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Hamlet *and Counter-Humanism*

by RONALD KNOWLES

This essay interprets the question of subjectivity in Hamlet by reappraising Renaissance skepticism and by reexamining the medieval debate concerning the misery of man's existence, and the Renaissance celebration of man. A central concern is the significance of the commonplace in humanist rhetoric and dialectic, by which Stoic and Christian thought depreciates passion. In his anguish Hamlet discovers a unique subjectivity as he attempts to reject the wisdom of tradition. But the nature of thought cannot be separated from the nature of the mind that thinks, and Hamlet's selfhood capitulates to the role.

In the study of the development of Western culture the question of subjectivity is a much debated issue which is often directed to the Renaissance in general, and to Hamlet in particular. Beginning with section 1, "Alexander died,"¹ this essay reapproaches the question in the play. Sections 2 and 3 expand on the backgrounds of the later Middle Ages, Humanism, and skepticism, while section 4 focuses on rhetoric, particularly on the commonplaces of consolation, in relation to the proscribed status of passion in the individual and society.² The fifth section considers role-playing and reappraises the nature of Hamlet's experience: his unique selfhood, realized through grief and loathing, cannot be sustained, since his mind is shaped by an essentialist humanism which undermines its very possibility.³ To evade alienation Hamlet embraces the scripted roles within and without him;⁴ and to understand this experience the critic of early modern culture needs, like Hamlet, to look "before and after" (4.4.37).

¹Shakespeare, 5.1.201. All references to *Hamlet* are to Harold Jenkins's edition.

²Like Katharine Eisaman Maus, I am concerned with what she calls "the early modern rhetoric of inwardness" (30) which is "intimately related to transcendental religious claims" (27). But the secular emphasis I develop here shows how the phrase "rhetoric of inwardness" becomes a contradiction in terms.

³For Catherine Belsey, Hamlet is retroactively interpreted as "the unified and unique subject of liberal humanism" (52). My interpretation is largely based on a reconsideration of the subject as conceived by the traditions of rhetoric which culminate in Renaissance humanism.

⁴Francis Barker writes: "At the centre of Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing. The promised essence remains beyond the scope of the text's signification: or rather, signals the limit of the signification of this world by marking out the site of an absence it cannot fill. It gestures towards a place for subjectivity, but both are anachronistic and belong to an historical order whose outline has so far only been sketched out" (37). To determine as closely as possible the dramatic conflict between Hamlet's "mystery" and "nothingness," this essay historicizes the signifying practices of the text.

1. "ALEXANDER DIED"

In contemplating Yorick's skull, by a process of rhetorical association Hamlet's mind moves to Alexander, the type of imperial greatness, "Dost thou think Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' th' earth?" (5.1.191-92). And then, following Horatio's confirmation, Hamlet invites his imagination to trace "the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bung-hole" (5.1.197-98). Horatio immediately anticipates some form of sophisticated word-play — "Twere to consider too curiously" (5.1.199) — but fails to pre-empt it: "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?" (5.1.201-05). It has been shown that within the Christian literary tradition of *timor mortis, memento mori*, deriving from St. Bernard, Alexander was often linked with Julius Caesar, as here ("Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay," 5.1.206). For example both are found in a poem by Skelton and in a poem attributed to Southwell.⁵ But as Harold Jenkins has noted, in meditations on Death the leveller deriving from antiquity, Alexander appears in Lucian's *Dialogue of the Dead*, and in the Stoic context of Marcus Aurelius where the dust of Alexander is likened to that of his groom.⁶ In another Stoic context, Thomas Bedingfield's translation of Cardan's *Comforte* (1576), a book many have argued is the one Hamlet carries on to the stage before the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, Alexander and Caesar are listed with several others as types of human vainglory.⁷ However, of greater importance here is the form of Hamlet's thought.

In terms of logic and rhetoric, Hamlet works through a *sorites* colored by *tapinosis* (or *humiliatio*). The *sorites*, perhaps more familiarly known as the chain-syllogism, is close to the rhetorical figure of climax or *gradatio*. *Tapinosis* is the use of a word to debase the noble. The *sorites* was a series of enthymemes, or abridged syllogisms, taking the last word of a sentence or clause to begin the next,⁸ the logical counterpart to the rhetorical *anadiplosis*. For mostly witty sophistic purposes a false proposition, or propositions, seemingly led to an inevitably outrageous conclusion. Here, the fourth proposition, "the dust is earth" is manifestly fallacious in its deliberate equivocation between the biblical "dust" ("thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou returne," Genesis 3.9.) and geological

⁵Morris, 1970.

⁶In Shakespeare, 387.

⁷Craig.

⁸Joseph, 180, 196.

“earth” (as sand, clay, soil, humus, etc). Again, identifying the “dust” of a corpse with “earth” generally is the fallacy of accident whereby what is an adjunct or accident of something is attributed to that entirely, and vice-versa. The remains of a corpse may be said to eventually mingle with the earth, but it hardly constitutes earth as a whole.

Hamlet’s cast of mind here gives expression to an individually felt pessimism, but the personal experience that gave rise to this is to some extent depersonalized by the external public modality of logic and rhetoric working through a commonplace. The argument presented by Hamlet is part of the pessimism that culminates at this point of the play, a pessimism influenced by the philosophical skepticism of what Hiram Haydn called the sixteenth-century “counter-Renaissance,” which severely challenged the optimism of Renaissance humanism. At one point Hamlet specifically parallels the two, echoing a cultural context that needs re-examining in the light of modern scholarship. Hamlet’s pessimism in part derives from his discovery of subjectivity. Renaissance ontology is closely linked to the philosophy of rhetoric whereby something like grief is understood in a specific, conventionalized way, which Hamlet reacts against but ultimately has to capitulate to, to evade the pain of his alienation. Hamlet’s tragedy becomes the site of a cultural struggle between the Western tradition of Stoic rationalism and an affective individualism. As Hamlet traces the dust of Alexander, so we may trace these elements in the play, beginning indeed with that “dust.”

