controlled, unemphatic prose statements, is one of sad, almost (but not quite) passive acceptance of the need to act.

The readiness is all. Hamlet is not taken in, nor has he become cynical: in his heart there remains a kind of fighting that will not let him sleep. Although all's ill about his heart he will meet the challenges that come bravely, without cynicism and without hubris.

The fifth act does not involve, it seems to me, a dramatic resolution of Hamlet's dilemmas in any full sense of the word, but rather some kind of salvaging of human decency and a reaction of philosophic idealism. Hamlet, the prince who has tried to become a man, becomes a prince again and does what a sixteenth-century prince ought to do—killing the murderer of his father, forgiving the stupid, clean-limbed Laertes, expressing (for the first time) direct concern about his own claims to the throne but giving his dying voice to young Fortinbras, the kind of delicate and tender prince that Hamlet himself could never again have been. Horatio, it is true, lives on, pledged to tell the truth and bear the aspirations of the humanistic cause; but Horatio without Hamlet will not be, we feel, a decisive force. The end then, is, in one sense, almost total defeat for everything Hamlet has stood for. But it is an acceptance of the need to act in the real world, and that is a great human triumph.

MARGARET W. FERGUSON

Hamlet: Letters and Spirits

"The letter killeth," said Saint Paul (2 Cor. 3.6). His words can serve as an epigraph—or epitaph—to my essay, which approaches some broad questions about the genre of Shakespearean tragedy by exploring the connections between certain techniques of wordplay in Hamlet and a process of dramatic literalization that is associated, in this play, with the impulse to kill. In the early part of the play, Hamlet frequently uses language to effect a divorce between words and their conventional meanings. His rhetorical tactics, which include punning and deliberately undoing the rhetorical figures of other speakers, expose the arbitrariness, as well as the fragility, of the bonds that tie words to agreed-upon significations. His language in dialogues with others, though not in his soliloquies, produces a curious effect of materializing the word, materializing it in a way that forces us to question the distinction between literal and figurative meanings, and that also leads us to look in new ways at the word as a spoken or written phenomenon. Hamlet's verbal tactics in the early part of the play—roughly through the closet scene in Act III—constitute a rehearsal for a more disturbing kind of materializing that occurs, with increasing frequency, in the later part of the drama. This second kind of materializing pertains to the realm of deeds as well as to that of words; in fact it highlights the thin but significant line that separates those realms, while at the same time it reminds us that all acts performed in a theater share with words the problematic status of representation. This second type of materializing might be called performative, and since in Hamlet, in contrast to the comedies, it almost always results in a literal death, it might also be described as a process of "incorpsing"—to borrow a term that is used once in Hamlet and nowhere else in Shakespeare's corpus.

Hamlet begins his verbal activity of materializing words with the first line he speaks: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (9). With this riddling sentence, spoken aside to the audience, Hamlet rejects the social and linguistic bond that Claudius asserted when he addressed Hamlet in terms of their kinship: "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (9). Hamlet not only refuses to be defined or possessed by Claudius's epithets, the second of which confuses the legal relation of stepson with the "natural" one of son; he also refuses to accept the principle of similarity that governs Claudius's syntax, which, here as elsewhere, employs the rhetorical figure of isocolon: balanced clauses joined by "and." Claudius's isocolonic style is also characteristically oxymoronic: opposites are smoothly joined by syntax and sound, as for instance in these lines from his opening speech:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a drooping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

1 I borrow the term "performative" from J. L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words (1962). 2 Steiner (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 5 and passim. Austin, however, notoriously seeks to exclude from his discussion the type of performative utterance that interests me here, namely that which occurs on a stage or in a literary text. Such performative, he writes, "will be in a peculiar way hollow or void" (22, Austin's italics).

2 All quotations from Hamlet and other Shakespeare plays are from the New Arden editions. general editors Harold F. Brooks, Harold Jenkins and Brian Moers (London and New York). The Arden Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins, was published in 1962.

