elsinore, or elsewhere? The truth, of course, is cloaked in ambivalence and contradictory signs, but it is by no means unfathomable.

In their efforts to deal with this chasm between seeming and being, the era's religious iconoclasm, courtly behaviorism, and abounding theatrical metaphors all ultimately lead to the rigorous early modern mind of a near contemporary of Shakespeare's, René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes's rigid formulation of a hierarchical dualism has, to this day, left a chasm between the physical and non-physical that religion refuses to bridge in favor of the non-physical, and natural philosophy (science) leaves gaping as it stands on the side of the physical. Hamlet (though not Shakespeare) clearly anticipates Descartes (an articulator of a *zeitgeist*, apparently, rather than a philosophical singularity), and, much like Descartes, the early Hamlet clearly favors the ideal world of mind over the physical world of body.

Hamlet is a mind caught up in the intellectual advances of his day articulating a dilemma on stage that finds its way into Descartes's eventual "*cogito*" musings several years later. I see Hamlet's dilemma in many ways unravel in much the same way Descartes's "*cogito*" argument unravels, though its dualistic staying power remains remarkable even to this day. Terry Eagleton, in his far-reaching study on tragedy, observes that Descartes's apparent big-bang breakthrough reveals nothing short of a "mind *already* thinking and possessed of an idea of the deity."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the mind *predates* the world around it, including the body in which it is housed. It is of stuff other than that world. And from that declaration of separateness, again according to Eagleton, "To possess the world conceptually thus means to lose it sensuously, grasping little more than an odourless, colourless spectre of the real thing."<sup>3</sup> According to Descartes, and according to the early Hamlet as well, the physical and the non-physical are two different sorts of things, physical existence being subordinate to the non-physical ideal, if the physical can even be trusted to exist at all. Being is ideal; the physical is seeming, in the best of circumstances only *apparently* real.

I have always liked Samuel Johnson's refutation of idealism and its dualist premises by simply kicking the rock in front of him. Such a pragmatist can only argue what is to him obvious: the physical world clearly exists despite sophistic claims to the contrary. But, then, ideas come from somewhere. Is there, therefore, another realm that must be explored? Are the physical and the ideal of different origin, or at least of different ingredient? The dualists, of course, believe so. Body and *idea* of body are clearly different "stuff." Here is where I see Descartes's tantalizing thesis—one that has ensnared Western culture for centuries—begin to

crumble. And Hamlet's foundational beliefs begin to crack under the pressure of such scrutiny as well.

Here, in fact, is where Shakespeare himself kicks a stone to demonstrate an incipient monist position (a denial of dualist premises). Or, more vividly, I should say that given his whole lifetime of kicking stones in the theatre—a profession dedicated to kicking stones—Shakespeare finally sticks a boulder before our eyes and has his main character stumble over it in plain view of the whole world to see. Too often, however, I think we fail to see that boulder, mired in our dualist prejudices as we are. And here is where we get to the theatre.

The theatre uses concrete physicality to generate ideas. After all, even the spirit of a deceased relative like Hamlet's father is present in the flesh (appearing in "warlike form" [I.i.51]), a perhaps distant reminder that early Greek and Judeo-Christian thought believed (like the Egyptians, too) that the body was inseparable from self-hood and would go "with us" to our final destinations in the afterworld. Ideas in the theatre do not exist without physical correlatives, and, from that point, one could argue neither do ideas in the (apparently illusory/theatrical) world exist without physical correlatives. Shakespeare presents a Hamlet who ultimately/ eventually sees exactly how his mind has run before his body to unsupportable conclusions. Deceived by sophisticated dualistic abstractions claiming the primacy of the mind over the body and the ideal over the real, Hamlet (catching up to Shakespeare himself) evolves, not from an idealist into a realist but actually into a person who dissolves the realist/idealist distinction and becomes a monist in his way of thinking about the world. The idealism gleaned during his otherworldly days surrounded by books and ideas in Wittenberg is challenged by the high theatricality of Elsinore court life (not to mention the interest/infatuation in/with the theatre he brings with him, apparently from Wittenberg). It is not a recognition that the physical is more real than the ideal, but that the real and the ideal are in fact inseparable. Sorting out the problem of seeming and being—though of considerable *pragmatic* concern—is merely a matter of perception (a sort of detective's job of deciphering events) rather than inhering in the mind-boggling metaphysical and ontological concerns of his earlier dualist musings.

