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HAMLET



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JEFF DOLVEN
EDITOR

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Introduction to *Hamlet*

by Jeff Dolven

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be? That is the question" is the most famous line ever spoken on the English stage; it may be the most famous line of verse in the language. How familiar it is—and how strange that it should be so familiar. Why, of all lines, that one? It is such an odd string of words for history to have picked out to stand for Shakespeare, who himself can stand for so much with us: for drama, for poetry, for high culture generally. To begin with, it is neither particularly dramatic nor poetical. The same soliloquy offers up such impassioned metaphors as "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.57) just a moment later: why don't we remember them the same way? By contrast, "To be, or not to be" is so much starker and plainer, so much more, one might say, philosophical. It does little more than state the principle of logic that Aristotle called the law of the excluded middle: either α or not α , being or not being, but nothing in between. It is hard to imagine a barer thought, one more perfectly abstracted from the conditions of our ordinary lives.

Perhaps that abstraction has something to do with why the line is so often abstracted from the play. It has proven to travel exceptionally well, pried out of its context and passed freely around the larger culture (indeed around so many cultures: *sein oder nicht sein*,

ser o no ser). In this, it is like the character who delivers it. Hamlet is abstracted, preoccupied with thoughts he will not speak at the expense of the forms and rituals of daily life. He thinks a lot, and spends a lot of time alone. He is also chronically abstracted from his play: over four centuries of reading and staging, his character has become iconic, the melancholy, black-clad Prince in conversation with somebody's skull, recognizable anywhere. It scarcely matters that he speaks less than a third of the play's lines. Hamlet is *Hamlet*; the man is the play.

Over the last two centuries, this elevation of the Prince has gone hand in hand with claims that he is somehow ahead of his time, in his complexity and depth and "inwardness" (a word that seems as if it could have been coined for him). With the character of Hamlet, this story goes, we witness nothing less than the birth—perhaps the premature birth—of modern consciousness, a phenomenon larger and more contradictory than any fiction could contain. The history of Hamlet criticism could be cast as an argument between the partisans of this outsized and overintricate Prince and those who prefer to consider him as part of the play and of the world where it was written and performed. On one side (more or less) are the Romantics, from Goethe to Coleridge to Bloom, and a line of psychoanalytic critics that begins with Freud himself; on the other, students of the arts of drama, aesthetic formalists, and historicists.

Something about Shakespeare's play keeps renewing this dispute: Hamlet or *Hamlet*? Nor is it fought out solely among the critics, for it might be said to puzzle Hamlet himself. This introduction will follow the development of the problem—should we call it a choice?—through the play, and in so doing it will propose one way of getting to know the text, by tracking a couple of small, apparently innocuous words up and down the winding stairs of Elsinore. Everything Shakespeare wrote has its linguistic signatures, terms or tricks of rhetoric that gather meaning as the action proceeds, the particular music (as one critic has put it) of his thinking. Here the

words will be *part* and *like*. Many others would serve as well, but around these two—which recur with obsessive frequency—gather a set of traditional problems about solitude and company, autonomy and belonging, in the play's three spheres of family, state, and theater. They will lead us back again, at the end, to Hamlet's ultimate question.

The first scene sows these words in the audience's ear. The night watch is changing on the bitter cold battlements of the castle Elsinore, and Marcellus has brought Hamlet's friend Horatio to see the "dreaded sight" (1.1.27) that has twice surprised the soldiers there. As he speaks, the ghost appears again, "In the same figure like the King that's dead," as Barnardo says. "Looks 'a not like the King?" he asks, and Horatio responds, "Most like" (1.1.43, 46). A few lines later Marcellus puts the same question, "Is it not like the King?" and Horatio has a still stranger answer: "As thou art to thyself" (1.1.61). The refrain is taken up in the next scene: Hamlet says of his father, "I shall not look upon his like again," only to have Horatio describe "a figure like your father. . . . I knew your father; / These hands are not more like" (1.2.188, 1.2.200–213). It is the likeness of this specter to the dead King that amazes these men, but Horatio's odd phrases—"As thou art to thyself," "These hands are not more like"—are more deeply disquieting. *Are you really like yourself?* they ask in a whisper. What a strange question: for what would it mean *not* to be? These intimations of fracture can be heard, too, in the first soundings of *part* and its cognates. The Ghost has a story to "impart"; Horatio does not know "In what particular thought to work," and believes only "in part" (1.1.69, 167); when Barnardo first asks, "What, is Horatio there?" Horatio answers, "A piece of him" (1.1.21). All this talk is like the overture to an opera, or even the orchestra warming up, practicing in bits and scraps the themes that will hold the play together (if anything can).