Hamlet's remark "A little more than kin, and less than kind" unbalances the scale Claudius has created through his rhetoric—a scale in which opposites like "delight" and "dole" are blandly equated. Hamlet's sentence disjoins what Claudius has linked; it does so through its comparative "more" and "less," and also through the play on "kin" and "kind" which points, by the difference of a single letter, to a radical difference between what Claudius seems or claims to be, and what he is. The pun on the word "kind" itself, moreover, works, as Hamlet's puns so often do, to disrupt the smooth surface of another person's discourse. Hamlet's pun, suggesting that Claudius is neither natural nor kindly, is like a pebble thrown into the oily pool of the king's rhetoric. As Lawrence Danson observes in Tragic Alphabet, Hamlet's puns challenge Claudius's "wordly attempts at compromise" by demanding "that words receive their full freight of meaning." If the puns work to increase semantic richness, however—the Elizabethan rhetorician George Puttenham characterized the pun or syllepsis as "the figure of double supply"—they do so by driving a wedge between words and their ordinary meanings. The pun, Sigrid Burchhardt argues, characteristically performs "an act of verbal violence. . . . It asserts that mere phonetic—i.e., material, corporeal—likeness establishes likeness of meaning. The pun gives the word as entity primacy over the word as sign."

If Hamlet's punning wit makes an oblique attack on Claudius's rhetorical penchant for "voking heterogeneous ideas by violence together"—to borrow the phrase Dr Johnson used in a similar attack on what he felt to be indecorous conceits—Hamlet is, of course, attacking much more than Claudius's rhetorical style. For Claudius has yoked not only words but bodies together, and it therefore seems likely that Hamlet's style reflects his (at this point) obscure and certainly overdetermined desire to separate his uncle from his mother. His dialogue with Polonius in II,ii offers further support for my hypothesis that Hamlet's disjunctive verbal techniques constitute not only a defense against being entrapped by others' tropes but also an aggressive, albeit displaced, attack on the marriage union of Gertrude and Claudius. By the time Hamlet speaks with Polonius, of course, he has not only had his worst suspicions about the king confirmed by the Ghost, but has also met with a rebuff from Ophelia, a rebuff dictated by Polonius's and Laertes's suspicions. It is no wonder, then, that his rhetoric is now directly deployed against the very idea of fleshly union. "Have you a daughter?" he asks Polonius (34), and goes on to draw Ophelia into his morbid train of thought, which has been about the sun's power to breed maggots in the dead flesh of a dog. "Let her not walk i'the sun," he says, echoing his earlier statement, in the opening scene with Claudius, "I am too much in the sun" (9). The echo hints that Ophelia is already in some sense Hamlet's double here: both are endangered by the sun which is an emblem of kingly power, and both are also endangered—though in significantly different ways—by Hamlet's terrible burden of being a biological son to a dead king and a legal son to Claudius. As if dimly aware of his own way of thinking about Ophelia is tainting her with maggoty conceptions about sonship, Hamlet says to her father, "Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't" (34). It is at this point that Hamlet strikes yet another rhetorical blow against union in the realm of discourse: "What do you read, my lord?" asks Polonius. "Words, words, words," Hamlet replies. "What is the matter, my lord?" Polonius persists. "Between whom?" is the perverse, ungrammatical, and fascinating reply, not an answer but, characteristically, another question. In this peculiar dialogue Hamlet disjoints words from their conventional meanings both rhetorically and thematically; in so doing, he breaks the social contract necessary to ordinary human discourse, the contract which mandates that there be, in Roman Jakobson's words, "a certain equivalence between the symbols used by the addressee and those known and interpreted by the addressee."

In his first answer, "Words, words, words," Hamlet deliberately interprets Polonius's question literally; in his second reply, however, he does something more complicated than substituting a literal sense for a figurative one: he points, rather, to the problem that has always plagued classical theories of metaphor, which is that a word or phrase may not have a single, "literal" sense. And it seems strangely appropriate that Hamlet should expose the problem of distinguishing between multiple—and perhaps equally figurative—meanings through the example of the word matter—a word that appears 26 times in the play, more than in any other by Shakespeare, in locations ranging from Gertrude's acerbic remark to Polonius, "More matter with less art" (31), to Hamlet's poignant comment to Horatio in the last act: "Thou wouldst not think
enormous significance at precisely this juncture in the drama; immediately before Hamlet refers to Claudius as a “king of shreds and patches,” the Ghost appears, or rather reappears, with a dramatic entrance that allows the phrase “king of shreds and patches” to refer to the Ghost as well as to Claudius. As if to underscore the fact that Hamlet’s dilemma here is a hermeneutic as well as an ethical one, Shakespeare has him address the Ghost with the pregnant question, “What would your gracious figure?” (63). If Claudius is a figure of the father, so is the Ghost; according to what standard of truth, then, is Hamlet to distinguish between them?

