



A Detail of William Shakespeare's Hamlet

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ABSTRACT: Hamlet is an extraordinary play, which is full of deception, drama, intrigue, melancholia and death. This essay will examine Hamlet's relationship to death in selected acts, scenes and soliloquies from the play. The purpose is to investigate how Hamlet's relationship to death changes during the play and why. To ascertain the answer to these enquiries, I shall use psychology, particularly, the theory of Dr Michael J Diamond's work and apply it to Hamlet in the sections which will be examined. The analysis in the final subsection will elaborate on Hamlet's honour and death. In the end, it will be possible to show that Hamlet's relationship to death is initially a refuge from pain, but that it successively becomes associated with honour.

KEYWORDS- Hamlet, Shakespeare, death, honour, play

I. INTRODUCTION

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, often shortened to Hamlet (/ˈhæmlɪt/), is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare sometime between 1599 and 1601. It is Shakespeare's longest play, with 29,551 words. Set in Denmark, the play depicts Prince Hamlet and his attempts to exact revenge against his uncle, Claudius, who has murdered Hamlet's father in order to seize his throne and marry Hamlet's mother. Hamlet is considered among the "most powerful and influential tragedies in the English language", with a story capable of "seemingly endless retelling and adaptation by others".^[1] It is widely considered one of the greatest plays of all time.^[2] Three different early versions of the play are extant: the First Quarto (Q1, 1603); the Second Quarto (Q2, 1604); and the First Folio (F1, 1623). Each version includes lines and passages missing from the others.^[3]

Many works have been pointed to as possible sources for Shakespeare's play, from ancient Greek tragedies to Elizabethan dramas. The editors of the Arden Shakespeare question the idea of "source hunting", pointing out that it presupposes that authors always require ideas from other works for their own, and suggests that no author can have an original idea or be an originator. When Shakespeare wrote, there were many stories about sons avenging the murder of their fathers, and many about clever avenging sons pretending to be foolish in order to outsmart their foes. This would include the story of the ancient Roman, Lucius Junius Brutus, which Shakespeare apparently knew, as well as the story of Amleth, which was preserved in Latin by 13th-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum*, and printed in Paris in 1514. The Amleth story was subsequently adapted and then published in French in 1570 by the 16th-century scholar François de Belleforest.^[1,2,3] It has a number of plot elements and major characters in common with Shakespeare's Hamlet, and lacks others that are found in Shakespeare. Belleforest's story was first published in English in 1608, after Hamlet had been written, though it's possible that Shakespeare had encountered it in the French-language version.^[4]

Act I

Prince Hamlet of Denmark is the son of the recently deceased King Hamlet, and nephew of King Claudius, his father's brother and successor. Claudius hastily married King Hamlet's widow, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, and took the throne for himself. Denmark has a long-standing feud with neighbouring Norway, in which King Hamlet slew King Fortinbras of Norway in a battle some years ago. Although Denmark defeated Norway and the Norwegian throne fell to King Fortinbras's infirm brother, Denmark fears that an invasion led by the dead Norwegian king's son, Prince Fortinbras, is imminent.

On a cold night on the ramparts of Elsinore, the Danish royal castle, the sentries Bernardo and Marcellus discuss a ghost resembling the late King Hamlet which they have recently seen, and bring Prince Hamlet's friend Horatio as a witness. After the ghost appears again, the three vow to tell Prince Hamlet what they have witnessed.

The court gathers the next day, and King Claudius and Queen Gertrude discuss affairs of state with their elderly adviser Polonius. Claudius grants permission for Polonius's son Laertes to return to school in France, and he sends envoys to inform the King of Norway about Fortinbras. Claudius also questions Hamlet regarding his continuing to grieve for his father, and forbids him to return to his university in Wittenberg. After the court exits, Hamlet despairs of

his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. Learning of the ghost from Horatio, Hamlet resolves to see it himself.



Horatio, Hamlet, and the ghost (Artist: Henry Fuseli, 1789)^[5]

As Polonius's son Laertes prepares to depart for France, Polonius offers him advice that culminates in the maxim "to thine own self be true."^[6] Polonius's daughter, Ophelia, admits her interest in Hamlet, but Laertes warns her against seeking the prince's attention, and Polonius orders her to reject his advances. That night on the rampart, the ghost appears to Hamlet, tells the prince that he was murdered by Claudius, and demands that Hamlet avenge the murder. Hamlet agrees, and the ghost vanishes. The prince confides to Horatio and the sentries that from now on he plans to "put an antic disposition on", or act as though he has gone mad. Hamlet forces them to swear to keep his plans for revenge secret; however, he remains uncertain of the ghost's reliability.

