

Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*

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Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies have had an even more durable life than comedies. Especially at the Globe Playhouse, a varied audience crowded to see the rise and fall of kings, or the working out of revenge and passion. They watched horrific stories concluding with an ultimate test in which the hero, and sometimes the heroine, faced violence and disaster. Death came in many forms, but always brought with it a revaluation of the hero's life as means of support were taken away: the individual was separated from his or her fellows, endured loss and escalation of pain, and was exposed to intense scrutiny. The audience was invited to judge the hero's response and ultimate resource. Perhaps these tragedies were so popular because they offered audiences an opportunity to assume the role of God, the all-knowing assessor who had long been the exclusive possession of remote and authoritative clerics: they could watch as man suffers, and so judge his ultimate worth. In the words of John Webster, writing his first tragedy in 1612 (partly in imitation of Shakespeare):

... affliction
Expresseth virtue, fully, whether true,
Or else adulterate. (*The White Devil* I.i.49-51)¹

Death brought a final truth-telling. In his second tragedy, a couple of years later, Webster's heroine is told in the very first scene:

... believe't
Your darkest actions—nay, your privat'st thoughts—
Will come to light. (*The Duchess of Malfi* I.i.314-16)²

The coming to light of a man's "privat'st thoughts" is what Shakespeare implied as he explored the possibilities of tragedy in *Julius Caesar*,

a chronicle play concluding in numerous deaths, and gave his most thoughtful character words which liken the protagonists to horses who are judged for resources of spirit in painful trial:

There are no tricks in plain and simple faith;
 But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,
 Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;
 But when they should endure the bloody spur,
 They fall their crests, and like deceitful jades
 Sink in the trial. (IV.ii.22-27)³

So, later Hamlet moves through the tragedy with a secret within him, and defies his audience to guess at it. Yet he never seems able to name it, and very rarely lets "fall his crest." Towards the end of *Hamlet*, the hero tries to share his own sense that a bloody spur is about to probe to his very "heart":

Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter. . . . It is but foolery (V.ii.208-11)⁴

Earlier he had rounded on Guildenstern who had tried to "sound" him and "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery": "'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (III.ii.356-57, 360-61). In his first encounter with his mother, he had warned that nothing external, neither words, nor clothes, nor breath, tears, facial expression, "Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief," were able to "denote" him truly:

These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play;
 But I have that within which passes show—
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.77-86)

Perhaps the probing of a mystery as the hero confronts affliction and death—with a last rush towards understanding and judgment—accounts for the success of all these tragedies which have endured into our own days. We are interested in the hero's inner consciousness at least as keenly as we await the fulfilling of barbarous revenge, or the overthrow of a monarchical government grown tyrannical, or the disappointment

or satisfaction of love and lust. *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* remain the most performed and studied plays in the history of theatre despite the out-dated themes and narratives which are their ostensible subjects. Should we see them as offering an entrance to the midnight hour when all men must unmask? At any rate, let us pretend that this is so, and pay particular attention to the final moments of *Hamlet*. Has Shakespeare provided the means, in words or action, whereby this hero comes, at last, to be "denoted truly"?

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One of the first things which an audience learns about Hamlet—the single figure dressed in solemn black at a Court festivity—is that he uses words with startling agility. He plays on words that sound alike, or nearly alike:

King. But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—

Ham. A little more than kin, and less than kind.

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Ham. Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun. (I.ii.64-67)

The king withdraws from this exchange, and his mother begins more lovingly, on a different tack. But still Hamlet takes words that others have used and returns them changed or challenged:

Ay, madam, it is common.

...

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'. (I.ii.74-76)

Although the prince is speaking in public, he uses verbal rhetorical devices most critics in Shakespeare's day would consider unseemly. Cicero in *De oratore* (II.lx ff.) had insisted that wordplay tactlessly handled belonged to buffoons or pedantic scholars. George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) considered:

... sentences that hold too much of the mery & light, or infamous & vnshamefast ... become not Princes, nor great estates, nor them that write of their doings ...⁵

Ben Jonson, in his *Discoveries* warned that “we must not play, or riot too much with [words], as in *Paranomasies*,” but added that there is no sound “but shall find some Lovers, as the bitter’st confections are gratefull to some palats.”⁶

Hamlet’s first words are rhetorically complicated, and also challenging and puzzling. Does he pretend to be flippant or boorish in order to keep his thoughts to himself, or to contain his pain? Or does he express rational criticism in savagely sarcastic comments spoken only to himself? Or is the energy of his mind such that he thinks and speaks with instinctive ambiguity? Words are restless within his mind, changing meaning, shifting form, extending reference, awaking others close in sound but different in meaning.