Shakespeare gives this problem a further turn of the screw, as it were, by making the Ghost invisible and inaudible to Gertrude. Like the governor in Henry James’s tale, who sees the ghostly figure of Miss Jessel when the “gros” housekeeper does not, Hamlet is forced to confront and deny the possibility that the Ghost may be a figment of his own imagination. He, and the audience, must at least fleetingly experience a conflict between the evidence provided by their eyes and ears and Gertrude’s statement that she perceives “nothing.” And even if this scene’s stage directions confirm the Ghost’s existence and support Hamlet’s argument that what he has seen is not, as Gertrude insists, a “bodiless creation” of “ecstasy,” we may well not feel entirely easy about giving credence to Hamlet here; after the Ghost exits, Hamlet declares to Gertrude that his “pulse” keeps time just as “temperately” as hers does (64).

Then, having claimed to be no less (but also no more) sane than is the woman whose perceptions we have just been forced to discount, Hamlet proceeds to promise that “I the matter will re-word, which madness / Would gambol from.” The relation between the “matter” of the Ghost and the matter Hamlet will “re-word” in the ensuing passionate dialogue with Gertrude remains deeply mysterious.

By stressing the epistemologically doubtful status of the Ghost, we can usefully supplement the classic psychoanalytic explanation for why Hamlet defers performing the deed of revenge. That explanation, outlined by Freud in a famous footnote to the Interpretation of Dreams and elaborated by Ernest Jones, suggests that Hamlet obscurely knows that in killing Claudius he would be satisfying his repressed oedipal desire to be like his father, who has become a king and husband by killing the elder Hamlet. Jacques Lacan, in his brilliant, albeit elliptical, essay on “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet,” speculates that Hamlet's
inventives against Claudius in the closet scene are an example of denvation, that is, the words of dispraise and contempt are indications of repressed admiration. Building on both Freud and Lacan, we might read Hamlet's frantic efforts to draw a clear epistemological distinction between his father and Claudius as a defense against his perception of an excessive degree of likeness between himself and Claudius, or, more precisely, between his desires and Claudius's. In fact, the distinctions Hamlet draws between Claudius and Old Hamlet seem no less questionable, in their hyperbole, than the distinction he draws between himself and his mother when, alluding to the simple moral system of medieval religious drama, he calls her a vice and himself a virtue. A parallel dualistic oversimplification informs his sermon-like speech on the pictures of the two kings, "The counterfeit presentment of two brothers," as he calls them:

See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill

He doth protest too much, methinks, in this plethora of similitudes designed, as he says, to make his mother relinquish that passion which is blind to difference. Hamlet's own passion, we might say, is making him blind to similarity. His description of his father's incomparable virtue hardly accords with what the Ghost himself said to his son when he lamented having been "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" and "sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head" (22–23). Nor does it accord with what Hamlet himself said in III.iii, where he described his father dying with "all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May" (59).

Hamlet's doubts about his father's character, about the Ghost's status as a figure, and about his own relation to both his father and Claudius, constitute one reason why he cannot resolve the matter of his mother or his revenge. Another and related reason is that he is too filled with disgust at female flesh to follow the path Freud describes for those who eventually emerge, however scared, from the oedipal complex. That path leads to marriage with a woman who is not the mother. In Hamlet's case, the obvious candidate is Ophelia, whom Hamlet actually seems to prefer to his mother in the play within the play scene. "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me," says Gertrude, and Hamlet replies, "No, good mother, here's metal more attractive" (50–51). The metaphor is misogynistically reductive—and ominously allied to Hamlet's pervasive concern with debased currency; nonetheless, for a moment it seems that he may find in Ophelia a matter to replace his mother. "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" he asks, and when she says no, taking him literally, he specifies his meaning, offering to lay in her lap only that part of him which houses the higher faculties: "I mean, my head upon your lap?" "Ay, my lord," she answers; but he twists her affirmation by indicating that his head is filled with thoughts of her—and his—lower parts: "Do you think I meant country matters?" he asks, punning on the slang term for the female genitals. "I think nothing, my lord," Ophelia replies; and Hamlet once again bawdily literalizes her words: "That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs" (51). While his speeches in this dialogue seem like an invitation to sexual union (in one sense he is enticing her to realize that the matter between his legs is not nothing but something), the final effect of this exchange, as of all the encounters between Ophelia and Hamlet we see in this play, is to separate her from him, to push her naive love away and reduce her to incomprehension of what he later calls his "mystery." Hamlet's relation to Ophelia seems aptly epitomized a little later in this scene, when he leaves off interpreting the tropical ambiguities of the Mousetrap play being presented before them to say to her, "I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying" (54). The role of the interpreter who stands between others and their loves is the role he has at one time had thrust upon him by fate and which he chooses to continue to play. It is dangerous to suggest that he had any alternative, for the play notoriously foils critics who think themselves ethically or intellectually superior to this tragic hero. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that the play does provide a critical perspective on Hamlet, a perspective that implies a questioning of the genre of tragedy itself more than a moral critique of the hero as an individual subject.