Act II

Ophelia rushes to her father, telling him that Hamlet arrived at her door the prior night half-undressed and behaving erratically. Polonius blames love for Hamlet's madness and resolves to inform Claudius and Gertrude. As he enters to do so, the king and queen are welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two student acquaintances of Hamlet, to Elsinore. The royal couple has requested that the two students investigate the cause of Hamlet's mood and behaviour. Additional news requires that Polonius wait to be heard: messengers from Norway inform Claudius that the king of Norway has rebuked Prince Fortinbras for attempting to re-fight his father's battles. The forces that Fortinbras had conscripted to march against Denmark will instead be sent against Poland, though they will pass through Danish territory to get there.

Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude his theory regarding Hamlet's behaviour, and then speaks to Hamlet in a hall of the castle to try to learn more. Hamlet feigns madness and subtly insults Polonius all the while. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, Hamlet greets his "friends" warmly but quickly discerns that they are there to spy on him for Claudius. Hamlet admits that he is upset at his situation but refuses to give the true reason, instead remarking "What a piece of work is a man".^[4,5,6] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that they have brought along a troupe of actors that they met while travelling to Elsinore. Hamlet, after welcoming the actors and dismissing his friends-turned-spies, asks them to deliver a soliloquy about the death of King Priam and Queen Hecuba at the climax of the Trojan War. Hamlet then asks the actors to stage *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play featuring a death in the style of his father's murder. Hamlet intends to study Claudius's reaction to the play, and thereby determine the truth of the ghost's story of Claudius's guilt.

Act III

Polonius forces Ophelia to return Hamlet's love letters to the prince while he and Claudius secretly watch in order to evaluate Hamlet's reaction. Hamlet is walking alone in the hall as the King and Polonius await Ophelia's entrance. Hamlet muses on thoughts of life versus death. When Ophelia enters and tries to return Hamlet's things, Hamlet accuses her of immodesty and cries "get thee to a nunnery", though it is unclear whether this, too, is a show of madness or genuine distress. His reaction convinces Claudius that Hamlet is not mad for love. Shortly thereafter, the court assembles to watch the play Hamlet has commissioned. After seeing the Player King murdered by his rival pouring poison in his ear, Claudius abruptly rises and runs from the room; for Hamlet, this is proof of his uncle's guilt.



Hamlet mistakenly stabs Polonius (Artist: Coke Smyth, 19th century).

Gertrude summons Hamlet to her chamber to demand an explanation. Meanwhile, Claudius talks to himself about the impossibility of repenting, since he still has possession of his ill-gotten goods: his brother's crown and wife. He sinks to his knees. Hamlet, on his way to visit his mother, sneaks up behind him but does not kill him, reasoning that killing Claudius while he is praying will send him straight to heaven while his father's ghost is stuck in purgatory. In the queen's bedchamber, Hamlet and Gertrude fight bitterly. Polonius, spying on the conversation from behind a tapestry, calls for help as Gertrude, believing Hamlet wants to kill her, calls out for help herself.[7,8,9]

Hamlet, believing it is Claudius, stabs wildly, killing Polonius, but he pulls aside the curtain and sees his mistake. In a rage, Hamlet brutally insults his mother for her apparent ignorance of Claudius's villainy, but the ghost enters and reprimands Hamlet for his inaction and harsh words. Unable to see or hear the ghost herself, Gertrude takes Hamlet's conversation with it as further evidence of madness. After begging the queen to stop sleeping with Claudius, Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius's corpse away.

Act IV

Hamlet jokes with Claudius about where he has hidden Polonius's body, and the king, fearing for his life, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England with a sealed letter to the English king requesting that Hamlet be executed immediately.

Unhinged by grief at Polonius's death, Ophelia wanders Elsinore. Laertes arrives back from France, enraged by his father's death and his sister's madness. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible, but a letter soon arrives indicating that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, foiling Claudius's plan. Claudius switches tactics, proposing a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet to settle their differences. Laertes will be given a poison-tipped foil, and, if that fails, Claudius will offer Hamlet poisoned wine as a congratulation. Gertrude interrupts to report that Ophelia has drowned, though it is unclear whether it was suicide or an accident caused by her madness.