2. “THIS GOODLY FRAME”

For Hamlet man is the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.308), and the slain body of Polonius is “compounded . . . with dust whereto ’tis kin” (4.2.5). According to the queen, Hamlet had sought “with . . . veiled lids” his “noble father in the dust” (1.2.70-71). This last image is important since it suggests the reversal of a commonplace of Renaissance humanism, that of *homo erectus*. As will be shown, Renaissance celebrations of man took up the Patristic echo of this biblical theme of man’s uniqueness in creation, for he was the only one of God’s creatures to be created erect in order to worship the heavens, the source of his origin and end. Thomas Wilson in his *The Rule of Reason* (1551) included this as an example of the predicable *proprium* or property of man, “To go upright is proper to a man, and only to a man, and to none other living creature” (sig. C^r). Hamlet’s eyes and mind are fixed on earth, death, and bodily corruption. Earlier, Hamlet’s sardonically chosen diction had anticipated this: “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?” (3.1.128-29). “Crawling,” that is, like one of the brute creation on all fours. This con-

scious rejection of Renaissance humanism had been systematically worked through earlier before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the passage needs to be quoted in full:

. . . this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals — and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.298-308)

The complementary parallelism of macrocosm and microcosm is turned into the antithesis of optimism and pessimism, humanism and skepticism. The fact of the speech itself is the first evidence that man is something more than a mere “quintessence of dust,” yet Hamlet is removed from the irony since the speech is a kind of mock-philosophical exercise worked up by the intellectual student from Wittenberg, seemingly to entertain Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are, in fact, amused. Yet the similarity of this language to that on other occasions implies that Hamlet means every word. Hamlet knows that the philosophical impersonation will amuse his auditors while at the same time this guise actually reveals what he thinks to the audience of the play.⁹

Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) is probably the most famous of what became a minor genre of Renaissance humanism, yet it is not really typical. Pico's syncretic gathering from Hebrew, Christian, and Neoplatonic writings garnished by the *prisci theologi*, as they are referred to — the “early theologians” Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and Moses — makes a heady mystical brew, even for his Renaissance man as “maker and moulder of thyself.”¹⁰ If we turn from Pico's esoteric Cabbalism to something like Giannozzo Manetti's *On the Dignity of Man* (1452) and its context, this will provide the background for the understanding of Hamlet's argument, the materials for which Shakespeare probably got not so much from Montaigne, but from Montaigne's source in his library, Pierre Boaistuau whose work was available to Shakespeare in reprints of John Alday's translation.¹¹

⁹As Forker generalizes on Hamlet's “playing” with characters, words, and roles, “pre-tense may entail revelation” (5).

¹⁰Cassirer, et al., 225.

¹¹Spencer, 29, mentions Boaistuau and the English tradition in a context which also includes Montaigne, but he seems not to be aware of the latter's ownership, the translator's identity, or the various dates of the translation.

The tradition concerning the debate on the dignity and misery of man is a long and ramified one. Focusing primarily on man's dignity, Charles Trinkaus originally published *Adversity's Noblemen* in 1940, which, in retrospect, was a prolegomenon to a monumental two-volume study of 1970 entitled *In Our Image and Likeness*. This work is primarily an intensive scholarly introduction to, and study of, the question of man's dignity in fourteenth-century Italian humanism. I am greatly indebted to this scholar but the interpretation of *Hamlet* here is the present writer's own.

Dualism underpins Western culture, and the dignity and misery of man is an aspect of this. Either can be stressed at the expense of the other, or one disproportionately, or both equally depending on the speaker and the given cultural moment (or in spite of it — see George Gascoigne below). Genesis 1.26, "Let vs make man in our image according to our likenes" provided a major impetus for commentators among the early Church Fathers, in the Middle Ages, and in Renaissance humanists. St. Augustine is known for his harsh view on the depravity of man enslaved by sin, but he nevertheless believed in the soul's trinity of memory, intellect, and will as reflecting the divine Trinity. Furthermore, Augustine cited the significance of man's erect stature, his rule over animals, and his contemplation of the divine as grounds for a more spiritually positive view of man. Complementing this, another church father, Lactantius, stressed Cicero's Stoic-Platonic view of the rational design, divine purpose, and providential order of the world, again pointing out man's erect stature and the immortality of the soul. The Alexandrian Jew Philo provided a Neoplatonic link with Christianity, bringing together Greek providential rationality and Genesis 1:26, stressing the earth's plenitude at the service of man. A notoriously major figure of the Middle Ages, however, is Pope Innocent III, the author of *On Contempt for the World, or The Misery of the Human Condition* (1195). In the midst of the flowering of Tudor humanism George Gascoigne translated this work as *The Droome of Doomes day* (1576), though he did not know the author, in repentance for "penning and endighting sundrie toyes and trifles," namely the poetry for which he was known.¹² From vileness of conception through the catalogue of the seven deadly sins to bodily corruption and the pains of the damned, Innocent rehearses man's life and afterlife of misery and suffering. Yet he had also promised another treatise on *The Dignity of Human Nature*. Presumably this would have seen man from the point of view of salvation rather than that of original sin and damnation. Innocent's treatise was copied and translated all over Europe, particularly

¹²Identified by Spencer, 27.

in England,¹³ and eventually gave rise to the humanist debate which was prefigured most pre-eminently by Petrarch.