Being sane is different from appearing sane but being mad (and vice versa), which is different from simply being mad. When Hamlet appears to be mad, he has not ingeniously hacked a gap between being and appearing; rather, he has introduced to us a separate category of being someone who appears to be mad. Admittedly, it is difficult to distinguish between being someone who appears to be mad and being someone who is mad. But the distinction does not beg for an invocation of dual—physical and ideal—realities. It does not suggest that we throw up our hands and look beyond the physical for truth. Rather, it speaks to a need to sharpen our tools of discernment. And when those refined tools truly fail to fathom

truth, then perhaps the question—is Hamlet mad or not, for example—genuinely has no answer, even in the ideal.

This change in perspective seems to begin following Hamlet's aborted trip to England when Hamlet returns to Elsinore, a *body* literally affected by its physically inescapable attraction to Denmark against the will of Hamlet's idealist, escapist desires. That failed attempt physically to will his body to leave the gravitational attraction of the all-too-physical Elsinore marks the point where Hamlet intellectually becomes a different man, one who sees the physical world as more gravely real than before. More specifically, until this signal event, this literal sea change, Hamlet had virtually completely disregarded the significance of the physical realities of the world about him, hardly even grieving over the irreversible physical destruction of his father and Polonius, nor feeling any remorse over the cruelty of his behavior to those around him. Recall that he could care less for the body of the murdered Polonius but is now (in Act V) prepared to grieve over the body of Ophelia. Bodies—in all their (un)seemly appearance—now matter. Until his return from the sea, he grieves over the loss of ideas/ideals like honor and virtue (manifest in his father's perfunctory funeral and mother's hasty marriage), but not for mere things of the flesh. However, toward play's end, despite all his earlier efforts to the contrary, he has come to realize that he and his mind are *part* of the physical world around him rather than beyond or outside or above that world. Dualism is itself the illusion that Hamlet's odyssey in Elsinore (and beyond) unearths (literally reflected in the unearthing of poor Yorick's skull) and then buries (in Ophelia's earthy grave). Hamlet's struggle no longer involves a debate between primacy of the physically real or the mentally ideal. That ideal world (contrasted against the merely physical) he thought could be bounded in a nutshell is neither better nor worse—nor even really different—than the world bounded by castle walls (though thinking may [erroneously] make it so). Rather, Hamlet comes to realize that the debate between the real and the ideal is itself an illusion (or delusion).

Consider this: when Hamlet merely *seems* mad, his affect on others is much the same as if or when he in fact *is* mad. Hamlet's seeming to hate Ophelia has the same affect as, in point of fact, hating her. But seeming is what happens in the physical world; being occurs in the ideal world. Right? Slippage between the two is supposed to reveal the superiority of the true ideal world over the physical. Hamlet and Shakespeare, however, reveal to us that *seeming* is actually little more than a level of description of commitment in the world of being rather than being's opposite. It is itself a form of being, cutting every bit as sharply as if it were real. We do not have enough clear evidence to conclude whether Hamlet loves or hates Ophelia, but we can clearly see that the effect of his apparently feigned hatred/madness is every bit as fatal. What we see is that seeming and being may be significant categories only in that the category of seeming mad is a category of physical reality that must be accepted exactly for what it is. Without evidence demonstrating actual madness, we

must accept that the appearance of madness is itself a viable descriptive category. It is itself a truth to be accepted and to be fathomed no further; we certainly need not appeal to some ideal alternative realm to find some deeper truth. For all practical purposes, seeming mad is a categorical relative of actually being mad but no more. Simply put, the oppositionality previously assumed between seeming and being is itself the central human illusion—the illusion that leads to the delusion of idealistic dualism. I see Shakespeare suggesting a very real, very significant relevance in seeming, and in seeming he sees a notable correspondence to being: *Seeming* mad is closely related to *being* mad. But this seeming is not something that invalidates the truth inherent in the physical world, and as such it does not invalidate the truth of physical reality paving the way for an idealist alternative; rather, it adds complexity in our efforts to comprehend that physically manifest real world. This complexity is significant in our attempts to fathom truth, but no more. Clearly one can see Osric's feigned sophistication. It is part of his personality, not an argument that his seeming to be sophisticated contradicts his being a simpleton. His appearance—a self-deceived buffoon—is what he really is.