Act V

The gravedigger scene.^[7] (Artist: Eugène Delacroix, 1839)

Horatio has received a letter from Hamlet, explaining that the prince escaped by negotiating with pirates who attempted to attack his England-bound ship, and the friends reunite offstage. Two gravediggers discuss Ophelia's apparent suicide while digging her grave. Hamlet arrives with Horatio and banter with one of the gravediggers, who unearths the skull of a jester from Hamlet's childhood, Yorick. Hamlet picks up the skull, saying "Alas, poor Yorick" as he contemplates mortality. Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, led by Laertes. Hamlet and Horatio initially hide, but when Hamlet realizes that Ophelia is the one being buried, he reveals himself, proclaiming his love for her. Laertes and Hamlet fight by Ophelia's graveside, but the brawl is broken up.

Back at Elsinore, Hamlet explains to Horatio that he had discovered Claudius's letter among Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's belongings and replaced it with a forged copy indicating that his former friends should be killed instead. A foppish courtier, Osric, interrupts the conversation to deliver the fencing challenge to Hamlet. Hamlet, despite Horatio's pleas, accepts it. Hamlet does well at first, leading the match by two hits to none, and Gertrude raises a toast to him using the poisoned glass of wine Claudius had set aside for Hamlet.[10,11,12] Claudius tries to stop her but is too late: she drinks, and Laertes realizes the plot will be revealed. Laertes slashes Hamlet with his poisoned blade. In the ensuing scuffle, they switch weapons, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with his own poisoned sword. Gertrude collapses and, claiming she has been poisoned, dies. In his dying moments, Laertes reconciles with Hamlet and reveals Claudius's plan. Hamlet rushes at Claudius and kills him. As the poison takes effect, Hamlet, hearing that Fortinbras is marching through the area, names the Norwegian prince as his successor. Horatio, distraught at the thought of being the last survivor and living whilst Hamlet does not, says he will commit suicide by drinking the dregs of Gertrude's poisoned wine, but Hamlet begs him to live on and tell his story. Hamlet dies in Horatio's arms, proclaiming "the rest is silence". Fortinbras, who



was ostensibly marching towards Poland with his army, arrives at the palace, along with an English ambassador bringing news of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. Horatio promises to recount the full story of what happened, and Fortinbras, seeing the entire Danish royal family dead, takes the crown for himself and orders a military funeral to honour Hamlet.

