

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 humbug.

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 rejection 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 bearing the aspirations of the humanist 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.

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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,

plausibly have been related to Horatio in the graveyard (V.1). This is surely because Shakespeare wants Hamlet to emerge as a man of action only after the funeral of Ophelia, thus linking the two.

¹ From *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*,

ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London, 1985) 292–309. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Routledge, Chapman & Hall. Page numbers given in parentheses refer to the text of this Norton Critical Edition of *Hamlet*.

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*,¹ 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 "incorporating"—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).² 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."³ 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 dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

(8)

1. I borrow the term "performative" from J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), 2nd edn (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 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 performatives, 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 Morris (London and New York). The Arden *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, was published in 1982.

3. See Stephen Booth's excellent discussion of the syntactic and rhetorical devices Claudius uses to achieve "equation by balance": "On the value of *Hamlet*," in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York, 1969), esp. 148–9.

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 "wordy attempts at compromise" by demanding "that words receive their full freight of meaning."⁴ If the puns work to increase semantic richness, however—the Elizabethan rhetorician George Puttenham characterized the pun or *syllipsis* as "the figure of double supply"⁵—they do so by driving a wedge between words and their ordinary meanings. The pun, Sigurd Burckhardt 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."⁶

If Hamlet's punning wit makes an oblique attack on Claudius's rhetorical penchant for "yoking 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

4. Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language* (New Haven and London, 1974), 27.

5. See George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, 1936), 136. "Syllipsis" is the classical trope that corresponds most closely to the modern notion of the pun—a term that did not appear in English until the eighteenth century, according to the OED. Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov define *syllipsis* as "the use of a single word that has more than one meaning and participates in more than one syntactic construction"; they cite as

an example Falstaff's remark, from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, "At a word, hang no more about me: I am no gibbet for you" (*Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, 10. Catherine Porter [Baltimore, 1979], 278). I am indebted for this citation and for my general understanding of punning tropes to Jane Hedley's unpublished essay on "Syllipsis and the problem of the Shakespeare sonnet order."

6. Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton, 1965), 24–5. Burckhardt's comment is cited in part by Danson, *op. cit.*, 27, n. 2.

rebuff dictated by Polonius's and Laertes' 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'th' 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 that 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 who?" is the perverse, ungrammatical, and fascinating reply, not an answer but, characteristically, another question. In this peculiar dialogue Hamlet disjoins 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 addressor and those known and interpreted by the addressee."⁷

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.⁸ 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 locutions 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

7. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), 62; cited by Danson, *op. cit.*, 27, n. 3.

8. See, e.g., Paul de Man's discussion of Locke's condemnation of *catachresis*, the trope that most notoriously dramatizes the difficulty of grounding a theory of figurative language in a concept of referential correspondence between words and "reality"; "The epistemology of metaphor," in *On*

Metaphor, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago and London, 1979), 11–28. Locke's condemnation of *catachresis*, in *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, eventually "takes all language for its target," de Man argues. "for at no point in the course of the demonstration can the empirical entity be sheltered from tropological deformation" (19–20).

how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter" (96).

As is apparent from even a cursory examination of the play's manifold uses of this word, the relation between matter and spirit, matter and art, matter and anything that is "no matter," is altogether questionable for Hamlet; he is therefore quite accurate in presenting matter as an obstacle to unity of opinion: "Between who?" suggests only that any definition of matter will be a matter for dispute. Hamlet has indeed effectively disjoined this word from any single conventional meaning we or Polonius might want to give it; and it is no accident, I think, that Hamlet's rapier attack on the word "matter" foreshadows the closet scene in which he both *speaks* daggers to his mother and literally stabs Polonius, mistaking him, as he says to the corpse, "for thy better." In this scene, the concept of matter is linked to that of the mother by a pun that marries Shakespeare's mother tongue to the language known, in the Renaissance, as the *sermo patrius*: the language of the Church fathers and also of the ancient Romans.⁹ "Now, mother, what's the matter?" asks Hamlet at the very outset of the closet scene (60), and this query makes explicit an association of ideas already implied by a remark Hamlet made to Rosenkrantz: "Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say—" (56).