This part of Hamlet’s character—for ambiguous and complicated speech is a distinctive element of the “mind” with which Shakespeare has endowed his hero—this characteristic operates on various levels. We soon see that in private he continues to use wordplay as a disguise in which to taunt and trick both adversaries and friends, so that he is not fully understood and they are encouraged to disclose hidden thoughts:

Pol. Do you know me, my lord?

Ham. Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.

Pol. Not I, my lord.

Ham. Then I would you were so honest a man.

Pol. Honest, my lord?

Ham. Ay sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand. . . . (II.ii.173-79)

Fishmongers smell, when among other men; a *fishmonger* was a name for “fleshmonger” or bawd; a *fishmonger’s* wife and daughter were said to breed, fish-like, in great quantity . . .⁷ And so, Hamlet’s mind runs on to “so *honest* a man,” a word meaning “honourable,” or “chaste,” or “truthful, genuine.”⁸ “Modesties . . . craft . . . colour”; “I know a hawk from a handsaw” (II.ii. 280-79, 375): wordplay gallops easily, or abruptly it makes a bold and mocking challenge. Hamlet can deliver one message and at the same time another contrary one; “if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no *discourse* to your beauty (III.i.107-08); or again, “. . . he may *play the fool* nowhere but in’s own

house . . ." (III.i.133-34); or again, "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing . . . of nothing" (IV.ii.26-29).

Words are wanton in Hamlet's mind, feeding his aggressions and his fears. Sometimes we get the impression that he is revealing more than he knows, as if his unconscious, rather than conscious, mind controls his speech. Why should he punish Ophelia openly before the actors perform *The Mousetrap*? Is he looking at his mother and step-father all this time, or wanting to do so? Does he want *them* to hear? Or is he forcing himself to be pleasant in public to a girl he distrusts, and failing so thoroughly to do this that he concludes with talk of churches, hobby-horses and an epitaph which is puzzling even to himself? His play upon *cunt, no-thing, jig, do, die, hobby-horse* (III.ii.115-32) is doubly vulgar: not only a run of obtrusive and brutal sexual innuendo, but also an unprincely assumption that his predicament is a rite or carnival of common validity. In effect Hamlet is creating a paronomasia of performance, moving from politeness to brutality; and it seems to come out almost unbidden.

Even when Hamlet's wordplay is intentional and nicely judged, it is not always clear to what purpose he uses it. To confuse or to clarify? Or to control his own uncensored thoughts? The energy and turmoil of his mind brings words thronging into speech, stretching, over-turning and amalgamating their implications. Sometimes Hamlet has to struggle to use the simplest words repeatedly, as he tries to force meaning to flow in a single channel. To Ophelia, after he has encountered her in her loneliness, "reading on a book," he repeats five times "Get you to a nunnery," varying the phrase only by word-order and by changing "get" to "go." And after he has visited his mother "all alone" in her closet and killed Polonius, after she has begged him to "speak no more" (III.iv.88), and after his father's ghost has reappeared, Hamlet repeats "Good night" five times, with still fewer changes and those among accompanying words only. But, of course, in performance, in the heat of passionate encounter, the effect and meaning of these simple words can change with each repetition. It is an actor's instinct to vary them, using them as rungs of a ladder to grow towards a climactic emotional effect, rather than as firm stepping-stones on which to cross an unruly

river. So Hamlet seems to be struggling to contain his thoughts even by use of these simple words, rather than enforcing a single and simple message as a first reading of the text might suggest; and the words come to bear deeper, more ironic or more blatant meanings.