We are well embarked on *Hamlet* if we can catch the confusion, even paranoia of this first scene. The old King is dead; the kingdom is full of hurried, ominous preparations; the soldiers barely know each other

in the dark. But Denmark was not ever thus. There was a time, Horatio explains, when the elder Hamlet held the throne as a great warrior-king. When he was challenged by the elder Fortinbras of Norway—"Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride" (1.1.85)—he slew his would-be imitator in single combat. By rights this should be young Hamlet's destiny, to rule Denmark and do battle in his own time with his own proper likeness. But "The time is out of joint" (1.5.188): if the Ghost is to be believed—and it bears remembering that we go some ways into the play before we can be sure—then young Hamlet's uncle Claudius, new King of Denmark and new husband to the widowed Gertrude, poisoned the old King as he slept in his garden. Claudius's unfitness and *unlikeness* to the old King preoccupy Hamlet: "My father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152–153), he says in his first soliloquy; he tells Gertrude that her new husband is a goat-footed satyr to the old King's sun god (1.2.140), a "moor" that lies in the shadow of a "fair mountain" (3.4.66–67).

Claudius is no old Hamlet: the ancient code of "emulate pride" (1.1.85), the open combat of equals, has been broken. But the same might be said of old Hamlet's son. The ghost that Horatio describes is armed "cap-à-pie" (1.2.201), head to foot, an image of his former warlike glory. By contrast, Hamlet is dressed in mourning clothes, the "inky cloak" (1.2.77) that suggests both his sorrow and a scholar's ink-stained fingers. Not only is he unlike his father, but he does not much resemble the promising young Prince the other characters remember. What has happened, asks Ophelia, to a man who was once "Th' expectation and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mold of form" (3.1.151–152)? Hamlet in his suits of woe cannot live up to these descriptions, and Horatio's peculiar phrase "as thou art to thyself" comes back to haunt him. The demand implicit in this phrase *to be like yourself* has a Stoic ring to it: do not pattern yourself on others or attach yourself to them; cultivate detachment from the world as a defense against fortune's slings and arrows; and as Hamlet

says to the actors, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17–18), and both to the inner man. Hamlet the scholar would have been brought up reading such wisdom in the books of Stoic philosophers like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, but he is hard pressed to keep their counsel. He hates seeming, hates the vain displays of emotion that the Stoics hate, and yet when he declares, "But I have that within which passes show" (1.2.85), he admits that he cannot fit his appearance to the turbulent excess of his thoughts. His madness—whether it is an act, or real, or some alchemy of the two—is the ultimate symptom of this self-difference. "If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away," he says before his combat with Laertes, "Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it" (5.2.204, 206).

That drumbeat of *like* is a clue to this complex of ideas: both the dream of being like yourself, and all the bonds (to others) and fractures (of the self) that keep spoiling that dream. Psychoanalytically minded readers have been especially attentive to the trouble this little word makes. If Hamlet rails against Claudius's unlikeness to his father, and despairs of his own shortcomings (again, at 1.2.152–153, "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules"), does this make him all too like the man he loathes? It may be bad logic (if old Hamlet ≠ Claudius, and old Hamlet ≠ young Hamlet, then young Hamlet = Claudius), but it is powerful psychology. Such speculations form the basis of Freud's Oedipal interpretation of the play, where what Hamlet sees in Claudius is a mirror of his own primitive, unacknowledgeable desires to kill his father and marry his mother. Such readings take strength from the peculiar sexual intensity of the language in the so-called "closet scene" with Gertrude, when Hamlet so vividly imagines the King giving her "reechy kisses / Or paddling in your neck with his damned fingers" (3.4.184–185). Here the very likeness of sons to fathers—which seemed as though it might guarantee the regularity of succession—becomes instead a source of contamination.