The critical perspective I hope to trace does not result in our feeling that Hamlet should have done something else at any point in the play; rather, it heightens our awareness that the drama itself is the product of

3. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the interpretation of desire in Hamlet," in James Holly深远 French Studies, 51–61 (1978): 51–52. The mention of denvation occurs on p. 50; my explanation of the term draws on the translator's note 6. I should observe, however, that Lacan's analysis, despite Freud's, or rather claims to "shed light on what Freud had left to one's own" (48), by interpreting the plausibility with reference to the Lacanian theory of the phallus. The fundamental reason why Hamlet cannot overcome his ambivalence against Claudius, Lacan argues, is that "he knows that he must strike something other than what's there" (51): that "something other" is the phallus, the symbolic object which, for Lacan, signifies "the law of the father," and which cannot be mastered by the individual subject because it is an effect of repression and of one's insertion into a cultural system of meaning. "One cannot strike the phallus," Lacan asserts, "because the phallus is the real phallus, a ghost." (48)

4. Many critics have succumbed to the temptation to reproach Hamlet for incompetence (Bradley); by not pursuing "a moral sensibility inherit in our own," as Helen Gardner characterizes A. S. Eliot'stribute to Hamlet for "shrewdly well pleased with himself" despite the fact that he has made "a prettily considerable mess of things." "The uncanniness of Shakespeare and Seneca," cited in Gardiner's useful survey of the problems critics have encountered in trying to find critical or logical "conciseness" in the drama; see her chapter on "The iconoclastic approach: Hamlet," in The Business of Criticism (Oxford, 1939), 15–51.)
certain choices which might have been different. Like many students of Shakespeare, I have often felt that certain of his plays strongly invite the audience to imagine how the play would go if it were written according to a different set of generic rules. Certain turns of plot are made to seem somehow arbitrary, and the effect of such moments is to shift our attention from the story-line to the invisible hand manipulating it; we are reminded that the dramatist’s decisions about his material are not wholly preordained. A strange sense of potentiality arises at such moments; we enter a metadramatic realm where movements of plot and characterization no longer seem simply given or “necessary.” The death of Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet is an example of the kind of moment I have in mind; it seems so accidental, so unmotivated, that we may well wonder how the play would have turned out had he been allowed to live. The play could have been a comedy— as Shakespeare later explicitly indicated by including a parody of it in Act V of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Shakespeare’s tendency to blur generic boundaries throughout his career has often been remarked; but critics have not, to my knowledge, related this phenomenon to the peculiar way in which Shakespearean tragedy, in contrast to Greek or classical French examples of the genre, seems so often to imply a questioning of the necessity of casting a given story as tragedy.

The critical perspective on Hamlet—or on Hamlet as a “piece of work”—begins to emerge, I think, with the first death in the play, the stabbing of Polonius in the pivotal closet scene of III.i. Here we see a darker, literalized version of Hamlet’s verbal technique of separating others’ words from their conventional meanings. That technique was dissociative but also semantically fecund; now, however, a spirit is definitively separated from its body, which becomes mere matter. “It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf,” Hamlet had knowingly remarked apropos of Polonius’s fate when he played Julius Caesar in a university theatrical (50); now, by killing Polonius, Hamlet makes the earlier insult seem prophetic; he “realizes” it, transforming the old man into a sacrificial calf on another stage. This performative mode of materializing a figure, with its grim effects of tragic irony, is what I want to call “incorporating.”