In soliloquy, Hamlet gives wordplay such scope that we receive an impression of a mind working simultaneously at different levels of meaning and consciousness. As soon as he is alone, we hear that he wishes "this too too *sullied*" (or *sallied*, or *solid*) "*flesh would melt*" (I.ii.129?).⁹ From *melt*, particularly appropriate if linked to *solid*, Hamlet's mind springs onwards to two other verbs: *thaw*, bringing further physical associations of cold and change, and dissolution; then on to *resolve*, with a range of old and new associations—dissolve, melt, inform, answer, dispel doubt . . . "*resolve itself into a dew*"—that is something almost intangible, now; and mysterious; and also, in association with some senses of *resolve*, there is a suggestion of *due*, with a hint of necessary "payment" or "judgment."¹⁰ And so Hamlet's mind reaches "the Everlasting" (with a look backward, perhaps, marking a contrast with that which *melts*, *thaws*, and does *not* last)—the powerful, non-*fleshy* presence who *fixes* (no melting or resolving now) his *canon* (both law and instrument of destruction) against *self-slaughter* . . . Hamlet's mind breeds one meaning out of another, using words in several senses, activating new words so that they interact with each other. The energy of this wordplay is amazing: unsettled, serious, self-lacerating, mocking, self-critical, reckless; and bringing a sense of victorious and heady achievement as words bend, buckle, extend their meanings, and sharpen their attack.

Even in soliloquy, Hamlet is not always in control. Sometimes he halts momentarily, as if alarmed by what he has said:

. . . 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
. . . . (III.i.63-65)

Here the thought-process is abrupt and oscillating, so that scarcely any two modern editors punctuate this passage in the same way; many resort

to dashes and numerous dots. At other times Hamlet makes a conscious withdrawal, as if the management of words has tired or perplexed him too painfully:

Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes
the beggars' shadows. Shall we to th'court? For by my fay, I cannot
reason. (II.ii.263-65)

Farewell, dear mother. . . . Father and mother is man and wife,
man and wife is one flesh; so my mother. Come, for England. *Exit.*
(IV.iii.52, 54-56)

In this second example, Hamlet has rendered the king speechless, but he pursues him no further, preferring to go off-stage, silent and under guard, to journey to England.

Hamlet may be still less in control in the grave-yard, when both he and Laertes have had to be restrained physically. He tries to use simple words, but then asserts "it is no matter" and leaves abruptly with a taunting riddle:

Hear you, sir,
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I lov'd you ever. But it is no matter.
Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.
(V.i.283-87)

Much of the dramatic action of this tragedy is within the head of Hamlet, and wordplay represents the amazing, contradictory, unsettled, mocking, fecund nature of that mind, as it is torn by disappointment and positive love, as Hamlet seeks both acceptance and punishment, action and stillness, and wishes for consummation and annihilation. He can be abruptly silent or vicious; he is capable of wild laughter and tears, and also polite badinage. The narrative is a kind of mystery and chase, so that, underneath the various guises of his wordplay, we are made keenly aware of his inner dissatisfaction, and come to expect some resolution at the end of the tragedy, some unambiguous "giving out" which will report Hamlet and his cause aright to the unsatisfied among

the audience. Hamlet himself is aware of this expectation as the end approaches, and this still further whets our anticipation.

* * *

Towards the close, Hamlet has a short exchange alone with Horatio, which seems intended to "set up" the final encounter with Laertes, the Queen, Claudius, and the whole Court, and to make absolutely clear the nature of his own involvement. The passage exists in two good versions; the second Quarto of 1604, and the Folio of 1623, which is now thought to represent Shakespeare's revision of the earlier version.¹¹ This second text adds fourteen lines in which Hamlet seeks to justify, as "perfect conscience," his determination to kill Claudius with his own "arm"—or rather to "quit" him, which implies repaying as well.¹² He then asks whether he would not be "damned" if he did nothing to eradicate "this canker of our nature" (V.ii.68-70). But even this later addition to the play does not establish a "plain and simple faith."¹³ We notice that Hamlet expresses himself in rhetorical questions which seem to qualify his momentary certainty. And only minutes later, as the last encounter approaches, his reluctance to tell all ("Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter," ll. 208-09) and a further intrusion of vigorous and baffling wordplay cloud over these ultimate issues once more.