The other word, *part*, is equally important to the music of these considerations. "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75), asks Gertrude of Hamlet in his first scene. He has returned home from the university at Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, only to find himself celebrating his mother's marriage. Now he wants nothing more than to return to his studies. Scholarship was an unusual ambition for a Renaissance prince: Hamlet sets himself deliberately apart not only from his family but from the obligations of the King's son and heir. To those obligations the story of his father's murder returns him with a vengeance. "Let us impart what we have seen tonight / Unto young Hamlet" (1.1.171–172), says Horatio after he sees the Ghost; when they encounter it together, he says, "It beckons you to go away with it, / As if it some impartment did desire / To you alone" (1.4.58–60). The *part* in "impart"—a word Shakespeare uses five times in Hamlet, only six in all the other plays combined—hints at how this story compels Hamlet to become *part* of court and of family again, how it folds him back into a world he had sought to escape. Even as it entangles, however, it also exiles him, for he is now the keeper of a dangerous secret. The same word captures the pathos of this new estrangement: "I hold it fit that we shake hands and part," he says to the others on the battlement, "and for my own poor part, / I will go pray" (1.5.130–134).

This serious play with words explores wide territories of feeling, as Hamlet veers between the equally painful predicaments of being *part of* and *apart*. It also revolves around a conceptual problem that is peculiarly close to the heart of the play. A *part*, considered in the most abstracted terms, is something separate, distinct: we can single it out because it stands alone and because it is unlike what is around it. At the same time, if it is a *part*, it must be *part of* something else, entailed to some whole—a whole that it might even be, in some sense, like. Shakespeare could have encountered formal versions of this problem in the study of grammar or logic, of which he likely had a taste in Stratford's grammar school. What counts most in the play is

how he, or any of us, might slip into thinking of the word as a paradox, a problem that puzzles the mind the way "To be, or not to be" puzzles the will. A *part* is dependent *and* independent, like *and* unlike. In that paradox the very word becomes an image of the mind's helplessness.

To follow *part* into such high abstraction is not only to track a tendency in Hamlet's mind, but also in Shakespeare's: many of his plays are deeply structured by the thinking through of an intellectual problem (for example, twinning in *The Comedy of Errors*, motion and stasis in *Antony and Cleopatra*). One can follow the paradox back down again into almost any of the play's more concrete preoccupations. Politics, for instance: as when Laertes cautions Ophelia that Hamlet the Prince is not free to love whom he will. His choice is "circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head" (1.3.21–23). Behind this passing analogy is an important idea in the political theory of the time, that the king has two bodies, his physical body and the metaphorical body of the state. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play on the same notion when they flatter Claudius, "Never alone / Did the king sigh, but with a general groan" (3.3.22–23). Here are the lineaments of the same partial predicament: Hamlet is (or stands someday to be) the body's head, its governor, its legislator; yet as *part* of that body, he is never private, never alone, never free.

Then, of course, there is the echo in all of these parts—*part*, *particular*, *impart*—of a *part* in a play. We use the word now as a casual synonym for an actor's role, and Hamlet uses it that way himself when he is joshing with Polonius (3.2.99). But in the overdetermining echo chamber of Elsinore the sense of a *single* or a *mere* *part*, a *part* of something bigger, becomes inescapable. Any actor, after all, is only one element of a complex production, and for Hamlet—who is so peculiarly self-conscious about being onstage—that simultaneous dependence and independence is yet another register of his existential crisis. What *part* is there to play, mad or sane, that does not by its nature insist on his unwanted implication in the whole? (An actor on Shakespeare's

stage might have felt his partiality just a bit more acutely: the price of paper and the demands of manuscript copying meant that he worked from a script that gave only his own lines and his cues, a part indeed.)