In *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty*, Anthony Kubiak opens with a discussion of American Puritanism, where he draws in part from Robert K. Merton's 1938 work on seventeenth-century England. Merton (and Kubiak) sees the otherworldly, idealistically entrenched Puritans actually bolstering "an emergent empiricist and pragmatic search for true causes" as they worked to understand the relationship between appearing and being, amid the doctrinal dilemma of determining whether one is saved or damned.<sup>4</sup> They wanted to know the relationship between seeming and being, the actual correspondence between the two. Kubiak notes that the Puritans "were caught in the ontological binarism of authenticity/falseness and were not able to find release in the rejection of the authentic and the tentative embrace of the mask."<sup>5</sup> Hamlet initially arrogantly strikes through the mask of his own Puritan doubt, relying on his powers of observation to bely the dilemma. But his early confidence that he has "that within which passeth show" is first undermined and, then, to an unforeseen but clearly ironic degree confirmed toward play's end. Hamlet moves from confidently proclaiming that he can discern the difference between seeming and being in Act 1, to trying to demonstrate the difference through the middle of the play by his own controlled *seeming* behavior, to concluding in something of a confused, fatalistic, and nearly defeated fashion that seeming and being bleed into each other's domains more fully than previously presumed. As will happen to the Puritans to follow him, dualism collapses in upon Hamlet leaving him without a foundation other than to accept the interrelating realistic idealism or idealistic realism of monism. Hamlet actually defeats dualism even before its great early-modern protagonist—Descartes—is able to articulate the thesis and then take sides. However uncomfortable it may be,

knowing the operation of the world outside the mind becomes a necessity if one is to comprehend the ideas harbored inside the mind.

Antonio Damasio, neuroscientist and author of *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, observes the evolutionary fact that “[i]f there had been no body, there would have been no brain,” and, by extension, without a brain there would have been no mind, and without mind there would be no ideas, much less a “world” that could be labeled *ideal* and somehow separate from the physical.<sup>6</sup> He continues: “It is not only the separation between mind and brain that is mythical: the separation between mind and body is probably just as fictional. The mind is *embodied*, in the full sense of the term, not just *embrained*.”<sup>7</sup> The mental, spiritual, and metaphysical all derive from the physical. There are no two separate points of physical/non-physical genesis. They are parts of the same world and in many significant ways inseparable from each other, despite our linguistic and sophistic expostulations to the contrary. It simply cannot be that seeming is not significantly related to being, though admittedly such a connection is more complex when the subtleties related to a complex seeming/being dilemma actually arises (i.e., when someone *tries* to confuse the two). But this is a case of discernment (knowing how to distinguish between seeming and being), of epistemology (what we know), and not a case of ontology (what is). And running to dualist conclusions (leading to valorizing idealism) is not the solution because seeming and being are not opposites; they are terms of distinction and description applicable to the one physical world in which we live. That is Hamlet’s lesson. And that is where Shakespeare springs above and beyond Descartes as a singular thinker rather than an errant (but formidable) architect of a dualist universe, as Descartes has become for our culture.

Along these lines, one can see Hamlet’s father (the play’s original grounded man of action), in the belated form of a ghost (even the afterlife is inhabited by the physical), pursuing a sort of paternal mission to shake Hamlet out of his wayward, bookish, idealist leanings, pushing Hamlet to avenge his murder most foul in order to ground his son in the realities of the physical world around him. By leaving Gertrude out of the picture, the ghost strives precisely to avoid some Oresteian-style tragedy, hoping to protect Hamlet from a tragic end in order to preserve and convert his bookish son into something more like (and therefore more than) Fortinbras and Laertes, clearing a path for Hamlet to become king and forcing Hamlet to learn certain realities about the world around him, which will/should make him the stuff worthy of his birthright as king. Unfortunately, a tragic and sloppy body count does ensue despite the Ghost’s surgical efforts. But in its way, the Ghost’s plan works: Hamlet is transformed by play’s end from bookish private citizen to a humbled and wordly-wise man capable of becoming a leader of his realm—though the possibility of reigning is almost immediately extinguished and given over to the lesser realist Fortinbras (in contrast to the early idealist Hamlet). Dualism is



momentarily defeated by an incipient monism, only to rise again from the other side of the delusional realist/dualist chasm.

But the play's disastrous conclusion does not obliterate what Shakespeare has presented to his audience. Hamlet realizes at play's end that, first, he had really rather NOT have his too, too, solid flesh melt, because that melting away would also dissolve his being. In fact, what appears *to be* of lasting value—spirit, soul, mind—may in fact not have an existence without first (if not continually) having a physical reality. Neither in a realist's nor idealist's camp, Hamlet has belatedly come to understand something about the interwoven nature of the realist/idealist fabric of Reality itself, something the physical/spiritual presence of the Ghost—a spirit that physically walks the earth—actually *embodies*.