Immediately before the King and Queen enter on stage, Hamlet's words, spoken as he again finds himself alone with Horatio, are so tricky—or perhaps tricky—that they baffled the original compositors of the text and have set modern editors at variance.¹⁴ Neither the Quarto nor Folio makes sense and various emendations have been proposed. *No/knows; has/owes; leave/leaves; ought/all; of what/of ought*, all collide and change places with each other in the different versions. Today a text might read, "Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes?" or "Since no man of ought he leaves, knows, what is't to leave . . .," or ". . . no man owes aught of what he leaves, what is't . . .," or ". . . no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't . . ." (Was the speech ever absolutely clear in Shakespeare's autograph manuscript, or in his head?) With Hamlet's next words, as trumpet and drums

announce the King's arrival, the play's hero contrives yet another avoidance-tactic, refusing to talk further with a surprisingly curt "Let be."

Encountering Laertes in front of the whole court, Hamlet speaks again very simply: "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong" (l. 222). But then he refers to his own supposed "madness" as if it had been entirely real, and as if that absolved him of all responsibility for his actions:

Who does it, then? His madness. It be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (ll. 233-35)

That sounds straightforward enough, but what is his madness? Is it a "sore distraction" by which he has been punished, or is it his own invention and a somewhat theatrical disguise? To what extent is Hamlet creating a cunning smokescreen of words and questions, under which to hide his intent to kill the King? Soon all the action is over, the Queen, Laertes, Claudius and Hamlet all dead; and yet no more mention is made of "madness."

However, the action is held up artificially at the very last minute: the playwright delays his hero's death at the midnight hour for concluding speeches and the audience is encouraged to expect that the hero will unmask and everything will be clarified. But then, even now, this does not happen. Hamlet's final words are so famous that for us they carry an air of assurance with them, but if we try to imagine them as they were heard for the first time, we may appreciate that much is still concealed, and much is just as ambiguous as it was in his characteristically vigorous and volatile use of words throughout the play. We may wonder whether Hamlet is playing consciously with words at the very moment of his trial by death; and, if so, for what purpose.

In his last words to Claudius, Hamlet has already insisted on a final sexual pun: "Drink off this potion. Is thy *union* here?" (l. 331; italics mine).¹⁵ But when he knows that he is himself dead, almost at once he is concerned about how much is "unknown," and insists that Horatio should live to tell his story "aright." But that is his friend's duty: he

himself uses his last moments very differently, and speaks almost at once in an earlier manner:

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu!
 You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
 That are but mutes or audience to this act,
 Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
 Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
 But let it be. . . . (ll. 338-43)

Wordplay has come back, as if unbidden: “This fell sergeant, Death, / Is strict in his arrest” plays on *strict* as “cruel,” “inescapably binding,” and, perhaps, as “morally severe”¹⁶ (this last sense is common in Shakespeare’s plays). And *arrest* can refer equally to the stopping life and to stopping the “act” which the audience is watching and Hamlet performing. Then, once more, the wordplay is stopped with “But let it be” And yet, when he tells Horatio, a second time, that he is as good as dead, the “potion” becomes “The potent poison”; and in a strange phrase (Shakespeare using *o’ercrows* for the only time), the poison is said to shout in triumph over his spirit, rather than taking possession of his body:

O, I die, Horatio.
 The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit.
 (ll. 357-58)

For Shakespeare, this may also have been a reminiscence of the father’s spirit who had “faded on the crowing of the cock” (I.i.162).

Hamlet has already heard the “warlike noise” of Fortinbras’ approach, and now he gives his “dying voice” to this young soldier for the next King of Denmark:

He has my dying voice.
 So tell him, with th’occurents more and less
 Which have solicited—the rest is silence. (ll. 361-63)

The last line here is Hamlet’s last line, and it is as multiple in meaning as any in the play. *Solicited* takes attention first. Is this a gentle solicitation or an urgent call? The word had been used in both senses by Shake-

speare. Perhaps the second is the most likely here, since *solicited* and *silence* are linked a little in sound and may therefore be held in opposition. But the main problem is “the rest is silence.” What can this mean?

First perhaps, it means “All that remains for me to say must be unspoken.” This reading seems to make Hamlet withdraw intentionally from saying more, as he has done frequently in the course of the play: “Let it be.” Wordplay allows him to escape without revealing his secret. Alternatively, he may feel overmastered in his mind, as he is in his body, and here acknowledges that this is so and that he can manage no more words, except this last mocking pun, for *rest* could *also* mean the taking of ease, or a pause in action (or music).