Although the play raises all sorts of questions about the boundary between speaking and doing, in the closet scene there is no doubt that Hamlet passes from speaking daggers to using them. But he has stabbed Polonius only through a curtain—yet another figure for that position of “in betweenness” Hamlet himself is structurally bound to occupy. That curtain may also be seen, I think, as a material emblem not only for Hamlet’s ignorance of Polonius’s identity, but also for his inability to pursue a certain ethical line of interpreting the meaning of his deed. Hamlet does not inquire very deeply either here or later, when he kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into the meaning of his action. This seems odd, since he has shown himself so remarkably capable of interrogating the meaning of his inaction. There is a thinness, even an uncharacteristic passivity, to his response to his killing of Polonius: “For this same lord I do repent,” he says, adding, “but heaven hath pleas’d it so, I To punish me with this and this with me. / That I must be their scourge and minister” (65). It seems to me that the play questions this kind of self-justification, supplementing if not altogether invalidating Hamlet’s view of himself as a divinely appointed “scourge.” The questioning occurs most generally through the play’s scrutiny of kingship; kings, like divinely appointed “scourges,” may easily abuse their power by seeing themselves as heavenly instruments, beyond the authority of human laws. Shakespeare, I would argue, invites us to see that one meaning of Hamlet’s “incorporating” activity is that through it he becomes more and more like a king—or, perhaps, like a playwright. Indeed, with the killing of Polonius—the “rat” Hamlet mistakenly takes for the king he had already symbolically caught in the Mousetrap play—Hamlet takes a crucial step towards occupying the place of the king as the play defines it: not in terms of an individual, but in terms of a role associated both with the power to kill and with the tendency to justify killing with lines of argument unavailable to lesser men. Horatio darkly suggests this in V.ii: Hamlet has just described how he disposed of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “They are not near my conscience,” he says:

’Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

(93)

“Why, what a king is this!” Horatio ambiguously exclaims or queries. Does he refer to Hamlet or to Claudius? It doesn’t much matter. Shakespeare seems to say a king is one who thinks himself capable of literally disposing of whatever comes between him and his desires.

It is no accident that Hamlet kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by means of a forged letter. For Claudius’s letter ordering the king of England to kill Hamlet, Hamlet substitutes a letter ordering the king to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He seals that letter with his father’s ring, the signet or sign of royal power; Claudius of course possesses a copy of this ring, and it is worth noting that there is no difference between the effect of Claudius’s copy and that of the original seal. Both have the power to order instant death. Communication among kings in this play would, indeed, appear to be a grim illustration of Saint Paul’s dictum that the letter killeth. The play suggests, however, that it is not only the letter, but the desire to interpret literally, to find one single sense, that leads to murder. The Ghost that appeared “In the same figure like the King that’s dead” commands Hamlet to take action by means of several equivocal and mutually contradictory phrases, including “bear it not.”
“Taint not thy mind,” and “Remember me” (23); even when he reappears to what Hamlet’s almost blunted purpose, all the Ghost commands is “Do not forget” (63). So long as Hamlet remains perplexed by the multiple potential meanings of these commands, he remains in a realm where destruction of meanings goes hand in hand with the creation of new ones: the verbal and hermeneutic realm of his puns. Unwillingly to take the hermeneutic from their conventional meanings is not the same thing as unwrapping bodies from spirits. In coming to resemble Claudius, Hamlet is driven to forget this distinction, and Shakespeare, I think, asks us to see the cost of this forgetting. He does so by giving the audience a letter (or sorts) that invites a radically different interpretation from those which Claudius and Hamlet take from the messages they receive from mysterious places.

Shakespeare’s “letter to the audience,” as I want to characterize it, appears in a passage immediately following Claudius’s receipt of Hamlet’s letter announcing his return—naked and alone—to the shores of Denmark (80): let me try to show why the juxtaposition of passages is significant. Claudius says that he cannot understand Hamlet’s letter (“What should this mean?” he asks Laertes (80)); but he recognizes Hamlet’s “character” in the handwriting and proceeds quickly enough to give it a kingly interpretation. For he immediately tells Laertes of his “device” to work Hamlet’s death in a way that will appear an accident. His response to the letter—which comes, after all, from someone he believed he had sent to the country from which no traveler returns—is eerily similar to Hamlet’s response to the Ghost’s message from the land of the dead.