Petrarch's *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (1354-1357) was composed as a reply to Pope Innocent. Here are found the central arguments for the dignity of man: the soul as the image of God; the incarnation; erectness of stature and the beauty of the body; the immortality of the soul; the beauty and use of the external world; man's mind, memory, intellect, eloquence, invention, and artistry; man's rule over creatures; resurrection; heavenly destination; exaltation and salvation. Here we find a complementary stress on the divine and the human, the heavenly and the earthly. This is crucial; man is celebrated not just in theological terms (which was St. Augustine's emphasis) but also in terms of earthly existence. Earth and heaven complement each other:

For what does obscenity of origin detract from human dignity? Do not tall and leafy trees, grown from filthy roots, cover the green earth with welcome shade? Are the fields of grain not made fruitful by the vilest dung? The vilest origin of the best things is not something disgusting. You are the grain fields of God to be winnowed in the plains of judgement, and to be placed in the granary of the greatest head of a household. Earthly was man's origin, although partly noble and celestial. But whatever was his origin and however difficult his progress, his final seat is heaven.¹⁴

Such a balanced position was rarely followed with such evenhandedness. Where the seemingly complementary themes of dignity and misery are handled, as in the quattrocento treatises of Bartolomeo Facio and Antonio da Bargo, man's dignity is spiritual rather than earthly, to which the body and its misery belong. Though Aurelio Brandolini, in his *On the Condition of Human Life and on Bearing Bodily Sickness*, expounds fully the misery of life and the joys of existence, he tips the scales towards the latter in a most remarkable statement: "Even if we know that we will be subjected to perpetual miseries and eternal punishments, nevertheless, would we not think that this so great dignity of being born and living excels all miseries and punishments?"¹⁵

Brandolini was influenced by Giannozzo Manetti who wrote explicitly against Innocent III's depiction of misery, providing one of the great statements of Italian humanism, against which Hamlet's words may be measured.

¹³Lewis, 3-5.

¹⁴Trinkaus, 1970, 1:193.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:302.

With what form, what beauty, what fittingness ought we to think man was endowed, for whose sake alone, we may not doubt, this most beautiful and most ornate world was made? No wonder therefore if the ancient and modern inventors of the most ingenious arts, since they thought that the divine nature excelled and surpassed all things both inanimate and animate also, and believed that no figure was more beautiful than the human form, seem to have agreed that the gods should be shaped and painted in the image of man.¹⁶

Yet within the same milieu of Italian humanism Manetti's optimistic views were opposed two years later by another Florentine statesman, Poggio Bracciolini, in his *Two Books on the Misery of the Human Condition* (1455). Whereas Manetti recognized sin in man but saw it as deriving from pride in the very dignity he acclaimed, Poggio more orthodoxly reaffirmed original sin, the source of all misery. Though life contained some material blessings, only grace could lift man above fundamental misery. Plainly it can be seen that Hamlet's speech derives from someone who has read both sides of the debate, abstracted quintessential elements from each, and starkly juxtaposed one against the other in an alternating litany of pessimism.

3. "YOUR WORM IS YOUR ONLY EMPEROR"

There is no doubt that Shakespeare, in his tragic period, was strongly influenced by the writings of Montaigne, though the precise nature of the debt will probably always remain impossible to determine. The passage from Montaigne's *Apology of Raymond Sebond* often cited as a parallel to Hamlet's macro-microcosm speech reads as follows, in Florio's translation:

Who have perswaded [man] that this admirable moving of heavens vaults, that the eternal light of these lampes so fiercely rowling over his head, that the horror-moving and continuall motion of this infinite vaste ocean were established, and continue so many ages for his commoditie and service? Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himselfe, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth call himselfe Master and Emperour of this Universe? (225)

In tracing the pessimistic dust of Alexander we shall need to look further into Montaigne, but at this stage it quickly needs to be repeated that for the arguments concerning man's dignity and misery the same source would have been available to Shakespeare that was available to Montaigne, namely Pierre Boaistuau. Boaistuau's *Bref discours de l'excellence et*

¹⁶Ibid., 1:246-47.

dignité de l'homme (1558) was part of Montaigne's library.¹⁷ The work reappears as a complementary continuation of Boaistuau's *Le Théâtre du monde, où il est faict un ample discours des misères humaines . . .* (1561). Appearing in the mid-sixteenth century, Boaistuau's *Bref discours* looks back to the tradition Trinkaus has made available to us, for it quotes the *prisci theologi*, the Church Fathers, and notably Giannozzo Manetti ["Janotius"] and Bartolomeo Fazio. Authorities agree that Boaistuau's work was very well known.¹⁸ Though there is no evidence of *Le Théâtre du monde* in Montaigne's library there are sufficient verbal echoes to show that he knew this as well as the earlier work.¹⁹ However, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, we have the translation into English by John Alday, *Theatrum Mundi, The Theatre or Rule of the World, wherein may be sene the running race and course of euerye mans life, as touching miserie and felicity . . . whereunto is added a learned, and maruellous worke of the excellencie of mankinde* which appeared in 1566[?], 1574, and 1603. This work was still popular enough by Burton's time to be quoted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621 and thereafter).²⁰

Thus the argument that Shakespeare might have been specifically influenced in Hamlet's micro-macrocosm speech by a famous passage of Montaigne needs to be tempered by the recognition that possibly both were reacting to the same tradition — fifteen hundred years of debate epitomized in Boaistuau with a clear line of transmission to England by way of Alday. Elsewhere in *Hamlet* the direct influence of Montaigne remains an issue of debate. Yet anyone who saw *Hamlet* and then read Florio's translation of Montaigne in 1603 and found something like "the heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the break-fast of a seely little worme" (*Apology*, 232) is likely to have been reminded of Hamlet's "Your worm is your only emperor for diet" (4.3.21), part of his preoccupation with corruption and death with links to both the micro-macrocosm and "Alexander . . . dust" speeches. We know that a manuscript of Florio's translation of Montaigne was in circulation before its publication in 1603. Florio's patron Southampton was also Shakespeare's, but it seems that a manuscript was in circulation outside Southampton's household, since in his own essays written before 1600 Sir William Cornwallis praises the translation of his model. "Evidence" for Shakespeare's knowledge of Montaigne falls into three classes: (1) direct quotation, (2) verbal echoes, and

¹⁷Villey, 1:84-85.

¹⁸Ibid.; Sozzi, 178.

¹⁹Villey, 1:84-85.

