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"To Be, or not to Be': The Soliloquy Redefined"

by Bente Videbaek

The Oxford English Dictionary\(^1\) defines “soliloquy” as “An instance of talking to or conversing with oneself, or of uttering one’s thoughts aloud without addressing any person.” Harmon and Holman, in A Handbook to Literature,\(^2\) defines it as " [a] speech delivered while the speaker is alone (solus), calculated to inform the audience of what is passing in the character’s mind." Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be” is an obvious example. As Greenblatt, in Will in the World, describes Shakespeare’s possible mood in relation to the loss of his son Hamnet:

Something deeper [than the Essex rebellion] must have been at work in Shakespeare, then, something powerful enough to call forth the unprecedented representation of tormented inwardness. “To be, or not to be”: as audiences and readers have long instinctively understood, these suicidal thoughts, provoked by the death of a loved one, lie at the heart of Shakespeare’s tragedy. They may well have been at the core of the playwright’s own inward disturbance.\(^3\)

In scholarly works and handbooks, theater lobbies and classrooms, the “To be” speech is discussed, often in isolation from the rest of the play, as a tormented contemplation of suicide and its consequences, and analyzed word by tortured word, often in the process generating fierce discussion over what a particular phrase means. In film, the soliloquy
is almost always presented as Hamlet’s moment to steal the entire screen and shine.[4]

On stage, Hamlet often receives all the light, while Ophelia fades into the murky background. On a thrust stage, in plain daylight, however, Ophelia is visibly there, listening—along with her father and Claudius in hiding—to Hamlet’s every word. I believe we need to re-think this soliloquy in the light of Hamlet’s other soliloquies and the dramatic context in which we find it, and what will emerge is a well-thought-out, calculated, rehearsed, Machiavellian message sent to an anticipated on-stage audience.

Hamlet has seven soliloquy-like passages, one of which even opens with “Now I am alone” (II.ii.527).[5] In five instances, he is undoubtedly alone; in IV.iv, Claudius is praying and unaware of Hamlet’s presence. And then there is “To be,” with Ophelia as an on-stage audience. Hamlet has long been identified as a revenge tragedy.[6]

Contemporary opinion condemned private revenge, the sort where the avenger takes the law into his own hands, as unchristian and amoral. Sir Francis Bacon’s essay “On Revenge” defines it wonderfully:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law, but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over, he is superior, for it is a prince’s part to pardon... This is certain that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate... But in private revenge it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the lives of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.[7]
Public revenge, the acceptable pursuit of justice, takes the offender to court and lets the law pronunce sentence. But what is a man to do when the offender is the king himself, when the king could be conceived as being above the law as God’s anointed representative on earth? A common theme in both Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies is that the avenger becomes what he aims to eradicate.[6] In his pursuit of revenge, he deteriorates morally to a point dangerous to society and cannot be allowed to survive the fifth act. Though audience members, then as well as now, understand and sympathize with his feelings completely, the fabric of civilized society cannot hold if private revenge is encouraged. In this play, we are presented with three avengers, who go about their business in very different manners. Fortinbras seeks public revenge through war for his father’s death and the loss of his land at the hand of Old Hamlet in single combat; is thwarted by Claudius’ diplomacy; channels his troops’ energies into another venue, thus upholding princely honor and his troops’ respect; and is rewarded with the Danish crown at the end. Though his start is a bit problematic, Fortinbras upholds society’s ideal of honor and benefits in the end. Laertes is impetuous (“bold” by Bacon’s definition in “Of Boldness”), changeable, weak, swayable; he does not reflect on which path to take, but forges blindly ahead, accusing Claudius, only to shift his hatred towards Hamlet once Claudius, the father-figure he yearns for, prods him a little and makes him devious; and he ends up dead after attempting private revenge through underhanded means. Hamlet is ordered by a most unsympathetic ghost to do deeds
that would damn his Christian soul, but as he is capable of reflection, he manages to create a courtroom-like situation in V.ii, where he acts as Claudius’ judge and jury before witnesses; curiously, the prompt to this act of revenge is not the command of the ghost, but the death of his mother. Thus, Fortinbras develops into the example we should follow, Laertes into what we should avoid, and Hamlet into a most complicated character, both condemnable because of the murders and atrocities he commits to achieve his revenge, but also redeemable because, in the eleventh hour, he turns to a most unorthodox form of public revenge.