DISCUSSION

Shakespeare's masterfully written tragedy, *Hamlet*, is wrought with tragedy and themes of revenge, but it is equally notable for the deception and lies that the players have towards each other. Throughout the play, characters hatch plans and spy on each other, creating a high tension mood. Shakespeare does this in order to add dramatic tension, but also to convey the human truth that everyone lies. Character development, play structure and the nature of the play are used to show how the only way to achieve truth is to accept the lies of others. Shakespeare uses duality of characters extensively in order to reveal the deceitful dynamics at play throughout this play. As Tom Stoppard writes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, these pairs of characters "... are two sides of the same coin... or being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins (54)". Shakespeare uses themes of madness between Hamlet and Ophelia, accusation of guilt between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the masks of Polonius and Claudius to demonstrate that not only is there "something rotten in the state of Denmark", but there is also something rotten in human nature (I.5.100). The central act of deceit in the play is Hamlet's madness, but the lines of reality and insanity are blurred, especially when Ophelia commits suicide due to perceived madness, in order to question the intent of madness. Although Hamlet makes it clear to Horatio and Marcellus that he is "to put such an antic disposition on", his actions present true madness (I.5.192). The audience is left to question whether if Hamlet's command for Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" is his own candid thoughts or is merely a result of real madness (III.1.131). There is dramatic conflict created by this ambiguity, which is evidently left to the audience to judge if the deceit was so convoluted that he deceived himself. In addition, the rash murder of Polonius does not seem to correspond with Hamlet's previous actions. The juxtaposition of Hamlet's deliberation in Act 3 Scene 4, as Claudius is praying, with the "rash and bloody deed" in Act 3 Scene 5 questions the integrity of Hamlet's sanity (III.5.33). Shakespeare begins to question the extent to which a lie may become truth if acted on for long enough, creating a forwards for the audience and dramatic tension in Hamlet's fate. Acting as a foil to the pretend insanity of Hamlet is Ophelia's true madness, which drives her to suicide. Her madness can be directly traced to Hamlet, as Claudius remarks that it is because Ophelia is "divided from herself and her true judgment" that she loses her mind (IV.5.92). That division was clearly caused by Hamlet's actions and implies that the line between truth and lies is not very clear. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are despised by Hamlet as two-faced ignorant fools, but their dual character reveals confusion that reveals Hamlet to be victim of his own prejudices. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are never seen apart from each other and take a very minor role as courtiers, but Hamlet despises them for colluding with Claudius and acting as spies. However, this accusation is unfounded, particularly because the audience never perceive the two beyond "[making] our presence and our practices/Pleasant and helpful to him!" (II.2.40) Therefore, Hamlet's indigenious remark of "you cannot play upon me" is Hamlet deceiving himself as to the nature of the characters (III.2.402). The two innocent – although hopelessly confused – characters are used together to reveal the distress that a deceiving mind will cause to itself. Although Polonius rambles on and can be considered to be comic relief, the contrast of his sly wit with Claudius' methodical planning reveals that the members of the court are putting on a dumbshow for the others. In his dictation to Reynaldo, one of the few scenes where action is sacrificed for characterization, Polonius reveals his brilliance in manipulating the truth. Amid half started sentences, he mutters for "your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth; And thus do we of wisdom and of reach... By indirections find directions out" (II.1.70-73). This pivotal statement embraces one of the primary themes of the play, that the only way to uncover the truth is to embrace deceit. Similarly, Claudius exhumes a kingly presence when with people of the court, but in the soliloquy in Act 3, he breaks down and reveals a different aspect of his character. By exclaiming "O wretched state! O bosom black as death!", Claudius is embracing emotions that have been suppressed in the presence of others (III.3.71). Both Claudius and Polonius embrace the tense relationship of the court, and respect that the only way to function is to put on masks for others to see. Their actions correspond with inner desire and needs which can only be accomplished through delusions and trickery. Therefore, Shakespeare seems to imply that in society, people customarily put on facades to shield themselves from others. Shakespeare also uses fundamental structural aspects of *Hamlet* in order to reveal the common theme of deceit as the road to the truth. The play was intentionally written to clue the reader towards inconsistencies between the characters actions and thoughts, implying that there are subtexts for all of their actions. This is most vibrantly seen in the "play within a play" and the wordplay that Hamlet creates. Each of these topics reveals more about the effectiveness of deceit to obtain truths from unwilling people, which was intended to reveal human nature. In the pre-climax scene of "The Mousetrap", the structure of the play is fully exploited in order to use deceit to reveal Claudius' lies, which connects to the theme of using deceit to obtain truth.[13,14,15] Taking place roughly halfway through the full play, *The Murder of Gonzago* is a clever device to force action and to lead the audience into questioning what they are watching. To see actors



on stage, fooling other actors, is to see a meta-play, leading audience members to consider the truths that have been spoken. In addition, the “play within a play” concept is used structurally to convey meaning in regards to deceit. The subtext that actors could be hired to reveal Claudius alludes to how Shakespeare’s plays are intended to reveal a facet of human truth. Although the play is made-up, the audience members react towards it in some fashion, revealing their own preferences and truths that mere accusations would not achieve. In addition, Hamlet is a master of wordplay, punning even when insane, which calls into question the double meaning of language in this play, implying that even the words that the characters speak is fraught with meaning. Hamlet is able to respond to questions with such wit that Polonius misinterprets his genius as madness, remarking that it is such “happiness ...which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (II.2.227-229). In fact, all of the wordplay is intentional, which is a forward for the audience to note of. The subtext of using puns immediately draws in attention, as it uses humor to clue the audience that there is more at stake than what might appear. If the language used by the actors has multiple meanings, it goes without saying that those actors must stand for different ideas as well. Wordplay, as well as misinterpretation of words, is therefore used in order to gain a better understanding of who the players wish to be. On a higher level, the idea of what a play should be is manipulated to reveal truth in lies. Hamlet could be interpreted as a commentary on what a play should reveal to the audience and is a masterpiece of psychological analysis. Shakespeare takes the traditional model of a play and twists the interpretation of theatrical techniques in order to reach a greater understanding of what is truth. He achieves this through turning the ideas of soliloquies and common truths around to mean something completely different. Even the asides and soliloquies that are perceived to be raw truth through the medium of the play are called into question of honesty. Typically, the audience can rely on these theatrical devices to understand the play better, but in Hamlet, even these functions are not assumed to be true. One example of this is that most of Hamlet’s “soliloquies” actually have Horatio standing besides, nodding along. Although Horatio provides a character that Hamlet can talk to, it also provides a pair of watching eyes on Hamlet’s character, which he must then adapt to. For instance, in the soliloquy on death that he delivers with poor Yorick’s skull, Hamlet seems more reserved in emotion than during the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy in Act 3, where a true flood of emotion is poured out. Forcing the audience to doubt their ears is a technique that Shakespeare may have used in order to emphasize the idea of deception. Everyone is deceiving one another in this play, and perhaps the actors are trying to deceive the audience.[16,17]