As we hear or see in the word "matter" the Latin term for mother, we may surmise that the common Renaissance association between female nature in general and the "lower" realm of matter is here being deployed in the service of Hamlet's complex oedipal struggle.¹ The mother is the matter that comes between the father and the son—and it is no accident that in this closet scene Hamlet's sexual hysteria rises to its highest pitch. Dwelling with obsessive, disgusted fascination on his mother's unseemly passion for her second husband, Hamlet appears to be struggling with his own feelings about her body even as he argues for his dead father's continuing rights to her bed. Hamlet's act of stabbing Polonius through the curtain, which occurs almost casually in the middle of the tirade against Gertrude's lust, seems only to increase his passionate desire to make her see her error in preferring Claudius to her first husband. For Hamlet, however, the problem of seeing a genuine *difference* between his original father and the man Gertrude has called his father assumes

9. On Latin as a *sermo patrius*, see my *Trial of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven and London, 1953), 24, and Leo Spitzer, "Muttersprache und Muttererziehung," in *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York, 1945), 15-65.

1. See Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, 1950), for a survey of Renaissance authors who adopted the Aristotelian scheme of dualities "in which one element is superior and the other inferior. The male principle in nature is associated with active, formative, and perfected characteristics, while the female is passive, material, and deprived" (5). See also Linda

Woodbridge, *Woman and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620* (Urbana and Chicago, 1954), esp. ch. 3. It seems likely that an association between bareness, "matter," and his mother is at work even earlier in the play, when Hamlet vows that the Ghost's "commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain. / Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven! / O most pernicious woman!" (23). Cf. Av Erlich's comments about this passage in *Hamlet's Absent Father* (Princeton, 1977), 218.

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 governess in Henry James's tale, who sees the ghostly figure of Miss Jessell when the "gross" 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* Claudius, who has become a king and husband by killing the elder Hamlet.² Jacques Lacan, in his brilliant, albeit elliptical, essay on "Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*," speculates that Hamlet's

2. Freud's famous discussion of Hamlet as a "hysteric" whose guilt about his own repressed oedipal wishes prevents him from taking vengeance "on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother" was originally published as a footnote to ch. 5 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), from 1914 onward the passage was included in the text. See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*

Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey et al. 4 (London, 1953), 264-6. See also Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Garden City, 1949) (pp. 200-207, this edition—Editor). But see also, for a critique of the "Freud-Jones" interpretation and a discussion of other psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet*, Theodore Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in "Hamlet"* (New York, 1975), esp. 9-13, 184-6.

invectives against Claudius in the closet scene are an example of *dénégation*, that is, the words of dispraise and contempt are indications of repressed admiration.³ 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

(62)

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

3. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*," tr. James Holbert, French text ed. Jacques-Alain Miller from transcripts of Lacan's seminar, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Yale French Studies, 55–6 (1977), 11–52). The mention of *dénégation* occurs on p. 50; my explanation of the term draws on the translator's note 6. I should observe, however, that Lacan's analysis departs from Freud's, or rather claims to "shed light on what Freud had to leave out" (43), by interpreting the play

with reference to the Lacanian theory of the "phallus." The fundamental reason why Hamlet cannot raise his arm 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 investment into a cultural system of meaning. "(O)ne cannot strike the phallus," Lacan asserts, "because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a ghost" (50).

eventually emerge, however scarred, 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 maids' 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 once 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.⁴ 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

4. Many critics have succumbed to the temptation to reproach Hamlet for incompetence (Bradley) or for possessing "a moral sensibility inferior to our own," as Helen Gardner characterizes T. S. Eliot's rebuke to Hamlet for "dying fairly well pleased with himself" despite the fact that he has made "a pretty considerable mess of things" ("The

storicism of Shakespeare and Seneca," cited in Gardner's useful survey of the problems critics have encountered in trying to find ethical or logical "consistency" in the drama; see her chapter on "The historical approach: *Hamlet*," in *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford, 1959), 35–51).

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.iv. Here we see a darker, literalized version of Hamlet's verbal technique of separating others' words from their conventional meanings. That technique is 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 punningly 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 patness, 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, / 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 whet 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. Unyoking words from their conventional meanings is not the same thing as unyoking 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 (of 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
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks;
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,

As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable.