Throughout the play Hamlet matures with Machiavelli’s brilliant student Claudius as his teacher. Claudius’ address to the court (I.ii) shows us a virtuoso, playing the court like a fine-tuned instrument, getting around all possible obstacles through seeming openness and frankness. The blame for the incestuous marriage is shared with the entire court (14–16), the Norwegian problem tackled openly through diplomacy, covertly through preparations for war, and Polonius’ right to govern his own family is respected as a matter of course. On first acquaintance, Claudius appears the perfect ruler. Hamlet’s reaction to his situation in the new court is the tormented “Oh that this too, too sullied flesh would melt” soliloquy (I.ii.129–159). Of them all, this is the truly suicidal speech. Hamlet’s thoughts are disjointed, leaping from subject to subject, interrupted by exclamations, and giving the listener an impression his of utter helplessness and lack of comprehension for his new situation. He, like most children,
saw his parents’ marriage as ideal and happy, his father as a model husband, his mother as a loving and devoted wife. This world picture has been shattered, especially by his mother’s choice of a new husband. Marrying one’s brother’s widow was considered incest by the church,[10] and this is an added burden on the son, who sees no possible course of action and is close to despair; as he has not yet met the ghost, there is, thus far, no specific cause for revenge, and he cannot overthrow his mother’s marriage, no matter how much her choices disturb and disgust him. Typically, modern editors give this and several other soliloquies a plethora of dashes, while none are found in “To be.”

When the Ghost, a talented manipulator himself, points Hamlet at Claudius, Hamlet begins to study to become a Machiavellian politician in his own right. In I.v, we find another short speech, “O all you host of Heaven…” (I.v.90–110), even more passionately disjointed than the first. The ghost has honed and pointed Hamlet like a weapon, and Hamlet is more than willing to abandon all other pursuits and dedicate himself to revenge. His speech is incoherent, he is incapable of maintaining a sustained train of thought, and all he can manage is swearing allegiance to his father’s spirit and disparaging his mother and uncle. Then he begins, in his own fashion, to act, first of all covering his bases with his companions. His oath-swaterring, with Horatio and the Watchmen, is manic in tone, moved by the same urge that drives the second soliloquy.
We see the result of his first political action in II.i, where Ophelia reports to her father about Hamlet’s visit to her closet. Her description of his disheveled appearance and mesmerized stare calls to mind Rosalind-as-Ganymede’s scorn for Orlando’s purported love.[11] Everybody in Shakespeare’s audience knew what a rejected lover should look like, and Hamlet dresses the part. We know from his contemplation of the “antic disposition” that he has deviousness in mind, and now he sharpens his teeth on the weakest victim he can find: Ophelia. As Hamlet must have predicted, she immediately reports to Polonius, who, in his capacity as advisor, will go straight to Claudius—and indeed he does so. The idea of the madness that is love-melancholia has been planted and is beginning to establish itself.[12]