III.RESULTS

However, if everyone is known to lie, then the lie is accepted and is part of the social contract that is built up on stage. To understand this primal concept, Shakespeare implies, is to understand what human nature really is. There is no escape from the watchful eyes of others, nor is there escape from their misleading words, but if one accepts this to be true, they are able to understand a greater truth. Alas, the realization of deception comes too late, as it is Horatio who remarks on the “purposes mistook fall’n on th’ inventor’s heads” after everyone had died (V.2.426-427). His closing speech implies that if the actors understood the deceit of others, they would be able to navigate it properly and not have to reach such tragic endings. Shakespeare masterfully exploited traditional elements of the play to reveal a lesson about deceit and lies. He creates an immensely enjoyable play that allows for the audience to ponder their realities. The usage of dual characters, specialized play structure and twists on common play techniques convey the meaning that there can be truth to be found if one accepts the lies of others. Written as the author taught Hamlet every semester for a decade, these lightning essays ask big conceptual questions about the play with the urgency of a Shakespeare lover, and answer them with the rigor of a Shakespeare scholar. In doing so, Hamlet becomes a lens for life today, generating insights on everything from xenophobia, American fraternities, and religious fundamentalism to structural misogyny, suicide contagion, and toxic love.

Prioritizing close reading over historical context, these explorations are highly textual and highly theoretical, often philosophical, ethical, social, and political. Readers see King Hamlet as a pre-modern villain, King Claudius as a modern villain, and Prince Hamlet as a post-modern villain. Hamlet’s feigned madness becomes a window into failed insanity defenses in legal trials. He knows he’s being watched in “To be or not to be”: the soliloquy is a satire of philosophy. Horatio emerges as Shakespeare’s authorial avatar for meta-theatrical commentary, Fortinbras as the hero of the play. Fate becomes a viable concept for modern life, and honor a source of tragedy. The metaphor of music in the play makes Ophelia Hamlet’s instrument. Shakespeare, like the modern corporation, stands against sexism, yet perpetuates it unknowingly. We hear his thoughts on single parenting, sending children off to college, and the working class, plus his advice on acting and writing, and his claims to be the next Homer or Virgil. In the context of four centuries of Hamlet hate, we hear how the text draws audiences in, how it became so famous, and why it continues to captivate audiences.



At a time when the humanities are said to be in crisis, these essays are concrete examples of the mind-altering power of literature and literary studies, unravelling the ongoing implications of the English language's most significant artistic object of the past millennium.[17,18,19]

IV.CONCLUSION

Why is Hamlet the most famous English artwork of the past millennium? Is it a sexist text? Why does Hamlet speak in prose? Why must he die? Does Hamlet depict revenge, or justice? How did the death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, transform into a story about a son dealing with the death of a father? Did Shakespeare know Aristotle's theory of tragedy? How did our literary icon, Shakespeare, see his literary icons, Homer and Virgil? Why is there so much comedy in Shakespeare's greatest tragedy? Why is love a force of evil in the play? Did Shakespeare believe there's a divinity that shapes our ends? How did he define virtue? What did he think about psychology? politics? philosophy? What was Shakespeare's image of himself as an author? What can he, arguably the greatest writer of all time, teach us about our own writing? What was his theory of literature? Why do people like Hamlet? How do the Hamlet haters of today compare to those of yesteryears? Is it dangerous for our children to read a play that's all about suicide?