(Richard II, III.ii.160–8)

With wonderful irony, Shakespeare has Claudius metaphorically describe this king of kings while *thinking* he is pursuing his own aims—devising his own plot—by manipulating Laertes' competitive spirit to transform his rage against Claudius for Polonius's death into anger against Hamlet. "Two months since," Claudius says,

Here was a gentleman of Normandy—
I have seen myself, and serv'd against, the French,
And they can well on horseback, but this gallant
Had witchcraft in't. He grew unto his seat,
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse
As had he been incorps'd and demi-natur'd
With the brave beast. So far he topp'd my thought
That I in forgery of shapes and tricks
Come short of what he did.

(81)

"A Norman was't?" Laertes asks, and then, in one of the subtlest non-recognition scenes in all of Shakespeare, Laertes tells us the Norman's name: "Upon my life, Lamord" (81).⁵ The spirit behind these letters from the text of the Second Quarto is invisible to Laertes and Claudius; it was also invisible to the compilers of the First Folio, who spelled the Frenchman's name "Lamound," and to eighteenth-century editors like Pope and Malone; the former gave the name as "Lamond," the latter, citing the phrase which describes the character as "the brooch and gem of all the nation," suggested "Lamode," fashion.⁶ But I contend that Shakespeare meant us to hear or see the word "death" in and through the letters of this name; "Upon my life, Death," is the translation we are invited to make—and for those who are uncertain of their French but willing to suspect that puns which depend on mere changes of letters have metaphorical significance, Shakespeare provides an English pun in the word "Norman," which is all too close for comfort to the phrase used by the gravedigger in the next scene: "What man dost thou dig it for?" Hamlet asks. "For no man, sir," is the equivocal reply (87).

5. The Norman's name is spelled "Lamord" 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 ("Bad") Quarto.

6. See the variants and notes for IV.vii.93 in the New Variorum *Hamlet*, ed. H. H. Furness, 5th edn (Philadelphia, 1877), I, 363. The Variorum itself prints the name as "Lamond."

Although most modern editors who use the Second 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 wondrous messenger (91) is a presage of fatality" and is most plausibly interpreted as a play on "La Mort" (see his note to IV.vii.91, p. 369, and his longer note about the passage on 543–4). To the best of my knowledge, Harry Levin is the only other modern commentator who has devoted much attention to the passage; in *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), Levin discusses the "easily possible slip of typography or pronunciation" that would make "La Mort" into the Second Quarto's "Lamord" (95).

The play offers other intratextual clues to the identity of "Lamord." Laertes' phrase "Upon my life, Lamord," echoes a phrase Horatio used in his discussion of the Ghost in I.i:

Let us impart what we have seen tonight
Unto young Hamlet; for *upon my life*
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.
(7; my italics)

Horatio here unwittingly exposes the same eerie truth that Laertes does in Act IV: the "spirit" of Death, whether in the figure of the Ghost or in the figure of Lamord, sits upon the lives of all the characters in the play. And the scene which introduces Lamord seems deliberately designed not only to make Death's past and future presence manifest, but to link it, ominously and obscurely, to the playwright's own activities of "forging shapes," of persuading, and of creating elegiac song: immediately after Claudius successfully persuades Laertes to evenom his sword so that if he "galls" Hamlet in the duel "It may be death" (82), the queen enters with news of Ophelia's fate of being pulled, by her garments, from her "melodious lay / To muddy death" (83).

In the description of the mysterious Norman, Shakespeare paradoxically insists on the presence of Death by animating the dead metaphor in the common phrase "upon my life"; he also creates a new adjective, "incorpsed," which editors (and the *OED*, citing this line as the first use of the term) gloss as "made into one body," but which may also evoke the image of a dead body if we hear the Norman's name as "Death." The lines make us "see" Death, as it were, in a strangely materialized and emblematic figure: that of the rider sitting on—and controlling—the horse that traditionally represents human passion and ambition: "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse," Richard III famously cries, when he is about to lose the powerful vitality that animal symbolizes.⁸ The figure of Lamord sitting on his horse as if he were "incorps'd and demi-natur'd / With the brave beast" is richly evocative, reminding us, as Harry Levin suggests, both of the apocalyptic image of Death as a rider on a "pale horse" (Revelation 6:8), and of Hamlet's broodings on the inherently double or centaur-like nature of man, the angel and beast, the "beauty of the world" and the "quintessence of dust" combined into one "piece of work" (36).⁹