Hamlet, I argue, knows he is living in a veritable fishbowl. As he is reminded by both Gertrude and Claudius in I.ii, he is a prince, a public figure, and as such it is his duty to control his personal grief and present a polished surface. At the time of the next soliloquy, in II.ii, he knows he is observed by Ophelia and Polonius—who draws in Claudius and probably the Queen—and also by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His behavior at court when we first meet him, his appearance in Ophelia’s chamber, and his exposure of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as spies, all have focused worried attention upon his person. Hamlet seizes the opportunity provided by his old friends to plant another madness-seed with the King, that of almost-despair (239–251, 293–308).
After Player 1’s delivery of the Hecuba speech, Hamlet has his third tormented soliloquy, “Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I” (II.ii.528–584). Hamlet’s unfulfilled obligation to the Ghost tortures him. An actor’s artificial passion seems greater and more actively engaged than Hamlet’s “true” passion, and yet he cannot act. As Newell points out,[13] the actor-as-artist is quite another thing than the actor-as-private-person, so when Hamlet asks, “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?” his self-accusation clouds his judgment; he is “confusing the relationship between life and the art of acting” (Newell 62). Hamlet is putting on excellent performances himself,[14] but here he is suffering from a guilt too familiar to most of us who are children of parents, that of not being able to meet parental expectation. He is blaming himself passionately and mercilessly for cowardice and inaction. This morphs into a planning stage, where we see Hamlet think on his feet; we even hear the contemplative “Hum” (584). With the actors, Hamlet has already broached the idea of inserting provocative material into the “Gonzago” play, and here we begin to see him trying to define what exactly the addition will be. In Thomas Heywood’s “An Apology for Actors”[15] can be found a report of a confession made by a woman, who saw a play in which was shown murder by driving a nail through a sleeping man’s skull. She had herself murdered her husband in this fashion twelve years earlier, and her conscience drove her to confession shortly after she saw the play. She was consequently condemned to death and burned. Thus Heywood strives to prove
the moral and purging nature of performance, and it seems Hamlet believes in this. Hamlet ends the soliloquy with purpose, determined to act, and also to find out whether the Ghost is indeed his father’s spirit or a devil—but foremost in his mind is his Machiavellian determination to “catch the conscience of the King” (601).

So Hamlet, now, is both the watched and the watcher, very much aware of the Machiavellian court environment of spying, reporting, true and false message-flashes sent, received, reacted to, and acted upon. He also knows his Ophelia, who, albeit unwillingly, maybe, as a product of her society and upbringing, is her father’s creature; so when he sees her walking up and down with her prayer-book in III.i,[10] time has come to send another message to Claudius and/or the hidden watchers in the wings. We often forget, in directing and in film especially, as well as when reading, that Hamlet first appears to us in open court, and that no communication between him and his mother, him and Claudius, is private. As prince, courtier, and developing Machiavellian, the maturing Hamlet knows that there is no such thing as “Now I am alone” anymore; the proverbial walls have proverbial ears. Seeing Ophelia, which Hamlet is bound to do—after all, that is her mission, and at this point he is primed to draw conclusions—he delivers his speech directed at all comers, visible and invisible. This is the first “soliloquy” that is structured, ordered, progressing logically, without immediate passion.
Alex Newell sees “To be” as all structure, all reason:[17]

The academic method and style of the speech carries the stamp of Hamlet’s identity as a student, formally posing a “question” or topic for debate. The form is significant because, in its resemblance to a strictly intellectual exercise, it highlights the mind engaged in the process of reasoning and implicitly affirms the value of rationality as the basis of action. (Newell 75)

He sees the speech as not suicidal to the exclusion of all other concerns (79), and views it in dramatic context with what precedes, planning the “Mousetrap,” and what follows, the play-within. Francesca Bugliani[18] identifies the book Hamlet may or may not be carrying on stage for this speech as Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations, particularly Socrates’ speech concerning suicide,[19] analyzing “To be” as a dialog between rationality and passion. I agree wholeheartedly with the respect these scholars have for Hamlet’s intellect and rationality; I do not, however, believe they take the concept far enough. The Mediaeval idea of the Great Chain of Being was still very much alive in the fifteenth and sixteenth century mindset.[20] Man is connected to God and the angels at the top of the Chain through his immortal soul, but distinguished from angels by his mortality; his God-given power of reason separates him from the beasts, the links below, but his nature allows for him to forsake reason and give in to passion if he is not careful to stay in balance. Hamlet himself often compares himself and others to beasts when he sees reason slipping.[21] What prompts human beings to take leave of reason is most often violent passion such as love/lust and choler, which causes an imbalance in the four humors and forces us away from reasonable balance and into beastlike
In Wittenberg, Hamlet has studied rhetoric and logic and mastered the art of disputation, which is so evident in “To be.” But why would the Prince, who is motivated to act in the safest way he knows for his soul’s salvation, be contemplating suicide? It makes little dramatic sense in the context of his excitement over the plan to test the validity of the Ghost and the Mousetrap to come. It also makes little sense that a speech on suicide should be that reasonable, orderly, and logical.