These are some of the questions asked in this book, a collection of essays on Shakespeare's Hamlet stemming from my time teaching the play every semester in my Why Shakespeare? course at Harvard University. During this time, I saw a series of bright young minds from wildly diverse backgrounds find their footing in Hamlet, and it taught me a lot about how Shakespeare's tragedy works, and why it remains with us in the modern world. Beyond ghosts, revenge, and tragedy, Hamlet is a play about being in college, being in love, gender, misogyny, friendship, theater, philosophy, theology, injustice, loss, comedy, depression, death, self-doubt, mental illness, white privilege, overbearing parents, existential angst, international politics, the classics, the afterlife, and the meaning of it all.

These essays grow from the central paradox of the play: it helps us understand the world we live in, yet we don't really understand the text itself very well. For all the attention given to Hamlet, there's no consensus on the big questions—how it works, why it grips people so fiercely, what it's about. These essays pose first-order questions about what happens in Hamlet and why, mobilizing answers for reflections on life, making the essays both highly textual and highly theoretical.

Each semester that I taught the play, I would write a new essay about Hamlet. They were meant to be models for students, the sort of essay that undergrads read and write – more rigorous than the puff pieces in the popular press, but riskier than the scholarship in most academic journals. While I later added scholarly outerwear, these pieces all began just like the essays I was assigning to students – as short close readings with a reader and a text and a desire to determine meaning when faced with a puzzling question or problem.

The turn from text to context in recent scholarly books about Hamlet is quizzical since we still don't have a strong sense of, to quote the title of John Dover Wilson's 1935 book, What Happens in Hamlet. Is the ghost real? Is Hamlet mad, or just faking? Why does he delay? These are the kinds of questions students love to ask, but they haven't been – can't be – answered by reading the play in the context of its sources (recently addressed in Laurie Johnson's *The Tain of Hamlet* [2013]), its multiple texts (analyzed by Paul Menzer in *The Hamlets* [2008] and Zachary Lesser in *Hamlet after Q1* [2015]), the Protestant reformation (the focus of Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* [2001] and John E. Curran, Jr.'s *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency* [2006]), Renaissance humanism (see Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* [2017]), Elizabethan political theory (see Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* [2007]), the play's reception history (see David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet through the Ages* [2011]), its appropriation by modern philosophers (covered in Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster's *The Hamlet Doctrine* [2013] and Andrew Cutrofello's *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity* [2014]), or its recent global travels (addressed, for example, in Margaret Latvian's *Hamlet's Arab Journey* [2011] and Dominic Dromgoole's *Hamlet Globe to Globe* [2017]).

Considering the context and afterlives of Hamlet is a worthy pursuit. I certainly consulted the above books for my essays, yet the confidence that comes from introducing context obscures the sharp panic we feel when confronting Shakespeare's text itself. Even as the excellent recent book from Sonya Freeman Loftis, Allison Kellar, and Lisa Ulevich announces Hamlet has entered "an age of textual exhaustion," there's an odd tendency to avoid the text of Hamlet—to grasp for something more firm—when writing about it. There is a need to return to the text in a more immediate way to understand how Hamlet operates as a literary work, and how it can help us understand the world in which we live.

That latter goal, yes, clings nostalgically to the notion that literature can help us understand life. Questions about life send us to literature in search of answers. Those of us who love literature learn to ask and answer questions about it as we become professional literary scholars. But often our answers to the questions scholars ask of literature do not connect back up with the questions about life that sent us to literature in the first place—which are often philosophical, ethical, social, and political. Those first-order questions are diluted and avoided in the minutia of much scholarship, left



unanswered. Thus, my goal was to pose questions about Hamlet with the urgency of a Shakespeare lover and to answer them with the rigor of a Shakespeare scholar.

In doing so, these essays challenge the conventional relationship between literature and theory. They pursue a kind of criticism where literature is not merely the recipient of philosophical ideas in the service of exegesis. Instead, the creative risks of literature provide exemplars to be theorized outward to help us understand on-going issues in life today. Beyond an occasion for the demonstration of existing theory, literature is a source for the creation of new theory.[20]

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