A second reading would have Hamlet assert that the remainder of his life can have nothing to say or will make no noise, perhaps no “warlike noise”—the volleys may still be ringing in his ears, or the first sound of drums for Fortinbras’ approach. So he might speak of his failure to tell all, and die making an excuse for his rashness or ineffectuality.

But, then, *rest* may equally well refer to a time *after* life, a release from the “*unrest*” of life. In the same vein, Hamlet has told Horatio to:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story. (II. 352-54)

In association with *silence*, *rest* need not imply any existence after life; what follows life is unknown, possibly without life of any sort; in any case it makes no noise here and now.

However, yet another interpretation is not so agnostic or irreligious. Hamlet *could* mean that “the rest” of an after-life has nothing to say about matters of the world, such as the succession of Fortinbras; so death is a “quietus” devoutly to be wished (III.i.75). Horatio’s conventional and specifically religious consolation which follows immediately may seem to substantiate this reading:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy *rest!* (II. 364-65)

But *has* Hamlet lost his fear of those “dreams” which may follow when “we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (III.i.67)? Having killed the King

and voted for his successor is he ready to go into the dark, and accept his own "rest" without blenching? This would be a huge reevaluation of earlier attitudes for which the discourse on the fall of a sparrow (V.ii.215-18) is the sole (but not necessarily unequivocal) textual authority. If this is the "correct" reading, however, we may wonder why Shakespeare should follow the earlier account of Hamlet's attitudes with such an "ambiguous giving out," in glancing, unreliable wordplay, at this crucial last moment?

A defence of sorts can be made for each of these four different meanings of Hamlet's four last words, but they tend to cancel each other out if they are all allowed into the reckoning. Instead of choosing between them, I find myself ready to suggest yet a fifth reading which does not attempt to express the "virtue" within Hamlet, that mystery which passes ordinary show; this fifth interpretation could indeed co-habit with any of my earlier suggestions. Perhaps when the playwright directed Hamlet to say "the rest is silence," he was allowing himself to speak through his character, telling the audience and the actor that he, the dramatist, would not, or could not, go a word further in the presentation of this, his most verbally brilliant and baffling hero. The author is going to hide like a fox, leaving all of us standing at a cold scent.

In several earlier passages, we may have heard something of Shakespeare's own voice in what Hamlet says. "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you . . ." (III.ii.1-2) and the several other old saws and modern instances delivered to the Players on their arrival at Elsinore, in their rehearsals, and during their performance, are all possible authorial statements. Hamlet's quick retort to Polonius' dramatic criticism, his managing of several scenes as they are developing—"I must be idle," "For England?" "This is I, Hamlet the Dane," "But it is no matter," "Let be,"¹⁷ and so forth—could also be partly Shakespeare's words as they propel the plot forward. At the close, Hamlet is aware of his deeds as an "act" that is closely watched by "mutes or audience" (V.ii.330) who need to be told what has happened so that his name shall not be "wounded": something of Shakespeare may be in all this as well, and perhaps in the rather dismissive:

So tell him, with th'occurents more or less
Which have solicited

This might suggest the impatience of an author dealing with issues ("more or less") that only censorious (politically committed or politically correct) audience-members would wish to pick on.

There is example for a final authorial voice in other plays. Of course, Prospero's "I'll drown my book" and "Now what strength I have's mine own" come much later in Shakespeare's career. But about this time, we have in *Troilus and Cressida*, "Hector is dead: there is no more to say" (V.x.22);¹⁸ in *Twelfth Night*, "But that's all one, our play is done" (V.i.393);¹⁹ in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Portia. You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter. Antonio. I am dumb" (V.i.278-79);²⁰ and in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.
Exeunt. (V.ii.922-23)²¹

This last example is doubly strange. The line is printed in larger type than that used for the rest of the Quarto version of the play, and is without a speech-prefix. The Folio text regularizes the type-face, but is responsible for adding the concluding line, "You that way; we this way". Keeping in mind these other speeches in which Shakespeare may take over from his characters, we might think that here, through Hamlet, he is announcing that he has "no more to say," still less any further mystery to disclose.