Like Hamlet, Claudius wonders about the ambiguity of the message: “Is the letter some abuse?” he asks Laertes (80); echoing Hamlet’s earlier question to himself about whether “The spirit that I have seen” is or is not a devil that “perhaps . . . abuses me to damn me” (43). Also like Hamlet, although much more quickly, Claudius chooses a single interpretation of the message, finding in it an incentive to kill. It hardly seems to matter whether the message comes from a spirit or a letter; the interpreter’s decision about its meaning creates the deadliness. But in the passage that follows, Shakespeare offers an oblique criticism of the kind of interpretive decision that the kings or would-be kings make in this play. He does so by using Claudius as the unwitting spokesman for a greater king, the one who will really win the duel in the final scene. This is the king whom Richard II describes in Act III of his play:

within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits
Scorning his state and grinning at his pomp.
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchical, be fear’d, and kill with looks;
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,

5. The Norman’s name is spelled “Lamond” in the Second Quarto and in many modern editions of the play, e.g., the Arden, the Signet, the Riverside; the entire passage is absent from the First Folio. (Cf. note to IV, 109, p. 369.)
7. Although most modern editions who use the Reading Quarto’s spelling of the name do so without explaining their choice, Harold Jenkins in the New Arden edition does comment on his decision, suggesting that “the name of the ‘monstrous messenger’ (91) is a piece of fatalism” and is most plausibly interpreted as a play on “La Mort” (see his note to IV, 109, p. 369) and his longer note about the passage on 341–4. To the best of my knowledge, Harold Levin is the only other modern commentator who has devoted much attention to the passage in the Quarto of Hamlet (New York, 1970). Levin discusses the “seem possible slip of typography or pronunciation” that would make “La Mort” into the Second Quarto’s “Lamond.”
admonition. But it contrasts in a curious way with the other messages and admonitions in this play; for there is all the difference in the world between a message that asks us, with the paradoxical temporality of literature and dream, to remember our own future death, and messages that ambiguously incite characters to kill and thereby to forget, as it were, the potential future of another. It seems to me significant, therefore, that Shakespeare uses the trope of personification—the animation of inanimate things—to describe Lamord. A premonitory and admonitory figure he certainly is—but how interestingly different from the literalized memento mori that appears in the next scene, in Yorick's skull. I do not think Hamlet grasps the meaning of Yorick's skull very completely because he so quickly forgets its implications for the fate of kings. Although seeing the skull leads him to brood on the idea that great men such as Alexander and Caesar finally become, like commoners, no more than dust to stop a bung hole, in the very next scene (93) we find Hamlet still thinking of himself as a "mighty opposite" in a kingly war that makes humble men like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern irrelevant to conscience. Paradoxically, the death drive in Hamlet seems too strong to allow him to understand either a graphic memento mori such as Yorick's skull or the more unusual, figurative one offered to the audience (but not to Hamlet) in the Lamord passage. For truly to understand a memento mori, one must have at least some love of life—on earth or beyond. And Hamlet lacks this love; he was speaking truly when he told Polonius that there was nothing he would prefer to lose more than Polonius's company: "except my life, except my life, except my life" (34). It is therefore appropriate that, in the description of Lamord that Hamlet can neither read nor hear, Shakespeare asks us to remember not only death, but also love and life—particularly the life of Hamlet as Ophelia remembers it a time before the play began. Lamord, Laertes admirably says, is "the brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation" (81); the phrasing and rhythm recall Ophelia's description of Hamlet as "Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state" / The glass of fashion and the mould of form" (47).

The implied parallel between Lamord and Hamlet—not the gloomy and dishevelled prince we see throughout most of the play, a man obsessed with a sense of sexual impotence, but rather a prince made present to us only through the mediation of Ophelia's memorializing description—this parallel suggests that there is yet another way of interpreting Lamord's name and symbolic significance. If one listens closely to his name, one may hear in it a pun not only on Death but also on Love—there is, after all, only the slightest difference in pronunciation between the French "la mort" and "l'amour"; and the Latin amor is contained within the
Norman's name. French Renaissance poets often punned on 'l'amour' and 'la mort' in ways that suggest the two forces are no less 'demi-natured' than Lamord and his horse. 2