Here is the hub of my point: evidence of an increasing number of current materialist scientists (of which Damasio is one)<sup>8</sup>—challenging a Cartesian/Puritan-inspired tradition grounded in seventeenth-century thought—reveals increasingly persuasively that ineffable stuff like mind/consciousness/spirit/soul has evolved from materialist sources. Namely, primitive sensory accumulation devices arose in the most basic living organisms and evolved into more complex sensory gathering devices, which helped promote and preserve the species in possession of those tools. And in turn, greater sensory systems evolved until actual self-consciousness evolved as the ultimate self-preservation tool. That self-consciousness evolved through the body itself and into a brain that became capable of looking at itself and seeing itself as distinct from and ultimately (though mistakenly) superior to the world around it. Consciousness and mind are stuff of material reality. This concept of mind's superiority over its environment is not the result, or even proof, of dualism but is an illusion (perhaps a survival tool) refined from our own evolution in that environment. Damasio observes: "Of late, the concept of mind has moved from the ethereal nowhere place it occupied in the seventeenth century to its current residence in or around the brain—a bit of a demotion, but still a dignified station."<sup>9</sup> In that observation, we return to an earlier point: what Hamlet learns is not that the world is a dull, vapid, physical place no longer worthy of us. Rather, his is a radical re-vision of just how much we belong to this world, even as we acknowledge the value of our being in the world. No romantic despair here.

Terry Eagleton sees something of the same issues in *King Lear*, noting, "One of the chief doublenesses of this play involves a conflict between bodiliness and consciousness."<sup>10</sup> Taking a distinctly Marxist turn, he concludes:

If we could divest ourselves of the abstract consciousness which comes from blunting the body with a surplus of goods, we would be able to feel on our pulses the misery of those dispossessed by our wealth, and be moved to shed our superfluity by sharing

it with them, thus converting an injurious excess into a creative one.<sup>11</sup>

If this position applies to *Lear*, what applies to *Lear* and *Hamlet* both is that the lies of the mind must be confronted for fear that our delusions of grandeur are destroying any potential that humanity may have before it.

Consciousness, of course, actually introduced deception into our world at its (consciousness's) inception since it allows us to pursue behavior contrary to our beings' simpler impulses merely to pursue instinctive one-to-one actions. With consciousness, we can see and even control our behavior, manipulating it to appear contrary to our arguably true feelings/emotions. But ironically it appears that our bodies inhere the concept of truth and reality even as our bodies' consciousnesses develop a capacity to have our bodies' actions "lie." In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio observes that "voluntary mimicking of expressions of emotion is easily detected as fake—something always fails, whether in the configuration of the facial muscles or in the tone of voice."<sup>12</sup> In other words, there is a pre-aware level of consciousness virtually impossible to control and manipulate. Truth is in the body. Damasio, a neuroscientist, does pay particular attention to actors (as does Hamlet, of course), masters of manipulation apparently capable of controlling their behavior in ways the rest of us can only admire. In many ways, Hamlet is the consummate actor, providing us with the supreme test of the body's reliability as a revealer of truth. But the fact that deception is possible does not force us to disenfranchise the physical and turn to a parallel universe of disembodied ideas in our pursuit of truth. In our world, words often do fly up and thoughts often do remain behind; and harlot's cheeks can be plastered over with seeming virtue. But rather than dispense with evidence from the physical world and valorize a world of the ideal, our search for truth should instead redouble its efforts to strike through masks of deception in the world around us. Individually and collectively, we need to perfect observational means and technologies to do exactly what the idealist Hamlet mistakenly claims to be capable of doing as the play opens and better learns to do as the play progresses: to distinguish seeming from being through close observation of the physical world into which he has been thrust. While in their day neither Hamlet nor Shakespeare had twenty-first-century science to back them up, their impulses are now being validated by current consciousness theory. The body tells all, despite our (better or worse) efforts at obfuscation. Curiously, Hamlet's own "Mousetrap" experiment is an early-modern proof of Damasio's assertion. Consciousness can conceal the body's truth only so far. And what is true of Claudius's efforts at deception is also true ultimately even of Hamlet's.

How, then, do we work our way through consciousness back to the body to uncover the mind's lie and reveal the body's truth? A first step is to accept this monist paradigm: there is no need to bridge the dualistically-conceived mind/body

chasm since mind and body do not originate from different sources; they are the same matter and of the same genesis. And, by extension, we need to recognize that, at least to some degree, the deceptive potential of seeming/appearance unmasks a certain quality of being itself. Even seeming virtue possesses a certain degree of actual virtue.