²⁰See the entry on Alday in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

(3) general ideas.²¹ The only generally accepted example in class one is that of *The Tempest* (2.1.145-66) where Shakespeare quotes "Of the Caniballes" (I.xxx) in Gonzalo's description of an ideal commonwealth. Attention to the case of verbal echoes suggests the influence of Montaigne in the composition of *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*. In his early study, looking particularly at these plays, George Coffin Taylor found 750 words in Florio and Shakespeare which do not appear before *Hamlet*. For example, Shakespeare's "consummation" which appears in the 1605 "To be, or not to be" (3.1.56) soliloquy, is the word used by Florio to translate *aneantisement* ("annihilation" in modern dictionaries) in the speech of Socrates in the essay "Of Physiognomy" (III.xii.540). The accumulation of such instances provides strong grounds for the likelihood of Shakespeare's familiarity with Montaigne. Yet in the third category of general ideas it has been forcefully, perhaps too forcefully, argued that both Shakespeare and Montaigne relied on a body of commonplaces central to the traditions of rhetoric as taught in the culture of the Renaissance.²²

The significance of commonplaces will be a major concern of the second half of this essay. Suffice it here to note that in addition to the above-quoted echoes of Montaigne Ellrodt notes as "parallels both in thought and phrasing" the line from the essay "Of the art of conferring," concerning fortune: "My consultation doth somewhat roughly hew the matter" (476), which Shakespeare echoes in "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11). Montaigne's "That to Philosophise is to learne how to Die" also influenced Shakespeare, although as we shall see, the thought and style of both passages derive from a common Stoic background:

Nor alive, nor dead, it doth concern you nothing.
 Alive because you are: Dead, because you are no more.
 Moreover, no man dies before his houre. The time you
 leave behinde was no more yours, than that which was
 before your birth, and concerneth you no more.

(34)

. . . If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to
 come, it will be now; if it be not
 now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no
 man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to
 leave betimes? Let be.

(5.2.216-20)

²¹I am indebted to Ellrodt for this classification.

²²For example in Harmon.

The evidence, if it amounts to such, that Shakespeare knew *An Apologie of Raymond Sebond* — not so much an essay as a short book — is of major significance since it is here that Montaigne gives voice most fully to the Renaissance rediscovery of classical Pyrrhonism. Montaigne's defence or apology for the rationalistic natural religion of the second book of Sebond's *Natural Theology* is in fact an ironic dismantling of reason with the tools of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Pyrrho's works had been lost but Diogenes Laertius's account in his *Lives of the Philosophers* and, above all, the outline of Pyrrho's philosophy (transmitted by Sextus Empiricus in the *Hypotyposes*) gave Montaigne and his contemporaries of a skeptical temper a dialectical armory. Henri Estienne published a Latin version of the *Hypotyposes* in 1562, and in 1569 Gentian Hervet published a Latin edition of all of Sextus's works. However, it should be noted that there is evidence for a now lost English translation of the *Hypotyposes* in 1590 and 1591, which is referred to by Thomas Nashe.²³ If it was available to Nashe it could also have been available to Shakespeare.

Academic skepticism of the third century B.C. finds that no knowledge is possible, while Pyrrhonian skepticism considers this position a little too categorical, and thus, paradoxically, a form of negative knowledge: it takes the position that "there was insufficient and inadequate evidence to determine if any knowledge was possible."²⁴ The Pyrrhonist suspended judgement on all issues of knowledge and retired into a state of *ataraxia*, quietude or unperturbedness since, as Hamlet puts it "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50). This sentiment has given rise to varied comment, and attribution to various sources, but as a major consideration of Pyrrhonism (though ironically Hamlet's expression is closer to Academic skepticism), the concept reappears throughout Montaigne's essay "That the taste of Goods or Evils doth greatly depend on the opinion we have of them." "This common reflection was probably given currency by Montaigne's essay," Harold Jenkins notes.²⁵ However, given the public availability of the *Hypotyposes* in the 1590s in comparison with the private circulation of Florio's manuscript, this reflection is more likely to have been a topically modish reference since, as a central standpoint of Pyrrhonism, there are pages and pages devoted to the topic in Sextus. Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy*, a folio volume first published in 1655-1661, contains a complete

²³Popkin, 19 and 253. Jones-Davies looks particularly at suspension of judgement and the paradox in Shakespeare generally.

²⁴Popkin, xiii.

²⁵Shakespeare, 461-68.

translation of the *Hypotyposes* which might well depend on the lost English version of the 1590s.

At the outset, in describing "The end of skepticism," namely the aforementioned *ataraxia* or "indisturbance" Sextus notes that:

For he who is of Opinion there is something Good or Bad in its own nature, is continually disturbed . . . Whereas he who defines nothing concerning Things naturally Good or Bad, neither flyeth nor pursueth any thing eagerly, so that he remains undisturbed. (477)²⁶

Closer to *Hamlet* is the sequence in the *Hypotyposes* (bk. 2, chap. 24, "What that is, which is called Art about Life") concerned with the main-spring of skepticism, the ethical relativity made manifest by comparative sociology. What is considered bad in one society is perfectly acceptable in another. With Hamlet's grief and horror of incest in mind, we find the sequence moving from "Piety towards the Dead" and mourning, to incest:

For if we did not (for example) know, that the custom of the *Aegyptians* is to marry their Sisters, we might falsly affirm, that it is a thing acknowledged by all, that we ought not to marry our Sisters. (529)

And immediately following this we find the observation:

Hereupon the *Sceptick* observing so great difference of things, Suspends as to what is Good or Bad in its own nature, or what is absolutely to be done or not to be done . . . For doubtless, he who proposeth to himself that something is good or ill in its own nature, and to be done, or not to be done, is troubled many ways. (529)

Hamlet's "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" is part of his self-defensive witty word-duel following the seemingly light-hearted lewd exchanges at the entry of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This encounter takes a potentially serious turn with Rosencrantz's words, "the world's grown honest" (2.2.237). The palpable falsity of the claim makes Hamlet recognize that the courtiers are probably agents of Claudius, and cause him to speak of Denmark as a "prison"; that is, "honest" persons such as himself are imprisoned, figuratively speaking, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attend him as though they were warders. Aware that he might show his hand too soon, Hamlet regains his ground by seizing on Rosencrantz's "We think not so, my lord," and by throwing down the gauntlet of philosophical skepticism.