I do not know which of these five meanings to prefer, but the actors of Shakespeare's company seem to have been unsatisfied with them all. The Folio text contains numerous small additions to the Quarto which are thought to have been drawn from what actually happened on stage in performance.²² Among these is an addition to Hamlet's part, following "The rest is silence." What Burbage the actor added is represented by four letters: "O, o, o, o." Then follows the stage-direction. "Dies." What can this mean? Did Burbage believe that he needed extra time to express pain or disbelief, or to struggle or panic? We have no idea what the four O's were intended to mean and still less notion of what Shakespeare thought about them (the Folio was, of course, published after his death),²³ but this addition became well enough established to get into print, and it serves to remind us that, however serious Hamlet's last words were intended to be, they had to be spoken

while he faced the physical reality of death itself. The actor's way of accepting or resisting the "strict arrest" will become part of the meaning of the last moments of the play, casting further complications on the task of dealing with what Hamlet says and with the wordplay.

Exactly *how* Hamlet dies—how he dies physically—will continue to contribute to our view of him after the "silence" which follows the moment of death. Fortinbras enters asking "Where is this sight?" and Horatio directs attention to all four bodies on the stage. After all is said and done, the way in which Hamlet dies, whether in pain or with mockery, or with some sense of fortunate release, will still be manifest in his facial expression and in the manner in which his body lies on the stage—in contrast to how the others had died and are also mercilessly displayed.

* * *

Why should Shakespeare choose to conclude this tragedy with words that give the final presentation of its hero a multiplicity of possible meanings?

The most difficult answer would be to say that *all* meanings are meant to be present, co-existing. This might please critics and scholars who puzzle over the text in their own time and are able to build up complex impressions, but how could an actor attempt to suggest them all? How could an audience-member grasp them all in the exciting moment of performance, in an "upshot" in which purposes are easily mistook (V.ii.389)? A more acceptable answer might be that the audience, and each individual member of that audience, is left to interpret as they wish, according to their own "business and desire, / Such as it is" (I.v.136-37). In this case, the actor's task might be to avoid making any very clear statement of Hamlet's final thoughts or inner mystery. Yet that is easier to say than do, and we might rather argue that the multiple meanings are there so that the actor of Hamlet can choose which one he wishes to emphasise, according to the way in which he has responded to the varied challenges in his journey through the text, and according to what he feels himself best able to embody. Such a choice is likely to be intuitive, rather than intellectual; but it could also be governed by the

actor's (and his director's) view of how the play can speak most excitingly to the audience which comes to see their work.

However we choose to explain his decision, we must accept the fact that Shakespeare chose, very positively, to provide a multiplicity of meanings at this crucial moment. His hero was, above all and in the final test, alive in his mind, drawn restlessly into engagement with his imagination, perhaps a little in the same way as his creator had been as he worked. Death, for such a person, could not be held in a single grip, in the fix of words used in a single sense, without "tricks, in plain and simple faith." Such dramaturgy involved a choice which went against most of Shakespeare's earlier practice. At the moment of his death, Titus Andronicus could hardly have made himself more plain to our understanding:

Why, there they are, both baked in this pie;

...

'Tis true, 'tis true; witness my knife's sharp point.

(V.iii.60-63)²⁴

Romeo dies drinking poison; there is wordplay here, but wholly controlled and limited:

Here's to my love! O true apothecary,

Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

(V.iii.119-20)²⁵

Juliet also plays on words without confusing her simplest meaning:

Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger.

This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die.

(V.iii.168-69)

Richard III and Richard II both die with single-minded speech, although in earlier scenes they had both used wordplay to express their turbulent and cunning thoughts.

Marlowe, Shakespeare's most imaginative and inventive contemporary, ended his tragedies as their heroes narrowed the target for their thoughts; and he gave them words in which to express themselves unmistakably.

After Shakespeare's time, John Webster, for all the punning and allusive subtlety of his dialogue, took definition still further in the last moments of his leading characters. Shakespeare's Hamlet, however, dies mysteriously, and he is aware that he never makes a full statement of his thoughts:

Had I but time . . .

O, I could tell you—

But let it be.

(ll. 341-43)

The most unequivocal impression given by the hero at the close of this tragedy is that his mind is unvanquished: his imagination is still exploring strange shapes and future eventualities—what is still unknown, and even silence itself.