In a play as concerned as this one is with problems of translation, it seems quite plausible that Shakespeare would pun bi-lingually here no less easily than he does in the bawdy 'French lesson' scene of Henry V. It also seems plausible that he would be particularly interested in puns that strike the reader's eye even more than the listener's ear; Hamlet is after all a play that broods on the relation between elite and 'general' audiences, and also on the relation between written texts and dramatic performances of them. 3 The play on Lamord's name suggested by the Second Quarto in any case invites those of us who read Hamlet now, knowing all the problems presented by the existence of its different textual versions, to imagine the playwright asking of himself a question similar to the one Horatio voices in Act V, apropos of Ostric's inability to understand Hamlet's parody of the inflated courtly style Ostric himself uses: "Is't not possible to understand in another tongue?" 49. Horatio's question, like so many questions in this play, is left unanswered. But even if most of Shakespeare's later readers and editors have not understood the other tongue, or tongues, spoken by the text in the Lamord passage, that passage is nonetheless significant as a kind of window that allows us briefly to look out from the dark and claustrophobic world of Hamlet to another verbal universe, one whose metaphysical economy is less depressed than the one we see in Hamlet. The description of Lamord, often cut in production and apparently so irrelevant to the play's plot that it is sometimes described as a 'personal allusion' on Shakespeare's part, 4 seems to me a significant digression from the world of tragedy itself. The language of this passage is strangely foreign to Hamlet because here letter and spirit are joined in a message that insists on the union of life and death but does not present that union as a horror. For Hamlet, questioner of tropes and incorporer of bodies, all unions are tainted with poison, like the literal 'union' (the pearl) in the cup Claudius prepares for Hamlet in the final scene. After Gertrude has mistakenly drunk from that cup and Claudius has been wounded with the envenomed sword, Hamlet ironically offers the poisoned vessel to Claudius, asking bitterly, "Is thy union here? / Follow my mother" (99).

There is a different perspective on unions in the personification of Lamord. Shakespeare explores that perspective more fully in some of his later plays, notably the romances; one might indeed see the passage on Lamord as a kind of prophecy of Shakespeare's later career, when he experimented with a genre characterized by 'wondrous' escapes from potentially tragic plots. In the romances, and in a play like Antony and Cleopatra which blurs the boundary between tragedy and romance, we find a vision of the relation between death and life that sharply contrasts with the tragic vision represented in Hamlet. Characters like Antony, Petrarch (The Winter's Tale) and Ferdinand (The Tempest) inhabit verbal universes in which the verb 'to die' often has a double meaning; and the playwright himself exploits the theatrical analogue to this pun by reminding us, as he does conspicuously in Antony, that actors, like lovers, may die many times and come again to life. 5 Antony's marvelous dialogue with Eros envisions death as a dissolving of boundaries that is more erotic than terrible, and that may well be compared to the image of Hamlet "incorpor'd and demi-natur'd" with his horse. "Thou hast seen these signs, / They are black vesture's pageant," Antony tells Eros after describing to him the various forms clouds take; he goes on to conjure an image that anticipates Prospero's famous "cloud-capp'd towers" speech in The Tempest (IV.i.146ff.). Antony says:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct;
As water is in water.

(I.v. iv.9-11)

Such a way of conceiving death allows for the possibility of new shapes rising from the dissolution of old ones; death is acknowledged but also, one might say, embraced, in a romance vision similar to the one incarnated in a dialogue in Act IV of The Winter's Tale. Speaking of the spring flowers she lacks (for the pastoral world of Shakespearean romance

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2. My favorite example of which I am indebted to Joseph Shriver, of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is the following:

Amour en latin fait amor,
Et par avant, touts qui mord,
Dousc, plous, purger, faiblie, remords.

3. Stendhal uses this line as an example of a chapter 15 of La Peau, et &c. I have been unable to locate a Renaissance source for this example and it may of course have been composed by Stendhal himself, nonetheless, "se non veo, e ben tristi.

4. "The play on "memor" as "to bite" makes it a particularly apt gloss on the Lamord passage, since one editor of Hamlet, Edward Dowden, connects the Second Quarto's Lamord with the French words, a horse's bit. For simpler examples of "complexe on love and death in sixteenth century French poetry," see Verbe du XVe siécle ed. Albert. Marie Schmidt (1953), 73; (Jodelle: Les Amours, Sound 351 and 527, 623, 820) poems from Philippe Desportes: Les Amours d'Henriette.