The irony of such Pyrrhonic echoes is that we can discern behind the modish posture the impossibility of Hamlet's ever really being able fully to adopt the skeptic's stance. He believes only too well that murder and

²⁶This and all subsequent references to Sextus are from Stanley.

incest are “bad” and in need of corrective action — “something to be done,” indeed. But, as we hear, such a resolution is dialectically reversed from action to words — “To be, or not to be” — shortly after. Elsewhere in the *Hypotyposes*, Sextus argues the Pyrrhonist case concerning deception of the senses in such matters as the precise shape of things seen from a distance, and the question of what is relatively hot or cold to different natures (477, 482). It would not be difficult to relate these to Hamlet’s skeptical language games with Polonius (“Very like a whale” 3.2.373) and Osric (“It is indifferent cold, my lord” 5.2.96).

4. “TO REASON MOST ABSURD”

Hamlet affects the postures of philosophic skepticism as a corollary to the deep pessimism he derives from his immediate experience. The prince on Alexander’s “dust” is just one of the many word games which reflect the disjunction between words and things, rhetoric and reality throughout the play.²⁷ Consider the subsidiary rhetorical tradition of the various applied literary arts, particularly the *Ars Dictaminis*, the art of letter writing and its subdivision, the *consolatio*. The queen offers a form of consolation to the prince:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
 And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
 Do not forever with thy veiled lids
 Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
 Thou know’st ’tis common: all that lives must die,
 Passing through nature to eternity.

(1.2.68-73)

Gertrude’s rhetorical amplication is a trite example drawn from prescriptive handbooks such as Erasmus’s treatise *De Conscribendis Epistolis* (1521), which anticipates by example the various situations of grief and mourning.²⁸ The king takes up his wife’s *consolatio*; “you must know,” he tells Hamlet, “your father lost a father / That father lost, lost his” (1.2.89-90). To Claudius Hamlet’s excessive grief is “a fault to nature, / To reason must absurd, whose common theme / Is death of fathers” (1.2.102-04). This is the usual pattern of Stoic reminders, albeit here put bluntly and unsympathetically, which urge people to control their grief by employing reason.

²⁷Compare Gorfain’s anthropological approach: “A metacommunicative account of play helps explain how playing uses impunity both to evade responsibility and to enact figurative meanings” (33).

²⁸Boyce, 775-76 Erasmus quotes from Cicero’s *Ad Familiares* on death as “that which is common to us all” (166).

Formal rhetoric and its affiliated modes were thought to equip the individual with ample resources for public discourse. Rhetoric provided a massive compilation of human truths inherited from the past. Human experience became a moral taxonomy of precepts.²⁹ Given an ahistorical assumption of the universality of human nature, any individual experience was a minor reflection of the collective experience embodied, for instance, in that part of rhetoric called the commonplace.³⁰ W.S. Howell speaks of “a society that is satisfied with the traditional wisdom and knows where to find it.”³¹ But Hamlet’s anguish is as far as one could possibly get from that “satisfaction.” “What is a man,” Hamlet asks, “If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?” (4.4.33-35). The conditional question invites an automatic rebuttal in the form of the most common commonplace of them all — man is a rational animal. Hamlet’s mind and discourse divide around the two factors of reason and animality:

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and god-like reason
 To fust in us unus’d. Now whether it be
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on th’ event —
 A thought which, quarter’d, hath but one part wisdom
 And ever three parts coward — I do not know
 Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do,
 Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
 To do’t . . .

(4.4.36-46)

Hamlet thinks rhetorically; “cause,” “will,” “strength,” and “means” are topics or places or arguments for a deliberative oration on “Should I act?”

²⁹William Baldwin’s very popular *Treatise* presents perhaps the baldest of such compilations.

³⁰As Lechner, 68-68, points out, in practice the analytic topics deriving from the categories and predicables sometimes became confused with what Aristotle called the “special” or subject topics. In addition, Jardine, 179-86, describes the important development from syllogistic logic to a topics logic in Renaissance humanism. The significance of Rudolph Agricola’s *De inventione dialectica* in this respect is well accounted for in Mack. For a useful general introduction see Jacobus’s introductory chapter, “Backgrounds in Logic” (1-20).

³¹W. S. Howell, 23. Kristeller writes of “a kind of common wisdom that could be learned, imitated, and utilized,” but adds, “The frequency of quotations and of commonplaces repeated in the moral literature of the Renaissance gives to all but its very best products an air of triviality” (281).

Public forms of discourse encroach upon Hamlet's subjectivity, his personal experience. In act 1, scene 2, we see Hamlet isolated by his black clothes, refusing to accept the consolation of Gertrude and Claudius. He refuses to regard his subjective personal experience of grief in objectified general terms. He hears "all that lives must die," and agrees "Ay, madam, it is common," yet will not accept this universally held "truth" as at all meaningful for his personal experience. Conventional wisdom teaches that such anguish is an aberration. For Gertrude it is a wayward singularity, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75).