The description of Lamord, which I would like to see as Shakespeare's figurative letter to the reader, is somber and mysterious, a *memento mori*

8. The common Renaissance allegorization of the horse as a symbol for those passions which need to be controlled by reason (figured in the rider or driver) frequently harks back to Plato's image of the soul as a charioteer with two winged horses (*Phaedrus*, 246-8). Shakespeare uses the horse as a figure for uncontrolled anger in *2 Henry IV*, I.i.9-11, and again in *Henry VIII*, I.i.133.

9. See Levin, *op. cit.*, 95; see also Harold Jenkins's editorial comment (*op. cit.*, 544) that the description of Lamord recalls the image of Claudius as a satyr (11) and "kindred animal images, even while the horseman, in contrast with the satyr, is invested with a splendour of which no touch is ever given to Claudius."

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).¹ 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 from a time before the play began. Lamord, Laertes admiringly 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 disheveled 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

1. Cf. Lacan's remarks on Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia once she becomes, in his eyes, "the child-bearer to every sin"; she is then "the phallus, exte-

nized and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life" (Lacan, *op. cit.*, 23).

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 bilingually here no less richly 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 Osric's inability to understand Hamlet's parody of the inflated courtly style Osric himself uses: "Is't not possible to understand in another tongue?" (94). 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

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

Amour en latin faict amor,
Or donc provient d'amour la mort,
Et par avant, soulevy qui mord,
Deuils, plours, peiges, forfaitz, remords.

Stendhal uses this *blason* as an epigraph to chapter 15 of *Le Rouge et le Noir*. I have been unable to locate a Renaissance source for this epigraph and it may of course have been composed by Stendhal himself; nonetheless, "se non è vero, è ben trovato." Its play on "mordre" 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 *mords*, a horse's bit. For simpler examples of wordplay on love and death in sixteenth-century French poetry, see *Poètes du XVI^e siècle*, ed. Albert-Marie Schmidt (Paris, 1953), 725 (Jodelle's *Les Amours*, Sonnet 35), and 827, 823, 820 (poems from Philippe Desportes's *Les Amours d'Hippolyte*).

3. For whatever reasons—one possibly having to do with the complex publication and production history of *Hamlet* in Shakespeare's own lifetime—the play emphasizes the difference between written scripts and actors' versions of them in a way unique in Shakespeare's canon; see, e.g., Hamlet's remark to the Player in (39) apropos the speech that "was never acted" ("was cavaire to the general") and his later directive, again addressed to the Player, that "your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (49). The play is also unusually full of references to books, tablets, letters, and forgeries of written texts; some critics have suspected that Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (32) is a forgery by Polonius. For a discussion of the theme of writing in the play, see Daniel Sibony, "Hamlet: a writing effect" (*Yale French Studies*, 55-6 (1977), 53-93). On other passages in the text that contain bi- and trilingual puns, see Lidz, *op. cit.*, 23-5.

4. As Harold Jenkins notes (*Arden Hamlet*, 369), a number of editors have suggested a "personal allusion" in the passage to the cavalier in Castiglione's *The Courtier* named Pietro Monte (ren-

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, Florizel (*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 Lamord "incorp'd and demi-natur'd" with his horse. "Thou hast seen these signs, / They are black vesper's pageants," 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.148ff.). Antony says:

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

(IV.xiv.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

dered by Hobz in his Tudor translation as Peter Mount, cf. the Folio's "Lamound"). I do not dispute the idea of an esoteric allusion; I am simply arguing what can never be definitively proved, that

an allusion to Death is more plausible.
5. See, for examples of erotic puns on "die," *Antony and Cleopatra*, I.ii.135-42 and IV.xv.38-9; *The Tempest*, III.i.79-84.

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 "incorps'd" 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 (87). 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

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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 failing 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 undecipherable nature something of that maimed or 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