With these two little words and the concepts they unfold, *Hamlet* gives us a language for thinking about a character who is inescapably central to the world of the play—"Th' observed of all observers," as Ophelia puts it (3.1.153)—and yet who longs to abstract himself from its designs. His alienation has always been obvious to audiences. Not quite as easy to recognize is the extent of Elsinore's hospitality: the standing offer for the Prince to accept his part in the court and the royal family, to be like everyone else. After all, Hamlet still stands to become king; when Claudius calls him "my son" (1.2.64), the offer of love and protection might well be perfectly genuine, so long as Hamlet will accept the new order. The Prince is surrounded by advice to be reasonable, to give over his grieving, to accept things as they are. Even the Player King in the play-within-a-play that Hamlet himself chooses, *The Murder of Gonzago*, counsels, "Most necessary 'tis that we forget" (3.2.180).

But, of course, Hamlet cannot forget. Not only does he burn with the revenge he is so slow to take, but he has a kind of contempt for the society he has grown up in, where men of state lose themselves in the "heavy-headed revel" (1.4.17) of Claudius's banquets. He is tenaciously skeptical of "fashion and ceremony" (2.2.305–306), of false friendship and empty ritual, even of the cosmetics with which we gild our corruptible bodies. He rails against "That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat, / Of habits devil" (3.4.161–162). Customs (such as weddings and funerals) are the ways we ordinarily feel a part of a culture and assert our likeness to one another; for Hamlet, they are a way the world has of not knowing its crimes, sinking itself in oblivious courtesies. It is when the Prince's alienation rises to the pitch of social critique that readers have been most inclined to insist on his modernity. His outsideness to his society, even to the drama it-

self, and his constant advertisement of impulses and desires too large for full expression capture a modern sense that the old forms of life, and of art, no longer hold us.

That double sense of alienation from one's culture and one's self has one more crucial dimension, expressed in the unfolding of the play's plot. It is clear enough what is supposed to happen: as in any revenge tragedy, the crime revealed at the beginning will be revenged at the end, after a suitable interval for planning and fulminating. *Hamlet*'s first audiences knew the script, for such plays had been all the rage in the public theaters a decade before. They would therefore also have recognized that Hamlet refuses to play his part: among the customs and conventions he defies is the single-minded vehemence of the revenger. By Act Four it seems possible that this famous delay could continue indefinitely, or at least until Claudius figures out a way to dispatch the so-far not-so-dangerous young man. And yet, Hamlet does finally act (another knowing pun), after a fashion. That word *like* can once more point toward an explanation, if we stretch it now to compass Fortinbras's sense when he speaks of Hamlet as "likely . . . To have proved most royal" (5.2.373–374)—*likely*, that is, meaning "probable." (As the word *like* itself could mean in the period: "Very like," muses Hamlet at 1.2.234, after Horatio says that the Ghost would have amazed him.) This probable *like* touches the play's obsession with futurity, an obsession that is everywhere: the Ghost is full of portent and omen; there is the peculiar dumb show before the play, to tell us what is coming; Gertrude worries that "Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss" (4.5.17); Hamlet's first reaction to the Ghost's news is to cry out, "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40).

The problem that these and so many other references to prologue, prophecy, and likeliness define is that time itself in *Hamlet* has come apart, or as Hamlet says, "The time is out of joint" (1.5.188). The river that flows from thoughts and words to acts is dammed up with thinking, and the Prince is trapped in prologue, trapped in pre-

diction, what is merely *likely*. It may be the exhilarating opportunism of stabbing Polonius behind the arras that changes everything, a deed complete almost before the intention is formed. Or perhaps it is the strange events of his sea voyage, which left no time for contemplation: "Or I could make a prologue to my brains, / They had begun the play" (5.2.30–31). However it happens, the luxury of prologue is gone by Act Five, and, somehow, the need for it, too. Now Hamlet's relation to time is different. "We defy augury," he famously tells Horatio: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. 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" (5.2.191–194). Hamlet claims to care no more for predictions and prophecies, or for that bank or shoal or part of time (as Macbeth might put it) from which one looks down on the river of events before plunging in. His insouciantly acrobatic juggling of tenses suggests that they are all one to him now.