Hamlet's sense of being, of alienated subjectivity brought about by grief and sexual loathing, is suspended in time from the moral imperatives of socially oriented action according to codes of honor and revenge, which is why being physically "bounded in a nutshell" for such a mind could paradoxically be ruling "infinite space" (2.2.254-55). Yet the "space" of Denmark proves to be "a prison . . . A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons" (2.2.243, 245-56) — one of which is language. "Words, words, words" are Hamlet's jailers, and rhetoric his prison. In the words "To be, or not to be" (3.1.56ff.), Hamlet's dilemma finds perfect expression, yet their significance is beyond his grasp. Here, with the dramatically most introspective of perhaps all soliloquies, Hamlet's personal experience yields to the rhetorical disposition of the thesis. We have the opening exordium; "To die, to sleep" adds a confirmatory argument; "To sleep, perchance to dream" offers a rebuttal; "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time" opens an extensive dilation, followed by the epilogue, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . ." The particular locution, "To be, or not to be," forces upon us, but not Hamlet, the awareness that the question he asks, and the speech which seemingly considers it, neutralize the suffering being between words and action; like Pyrrhus, "*a neutral to his will and matter*" who "*Did nothing*" (2.2.477-78). However, the antithesis reveals Hamlet's mind or being, although this and what follows in the famous soliloquy, the likeness of sleep and death, largely derives from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* by way of those sententia or "saws" Hamlet claims to have wiped from "the table of [his] memory" (1.5.98). Cicero's first disputation at Tusculum was the *locus classicus*, and any educated auditor would have recognized it and the rhetorical mode of Hamlet's speech.³² As they would have recalled the situation of Hecuba as a recommended

³²Cicero, *The Tusculan Disputations*, bk. 1 ("On the Contempt of Death"), section 41: "By dying I shall go from hence into some other place; wherefore, if all sense is utterly extinguished, and if death is like that sleep which sometimes is so undisturbed as to be even without the vision of dreams — in that case, O ye Gods! What gain it is to die" (327).

topic in rhetorical handbooks, and her speech as given by the Player as a good example of *copia verborum*, or copiousness of language, highly favored for any situation (grief, lamentation, etc.) needing expressive amplifications.³³ "To be, or not to be" recalls the formulator of philosophic relativism and subjectivism, Protagoras, who demonstrated that there are contradictory opinions, both seemingly valid, about every issue. As Charles Osborne Macdonald puts it:

Hamlet's ethos is partly the antilogistic habit of mind common to all schools of rhetoric, a habit of contrasting words with deeds, appearance with reality. It would be a work of supererogation to point out that Hamlet's concerns in these [antithetical] passages closely parallel those of Shakespeare himself as rhetorician and writer of tragedy. (132)

The social exchange of words seemingly implies the parity of public meaning — a common language reflecting the sameness of individual experience. The use of the word "grief", for example, inevitably assumes that the word has the same meaning for different individual experiences of bereavement. This essentialist aspect of language use lends itself to logic and its syllogistic basis, but in actual existence we cannot experience each other's experience *per se*. Only Hamlet feels Hamlet's grief. To maintain his being Hamlet refuses the public language of rhetoric and adopts a counter-rhetoric; yet, as we have seen, the humanist culture which enthroned the arts of language shapes his mind. Hamlet's existential defences are skepticism, pessimism, and seeming madness.

The madness of Hamlet takes on a specific form which an audience would have immediately understood in relation to commonplaces of language and civility. The relationship between words and things was a leading preoccupation of the Renaissance.³⁴ Though some scientists doubted the value of rhetoric and rhetoric itself was open to various abuses, nevertheless the overwhelming humanist assumption was that language somehow defined both man and society; language was a hallmark of civilization. John Hayward noted in 1604, "As Philo witnesseth, societie of men is maintained by speech, as being the interpreter or rather expresser of the mind" (sig. A3^v). "For if *oratio* next to *ratio*, speech next to reason, be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be praiseless which doth most polish that blessing of speech" is Sir Philip

³³T. W. Baldwin points out, for example, that the recommendation of the commentator Veltkirchius on Erasmus's *Copia* made "the plaint of Hecuba in Book XIII of the *Metamorphoses* . . . the stock illustration of excessive use of copy to move the affections" (2:193-94).

³⁴See A. C. Howell.

Sidney's gloss on the commonplace.³⁵ Echoing a Stoic insistence, George Puttenham avers "for man is but his minde, and as his mind is tempered and qualified, so are his speeches and language at large, and his inward conceits be the mettall of his minde, and his manner of vtterance the very warp and woofe of his conceits."³⁶ Hamlet calculatedly goes against these truisms but in a way that would have been immediately identifiable. A statement by John Hoskins is almost like an account of Hamlet's linguistic behavior:

Yet cannot his mind be thought in tune whose words do jar, nor his reason in frame whose sentences are preposterous; nor his fancy clear and perfect whose utterance breaks itself into fragments and uncertainties. (2)

5. "WITHIN THE BOOK AND VOLUME OF MY BRAIN"³⁷

In refusing to resign his private grief to the public world of debased value masked by rhetoric, Hamlet refuses to communicate meaningfully, but is meaningful to himself. His understanding is so intense that he is not understood. His awareness of modes of being finds a correlative in modes of meaning. The intensity of his preoccupation with being, its origin and end, finds expression in concentrated language, particularly in the pun and the paradox. Consider the following exchange:

Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion — have you a daughter?

Polonius: I have, my lord.

Hamlet: Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive — friend, look to't.

(2.2.181-86)

Editors annotate these words variously, but perhaps it would be just as well to dwell first on their difficulty, which is that their immediate obliquity renders them largely meaningless. That is, language does not communicate, at least to Polonius (and us?). Yet Hamlet appears to be in control of the situation since he baffles Polonius wilfully. And yet he can-

³⁵Sidney, 121-22.

³⁶Puttenham, 161.