Of course there are many ways of accounting for the tragedy as a whole. It is a Revenge Tragedy, and a Tragedy of Blood (or of lust and love); it is a Metaphysical Tragedy in which the nature of death, certainty, and life are all weighed and variously judged. It is also a Tragedy of State, the story of a kingdom ruled by an ambitious, treacherous, and smiling king, in which the "rabble" can rise up to follow the insurrection of a young man who has a private vendetta to pursue, but no clear political programme. The plot and characters, the drive and liveliness of the dialogue, the clashing rhetoric, all support these various strands of the play; and they are supported by on-stage action which is often exciting, sensational, and visually opulent. But the heart of the tragedy is Hamlet himself, a person whose mind is unconfined by any single issue. As he moves towards the last encounters, we can sense a self-aware superiority: ". . . Laertes. You do but dally. I pray you pass with your best violence" (301-02). He is attracted, still, to light-minded wordplay and assonance: "strict . . . arrest," "o'ercrows . . . occurents," the pun of "dying voice" (the sound he makes is growing faint). There is mockery in "potent poison," the ring and relish of a mountebank. Impatience and a constantly frustrated desire to have matters under control can be heard in repeated *comes* and in many short replies, commands and messages. Tenderness mixes with bitterness—"Absent thee from felicity awhile . . ."—and with ambiguity. "The rest is silence"

could be a joke, a profound searching of the unknown, a resignation to the fate of a sparrow, the voice of bitter despair, or a matter of fact.

At the risk of sounding too unambiguous for such a play, I would say that, through Hamlet, this tragedy affirms the world of the mind over against the world of matter, the unresolved and independent conscience over against the answers that can be provided by others or demanded by society in its political, religious or familial manifestations. In so far as Hamlet commands our attention while the tragedy unfolds and is completed, we prefer his ambiguous, spirited, free affirmation that the "rest is silence" to the attempted suicide and sentimental consolation of Horatio, or to the political homage of Fortinbras, and his call to arms and to a fresh start.²⁶

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NOTES

¹The Revels Plays, ed. John Russell Brown, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1966).

²The Revels Plays, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1964).

³Arden Edition, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London: Methuen, 1955).

⁴Quotations are from the Arden Edition of *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982).

⁵Eds. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1936) III.vi., p. 153.

⁶Ben Jonson, *Works*, eds. C. H. Herford, P. and E. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1947) 8:623.

⁷See Jenkins' note, pp. 464-66.

⁸See *OED* †2.a., 3.b and c.

⁹On the textual ambiguities of this line, see Jenkins' note, pp. 436-38.

¹⁰See *OED* "resolve" *vb.* I.2.†b. To analyse, examine (a statement). *Obs.*

¹¹See, especially, the editors' comments for the New Oxford Shakespeare (*The Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986] 735).

¹²See *OED*, "quit, †quite" II.10. To repay, reward, requite.

¹³*Julius Caesar* II.ii.22.

¹⁴Almost any modern edition will serve as an introduction to the problem. The variants quoted below derive from editions by Harold Jenkins, J. Dover Wilson, G. Blakemore Evans and Terence Spencer, and others.

¹⁵See Jenkins' note.

¹⁶See OED "strict," esp. 10-15, and "stricture."

¹⁷III.ii.90, IV.iii.47, V.i.250-51, V.ii.209 and 220.

¹⁸Arden Edition, ed. Kenneth Palmer (London: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁹Arden Edition, eds. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975).

²⁰Arden Edition, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1955, 1959).

²¹The Quarto version, quoted from the Arden Edition, ed. Richard David (London: Methuen, 1951, 1956).

²²See Harold Jenkins, "Playhouse Interpolations in the Folio Text of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Bibliography* 13 (1960): 31-47.

²³We may reflect that its repetitious simplicity is not far from Bottom's death-line as Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the slightly more sophisticated end for Thisbe.

²⁴Arden Edition, ed. J. C. Maxwell (London: Methuen, 1953, 1961).

²⁵Arden Edition, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Methuen, 1980).

²⁶This article is based on a paper read at a symposium on Paronomasia at the University of Münster in July 1992. It benefits in many ways from the discussion there, both formal and informal, and its welcome stimulation. I cannot note all the effects of this occasion in the body of this paper, so I hope this general note may be taken as an indication of my gratitude and indebtedness.