As, indeed, he tells us in the Folio text of the play: "man's life's no more than to say 'one.'" Hamlet has given himself over to readiness, and in a peculiar way, he has given himself over to death as well. Death has been the play's ultimate partition: "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.78–79). Nightmares of the body's corruption haunt Hamlet's imagination from the start, flesh melting into dew, "kissing carrion" (2.2.179), the "convocation of politic worms" (4.3.19–20) that he imagines feasting on the dead Polonius. But Act Five finds him in a graveyard, bantering with the gravedigger and handling, if queasily, the skull that has become his signature prop. He allows himself to wonder aloud, with new equanimity, what has become of the body of the ancient emperor Alexander, whose dust may even now be used to "stop a beer barrel" (5.1.194). "'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so" (5.1.188), advises the philosophic Horatio, who is discomfited by this train of thought. But Hamlet clearly finds a kind of peace in the idea.

For four acts Hamlet has tried to keep himself apart and has cherished his singularity. Even the verse from Genesis, "man and wife is one flesh" (4.3.49–50), has given him pain, for it recalls him to his part in the play's tangled family romance. But now it is as though he has overleaped all the broken relations that so dismayed him. On the other side of family, state, and custom—mere custom—is our true commonality, our deepest bond, the fact that all of us will die and that our bodies will be food for worms. Such tortuous compounds as "uncle-father and aunt-mother" (2.2.309–310) lose their sting if fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters resolve themselves into the same dust. When Hamlet stands by the grave of Ophelia, and then in the grave of Ophelia, all of the agonies anatomized by those tenacious words *part* and *like* are passing away. There are no parts; everything is like, because we are all the same stuff. The poison pearl that will seal his revenge in the next scene is called a "union."

Like, part: these two words haunt the play more surely even than the Ghost. Others might have been enlisted to define the same problems, say *joint*, or *common*. The play is rich enough, moreover, that they cannot begin to touch on all its complexities; every time you hear a word you think you have heard before, then hear it again, you have found another way in. Elsinore is a house with many mansions. We can exit with one more glance back at the problem of its modernity, or its hero's. That modernity may now look like a problem of the first four acts, a problem of the Hamlet who is tortured by his part in a culture, a family, and a play. If his alienation signals the birth of modern consciousness—or, better, if we moderns recognize ourselves in Hamlet as in no literary character before him—we must also confront the fact that that consciousness is born already struggling to be free of itself. Hamlet is desperate to escape Hamlet, perhaps even to escape *Hamlet*. When he finally does so in Act Five, and he sheds that unease and out-of-placeness, he leaves us moderns behind, too.

That does not necessarily mean that Hamlet wants to die—not the way we might fear, at least. It is true that in Act Three he longs to make his “quietus,” stayed only by a dread of that undiscovered country. A certain kind of philosophy—the philosophy of Horatio, perhaps, who is so baffled by the Ghost—insists on this partitioning, the hard logic of “to be, or not to be.” But by the end of the play, this logic has broken down, or at any rate it hardly matters to Hamlet anymore. Alexander the King and Alexander the plug of earth both are; that loam both *is and is not* Alexander. Aristotle’s logic cannot compass this idea. Shakespeare’s language, however, can do it easily enough. The journey to this recognition is one way of thinking about the strange progress we go with Hamlet through the guts of the play that bears his name. He has by the end an uncanny power to stand astride those two worlds, an achieved indifference that we can only wonder at—we who cling with such a singular intensity to the absoluteness of a question that Hamlet, for his part, has outgrown.