³⁷In effect Hamlet's analogy reverses the movement described by Lechner: "While the ancient orators conceived of the topics and their seats of arguments as located in the mental areas of the mind in which thought processes developed and were expressed in the oral tradition of the spoken word, the Renaissance teacher and schoolboy tended more to locate his topics and their accumulated wisdom outside the mind on the pages of his commonplace book where thoughts were manipulated like objects" (236).

not be said to baffle Polonius completely since Polonius thinks that he is mad anyway, and Hamlet is confirming his belief with his "antic disposition" (1.5.180). Upon re-examination of the passage we can begin to unravel its meaning. The sun is the source of decay, yet in the form of life — the sun breeds (maggots) in what is already dead (a dog). In considering the process of fleshly corruption by lewd association of the physiological with the moral, Hamlet thinks of Ophelia ("have you a daughter?") and of human conception and birth. When he recommends "Let her not walk i' th' sun," he puns on the sun as source of procreative life; the *sun* and *son*, namely Hamlet as possible procreator; and the sun as emblem of kingship. In sum, keep her out of the court where the procreative act, sex, is corrupt, "but as your daughter may conceive, friend look to't." In this brief exchange, as with the micro-macrocosm speech, and as with the "Alexander . . . dust" speech, we see Hamlet's preoccupation with the antithetical nature of existence in corruption and generation, life and death.

Hamlet's final step before the close of the play is to move to Stoicism. In the claim "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11), action is resigned to fatalistic passivity, like Hamlet's mechanistic "continual practice" (5.2.207) at duelling. The verbal image twice removes Hamlet from the reality: practising for the formalized sport which simulates actual fighting. (As the physical counterpart to the soliloquist, the idea of Hamlet solus, shadow-duelling like the shadow-boxer, is irresistible).³⁸ This Stoicism appears in the above-quoted passage (5.2.216-20) that has given rise to much textual and interpretive debate. Rather than enter into the controversy concerning lines 218-20 (" . . . The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, / knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.") the reader may consult the "long note" supplied by Harold Jenkins (565-66). Suffice it here to observe two aspects of the general character of the passage. "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" specifically echoes Matthew 10.29, a verse customarily referred to in discussions of both general and particular, or "special," providence, usually with reference to Calvin's *Institutes*. This Christian allusion can be linked to the "heaven ordinaunt" Hamlet alleges earlier in the scene (5.2.48). Some commentators would also consider the passage beginning "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10) to argue for a sense of Christian belief. That is, to turn from the negativity of pessimism and skepticism to the positives of religious affirmation. Yet there is the unquestionable Stoicism in the thought

³⁸In fact this image of Hamlet burlesques the Stoic *askesis*, mastery over oneself, by the exercises of *meletē* (meditation) and *gymnasia* (physical training). See Foucault, 34-39.

and style, particularly of lines 219-20 which one scholar finds “a commonplace in Stoics as divergent as Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius,” and furthermore, “the whole passage has strikingly close parallels to a type of Stoic doctrine current in the late English Renaissance.”³⁹ A passage in Epictetus is particularly close, “I must die: if instantly, I will die instantly: if in a short time, I will dine first; and when the hour comes, then I will die. How? As becomes one who restores what is not his own.”⁴⁰ Final Stoic resignation seems more consistent with the development of pessimism in the play which culminates in Alexander’s “dust” in the preceding scene, whereas any Christian resonance would seem ironic in suggesting what is denied Hamlet, rather than what he has found.

Shakespeare was manifestly drawn to the popular genre of the revenge tragedy because it gave him the opportunity to confront a condition of being and acting. In the revenger’s delay he could explore an individual suffering, suffering in the sense of being acted upon, both externally and internally, socially and psychologically, to produce Hamlet’s unique alienation. In the development of Western culture Shakespeare’s discovery of subjectivity in Hamlet is as momentous as the Renaissance discovery of perspective in art. Shakespeare’s inner psychological perspective offers a counter-humanist reversal. To the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, alienation suggested *homo viator*, the fallen Christian traveler alienated from God in this pilgrimage of life seeking reunion ultimately in heaven. Hamlet’s subjectivity is more like the existential alienation discussed by twentieth century commentators.⁴¹

Hamlet’s father’s death, his mother’s concupiscence and hasty marriage to her husband’s murderer, produce a grief and loathing of such a profound degree that a sense of being created by emotion estranges him from the previous identity of a princely role. Hamlet anticipates this in his response to the revelations of the ghost:

³⁹Morgan, 553-54.

⁴⁰“Of the things which are, and of those which are not, in our own power” 1.1.9 (5). Morgan, 553-54.

⁴¹For the medieval view see Ladner, for the modern compare Schacht. Kristeller observes that “Renaissance thought and literature are extremely individualistic in that they aim, to a degree unknown in the Middle Ages and to most of ancient and modern times, at the expression of individual, subjective opinions, feelings, and experiences” (305). But that word “individualistic” flattens out necessary distinctions: the humanist orator-writer-poet uses his *ethos* or personality as part of a rhetorical strategy to win over an audience or readership. Subjectivity, regarded from an existential point of view, defines itself against, or separate from, the public world, since it derives in large part from a breakdown between the discourses of self and status, role and the world.

Remember thee?
 Yea, from the table of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmix'd with baser matter.

(1.5.97-104)

Hamlet does not realize that this is impossible. He cannot replace a mind shaped by rhetoric with unalloyed feeling. Rhetoric provided not just knowledge, but *how* knowledge was assimilated and understood: it provided a cognitive structure which enforced the Western censure of emotion. Consequently, in desperation, Hamlet ponders on dissolution of mind and body: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt" (1.2.129). But Hamlet's body actually undergoes a kind of reification when we hear, "*whilst this machine is to him*" (2.2.122-23), the first recorded instance of the word used in this way (*OED* 4.c). Hamlet is imprisoned by rhetoric, the enemy within. He is self-policed by the inescapable guardians of rationalism and sin who suppress the radical threat of passion. His only options are loss of selfhood in real madness or to re-assume a role which travesties his truth. He hides his "mystery" within the conventions of love's madness. Then Hamlet, the former courtier, soldier, and scholar, seizes the opportunity to become actor-manager, and then the philosopher roles of skeptic and stoic, until he finally capitulates to the most evasive of all roles, the return of "Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.251). It is the most evasive because it completely confounds social and private, past and present, illusion and authenticity, in its conformity with the world of public values where seeming cannot be differentiated from being. Only the audience is fully aware of the existential disjunction between subjective being and public self-presentation. Burkhardtian Renaissance man undergoes that primal nausea: in Hamlet's words, "how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2.208-09).