Once we come to that point of the integrated complexity of materialist self-conscious awareness, we see a rising need to experiment with the faulty idea of mind's own difference from the world out of which it arose. Dualism is so tantalizing because consciousness *seems* so clearly to be a unique thing. If accurate, dualism would have confirmed our connection with our creator, as the early Hamlet seems to muse when he speaks the famous words, "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties . . . in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god" (II.ii.300-303). Out of such musing, the illusion of dualism is reassuring, creating a curious history of mind's unique origins in an effort to separate it from the rest of physical creation and connecting it to godhead itself. That experience of dualism continues to this day.

But we are increasingly recognizing that mind is an interrelated offshoot of physical reality, as is consciousness and (probably) soul itself. And what I find incredible is that Shakespeare, at a time of greatest human confidence in its mental potential, sets up an experiment wherein his hero relinquishes his epistemological and ontological illusions of superiority and difference. The early Hamlet seems to "know" the truth that the world is rotten even before the ghost appears. His prophetic soul and all the other less-than-concrete evidence convinces him of Claudius's crime, yet he chooses to wait for concrete evidence. If Hamlet, a man who abhors this too, too, solid world, is actually committed to that abhorrence, then material evidence is irrelevant. But he is not even sure whether "to be" or "not to be" is the preferred condition. Surely, these are not words of a committed idealist. Surely Socrates would never have spoken them.

Note that when Hamlet returns from sea, he reflects upon Yorick, Alexander, and Caesar, speaking of them as if the remains of their too, too solid flesh were as materially significant as the memories their lives generated. And he declares his love for the corpse of Ophelia. It seems the question is no longer "to be or not to be" but something like "please let me be" or, later in the play, "how can I continue to be after what I have done?" He does finally kill Claudius, but it seems more the result of Laertes bearing concrete witness to Claudius's intent to murder Hamlet than revenge for the murder of the elder Hamlet, oddly missing throughout these last acts. Being *is* preferred to not being.

In the end, Hamlet gives up efforts to manipulate the world and control its destiny; rather, the world grabs Hamlet and takes control of *his* destiny. In the end, Hamlet's struggle signals neither the triumph of an ideal mind *or* real world beyond that mind (though Fortinbras does appear to usher in a return to dualism,

with the material world becoming ascendant). Hamlet's faded struggle signals a call for a recognition of the interrelationship of the ideal and real, suggesting a real-to-ideal genealogy that reverses the Platonic-Judeo-Christian tradition. Namely Shakespeare suggests that the physical precedes the ideal and deserves exactly the attention theatre gives it.

The theatre—and Shakespeare and Hamlet—kicks the stone that invalidates the idea that idealism is derived from stuff other than that which makes stones themselves. Taking up the bodies is the stage's final action. Finally, even more than Dr. Johnson's perhaps apocryphal stone, bodies are the stuff dreams and minds and souls are made on, whose airy nothings were just moments ago earthly everythings without which even the great globe itself would not be so much as a memory. We may never know with certainty that a certain appearance reveals true being—at least not in the manner we like to think of true being (unpolluted by false appearance)—because that appearance is itself part of the truth. Surely, relying on an “I-give-up-on-the-real-world” brand of abstract idealism is not the way to pursue the true.

What do we learn from all of this? (1) That the opposite of the “ideal” is not the “real” because the two are ultimately inseparable. (2) That the opposite of mind, consciousness, spirit, soul is not the physical world of brain, neural networks, and reflexes, but are actually integrated outgrowths of each. (3) That appearance and seeming are not the opposite of reality and being but are some vital and mutually valid descriptors of reality itself. (4) That the opposite of the “real” is not the “theatre”; rather, that theatre is very much part of the real in ways that are becoming daily more clearly manifest in theatre, self-conscious expression on the stage, and in the sciences themselves, thanks to advances in consciousness theory. If we can learn these points—almost literally down into our marrow—then we will be better able to pursue truth through channels that can best reveal what we seek. As Damasio notes, it is a “difficult and indispensable job indeed, but one without which we will be far better off leaving Descartes' Error uncorrected”<sup>13</sup> Finally, one can only wonder what the modern/contemporary world would be like—at least what the current state of intellectual thought would be like—if Descartes had regularly attended the theatre before he presented his philosophy to the world.

## Notes

1. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1981) 88-89.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 223.
3. 223.
4. Anthony Kubiak, *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 47.

5. 48-49.
6. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994) 90.
7. 118, italics mine.
8. The list of valuable studies on mind/brain/body is extensive. In addition to Damasio, studies by Joseph LeDoux, V. S. Ramachandran, and Daniel Dennett are particularly valuable.
9. Damasio, *Descartes' Error* 225.
10. Eagleton 284.
11. 285.
12. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999) 49.
13. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* 252.



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