5. As Harold Jenkins notes (Anders Hamlet, 169), a number of editors have suggested a personal allusion on the passage to the catalogue in Castiglione's "The Crown" named Petru Lembe ("the remains of the horse" in Shakespeare's translation as Pete Mount, d. the Folio's "Lamnund". I do not dispute the idea of an erudite allusion, I am simply as gaus, gaus what can never he definitely proved, that
is never an Eden of timeless spring), Perdita says that if she had such flowers she would use them on her lover, "To strew him o'er and o'er." "What, like a corpse?" he asks, and she replies:

No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on:
Not like a corpse; or if—not to be buried,
But quick, and in mine arms.

(IV iv. 130–2)

Here again is language like that in the Lamord passage, which speaks of something "incorpsed” and lively at once, the quick and the dead "demi-natur'd." In such visions there is a kind of sublime punning, an equivocation that holds life and death in solution or delicate balance. "We must speak by the card or equivocation will undo us," Hamlet says in the graveyard scene (57). Shakespeare, I think, infuses this statement with an irony Hamlet cannot see, for Hamlet is undone, and undoes others, not because he equivocates, but because he inhabits a world where equivocation tends, as if by a fatal entropy, to become "absolute for death." The play, however, renders its own generic drive toward death just equivocal enough to make us question the rules of tragedy.

JACQUELINE ROSE

Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: Hamlet and Measure for Measure

What fantasy of the woman has figured in readings—psychoanalytic and other—of Hamlet and Measure for Measure, plays which have repeatedly been defined as a ‘problem’, as requiring an interpretation which goes beyond their explicit, or manifest, content? How far has the woman been at the centre, not only of the internal drama, but also of the critical drama—the controversy about meaning and language—which each of these plays has provoked? In this essay, rather than apply psychoanalysis to literature, as if psychoanalysis were a method to be mapped onto the literary text, I will try to show how psychoanalytic and literary criticism share with the literature they address a terrain of language, fantasy and sexuality—a terrain in which the woman occupies a crucial, but difficult, place. In both of these plays, the central woman character finds herself accused—Gertrude in Hamlet of too much sexuality, Isabella in Measure for Measure of not enough. In both cases, the same notion of excess or deficiency has appeared in the critical commentaries on the plays. Hamlet and Measure for Measure have each been described as aesthetic failures which ask too much of—or offer too little to—the act of interpretation itself. By focusing on the overlap of these two accusations, of the woman and of the play, we might be able to see how the question of aesthetic form and the question of sexuality are implicated in each other.

T. S. Eliot linked the two plays when he described their material as ‘intractable’, resistant to interpretation and infringing the proper boundaries of dramatic form. In his famous essay (1919) on Hamlet (Eliot 1975), which was later picked up by Ernest Jones in his psychoanalytic reading of the play (Jones 1949), Eliot first put forward his central concept of the ‘objective correlative’ in the form of a critique of Hamlet for its aesthetic failure and of Gertrude for being its cause. For Eliot, the aesthetic matching of emotion to object, which is the pre-condition of proper aesthetic form, fails in Hamlet because Gertrude is not sufficient as a character to carry the weight of the affect which she generates in the chief character of the play. Without this correlation, emotion in literature, or drama, becomes too insistent. Unless it can be seen as the inevitable response to the character presented on stage, it draws attention to itself, uneasily suggestive of something in the artist which he has failed to get under control. The deficiency of the character is therefore not only the cause, but also the result of an emotional excess. In Hamlet, the failure is Gertrude’s, who thus deprives not only her son, but also the play, of the proper emotional support.

In his essay, Eliot lays down the terms for a way of assessing literature and its values whose influence has by no means been restricted to Shakespeare, but it is important that he first does so with reference to Shakespeare, and that the formulation centres so crucially on a woman. The importance of the woman in Eliot’s theory appears as more than arbitrary when we notice that he uses another image of a woman to embody what he sees as the consequent failure of the play. Hamlet, Eliot writes, is ‘the Mona Lisa of literature’ (Eliot 1975, p. 47), offering up in its enigmatic and indecipherable nature something of that maimed and imperfect quality of appeal which characterizes Leonardo’s famous painting. Like the Mona Lisa, Hamlet is a flawed masterpiece whose very failing acts as a pull on spectator and critic alike. Its very imperfection brings with it the power to seduce. Thus the idea of emotional excess shifts across the different levels of analysis—from drama to author to spectator. The appearance of the Mona Lisa in Eliot’s essay suggests that the problem with Hamlet is that the ‘inexpressibly horrible’ content which he identifies beneath the surface of the text fascinates as much as it repels. The danger which Hamlet poses to Eliot’s definition of proper