The commonplace voiced in *Hamlet*, "to thine own self be true" (1.3.78), has a long history, from the inscription at the oracle of Delphi, through the Latin West as *nosce te ipsum*, up to the concluding advice of Polonius to Laertes, where it is vulgarized as conventional prudence. Platonic traditions interpreted this axiom as the necessity of self-knowledge as the first stage towards a knowledge of ideal forms, or an assent to spiritual selfhood. In Christian thought self-knowledge denoted the rational soul's awareness of its origin and end: its conception in sin and its parallel

striving by ascent to Godhead.⁴² But within the Christian tradition St. Augustine made a crucial distinction. He conceived of the self as a kind of emptiness or negation that is fulfilled by recognition of the need for relationship and dependence on God. For Augustine, the soul “has consciousness of being but does not know *what* it is.”⁴³ If the Christian contexts of soul, Godhead and sin are removed, this remark lays bare the existential anguish that is found in Hamlet.

Consciousness, at this stage of the development of individualism in Western culture, was always consciousness of being-sinful, or consciousness of being-in-love, or consciousness of self as being-for-others. In secular terms, selfhood and identity were authenticated by the externals of name, fame, glory, and reputation. Hamlet’s consciousness of self as self, or pure being simply existing, over and above sentience, originates in a vacuum of grief and loathing enveloped by his own facticity, the continuum of past and present identity. Ophelia’s account of Hamlet’s distracted state is a paradigm of Hamlet’s situation.

He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
 Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
 And with his other hand thus o’er his brow
 He falls to such perusal of my face
 As a would draw it. Long stay’d he so.
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
 He rais’d a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
 And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
 And with his head over his shoulder turn’d
 He seem’d to find his way without his eyes,
 For out o’doors he went without their helps,
 And to the last bended their light on me.

(2.1.87-100)

Full quotation brings out the nature of the encounter. “Th’observ’d of all observers” (3.1.156) undergoes a dialectical scrutiny as we scrutinize him scrutinizing Ophelia as she recounts the meeting. As part of his “antic disposition” (1.5.180) Hamlet as distracted lover rehearses a role (“. . . all unbrac’d, / No hat . . . Ungarter’d” 2.1.78-80) in which the imposture brings home a greater truth. Reversing the interanimation of lovers’ souls here, Hamlet’s act elicits an authentic response, and he experiences the

⁴²Bennett offers a valuable survey.

⁴³*De Trinitate* 4.7, cited in Bennett, 136.

facticity of his former self in Ophelia's eyes as he recedes into his own truth of suffering, and recedes from the possibility of Ophelia or her auditor's understanding. But not from ours, as we have the experience of the soliloquies — the objective correlative for Hamlet's emotion that T. S. Eliot could not find (48).

The church is concerned with the numinous, with essences, while the theatre as the main expression of Renaissance secularism, is concerned with existences. As part of anthropocentric humanism the human agent was depicted in poetry and eloquence. But the twin forces of skepticism and nominalism served to undermine the efficacy of "words, words, words." The scholastic solidity of the Thomist resolution of the Christian and Aristotelian in the formula of the soul as the form of the body held off the destructive dualism of such things as Manicheism and Gnosticism. But as the twentieth century French catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain saw, it was ultimately the *Method* of Descartes which broke up

the superior conciliations in which the antinomies of the real were resolved by Scholasticism into two conflicting pieces which it affirms separately and which it cannot unite; and from there on this philosophy places side by side a thesis and antithesis equally extreme, one of which serves to mask the other. (44-45)

Commenting on this passage Roy W. Battenhouse finds, "Here, I believe, is the key to the contradictions and maskings of Hamlet. Yet Descartes is not our only key, for his 'antinomic errors' hark back to classical antiquity and continue forward to today [in] Idealism and Existentialism" (1107-08).

This essay has sought to reexamine the question of subjectivity in *Hamlet* by reappraising the significance of the Renaissance revival of philosophic skepticism; the continued debate between medieval views of the misery of man's life and the Renaissance celebration of existence; the particular importance of the commonplace in the theory and practice of dialectical and rhetorical topics. At the center has been the cultural derogation of passion, in both Stoic and Christian tradition. In the anguish of grief and loathing Hamlet's subjectivity is realized in a consciousness which rejects the wisdom of tradition for the unique selfhood of the individual. This subjectivity is not an anachronism retroactively conferred by the culture of bourgeois individualism, the essentialism of liberal humanism. An ahistorical essentialist view of man derives from both Greek and Latin humanism, above all in rhetoric, and Christian belief in the universality of man's fallen condition, according to Scripture. Such apparent transcendence has, however, been located within the cultural moment of historical change and continuity. Culture is as much within as

without the mind and Hamlet is forced to submit to the plot and history, albeit in a series of burlesque roles, but for a moment he has stood seemingly, "Looking before and after" (4.4.37), back to antiquity and forward to our own age (perhaps even more than Battenhouse conjectured) in which "identity crisis" has become a commonplace expression.

Famously, Montaigne could query "Que sais-je," his motto which was struck on one side of a personal medal, yet throughout the *Essais*, for all the recorded vagaries of his thought, nothing is in fact so solid as the mind and identity of the retired Bordeaux magistrate who could balance Pyrrhonian skepticism with his declared fideism. The other side of his medal was a pair of scales in suspense. In contrast, Hamlet's existential anguish, suspended between word and action, can neither retreat into that "indisturbance," *ataraxia*, or embrace pure faith. Instead he stands there as spectator of the plot invoking Alexander's dust, not so much "reading the book of himself" as Mallarmé claimed,⁴⁴ but fulfilling the true Herculean task that subsequent history has made manifest — bearing modernism on his shoulders.

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⁴⁴ . . . lisant au livre de lui-même." Mallarmé's *aperçu* appeared as part of a half-page response, under the editor's title "Hamlet et Fortinbras," to a reader's query.

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