As mentioned, Hamlet has attempted to establish the idea that he is “mad for love”; here he suggests another reason for his madness, the “antic disposition” he wishes the court to believe in: this time the fear that induces the kind of melancholia we would call depression today. Analyzing from the Hamlet we have come to know in soliloquies, this rational, deliberately composed speech is a fabrication intended for consumption. In the light of the popularity of the Tusculan Disputations and related topos, how original is the material in the “To be” soliloquy actually? Hamlet has shown himself capable of unoriginal thought before, in the Petrarch-inspired love-poem to Ophelia, which Polonius reads to the royal couple.

This interpretation does not make less of “To be,” which is, indeed, beautiful and thought-provoking, both in language and content; but it is even more inspired if seen also as a brilliant attempt at Machiavellian deception of the ears in the walls. Hamlet even manages to deny the existence of the Ghost, should any of his companions on the
ramparts have talked (“The undiscovered country, from whose bourne / No traveller returns...” (III.i.79–80)). Hamlet is performing here, as he was before the court in I.ii, and before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in II.ii; his intended audience: Ophelia and three more people, Claudius, Polonius, and Gertrude. His intended message: I am mad enough to consider suicide, but maybe not mad with love. Unfortunately for Hamlet, Claudius will be shrewd enough to see through the entire fabrication, now also the “love-melancholia” ploy.

Ophelia must remain on stage after Polonius prompts and directs her: “Ophelia, walk you here.—Gracious, so please you / ... Read on this book, / That show of such an exercise may colour / Your loneliness” (III.i.43–46).[25] Shakespeare’s stage was large, but not large enough to conceal an actor who has not signaled to us that he or she is invisible.[26] Ophelia’s father has deliberately “loose[d]” his daughter to Hamlet (II.ii.162; the word carries the connotation of breeding in animal husbandry), and she knows she is expected to have Hamlet notice her and interact with her. Hamlet has used her once already to disseminate a message of insanity, and as he sees her, suspicion must arise; her father should be somewhere within earshot, at least within reach. The speech he delivers sends a deliberate message to her, suing for her pity for his plight. If Polonius is not there already, listening, he will deliver the message to Claudius, once again, as soon as she relays it to him. “To be” contains all possible causes of discontent for Hamlet. There are “the whips and scorns of time” (III.i.70), an allusion to ill-
treatment, as is “[t]h’oppressor’s wrong,” referring to Claudius’ wrongful accession to
the throne, continuing with “the proud man’s contumely” (71). “The pangs of
dispriz’d love” (72) must strike Ophelia especially hard, but also dig at Gertrude,
should she be present. The soliloquy itself has barbs imbedded in it, directed at every
possible hidden audience member.

This intended audience becomes even clearer to us as Hamlet further interacts
with Ophelia. Most, if not all, productions I have seen let Hamlet’s “Soft you now, / The
fair Ophelia!” (88–89) be directed at the audience, the obvious listeners to a soliloquy on
the thrust stage, but these words might as well be part of his Machiavellian plan; she is
listening, let her be misled further. “Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins
remembered” (89-90) can be light and familiar in tone. This will speak to her feelings
and draw her out, so she is all the more vulnerable when Hamlet lashes into her and the
hidden audience. The make-up references (144 ff.) are clearly for Gertrude, no longer in
her prime, as are the “[nicknamings]” of God’s creatures; the “all who are married—
extcept one” (149 ff.) is, naturally, for Claudius, and, of course, the “Where’s your
father?” (130 ff.) is for Polonius. Every possible eavesdropper has been targeted in the
spots where Hamlet feels he or she is most vulnerable: incest, pretending to youthful
lust, and stupidity.
The “To be” speech has primed Ophelia for sympathy and made her susceptible, thus shaping a perfect tool for what Hamlet has in mind. Directors have often made Hamlet more or less Ophelia-dependent. I see him as using her to get his message across, and using her only, which makes her description of him as a Renaissance-man and lover (III.i.148–159) all the more poignant, and prepares the audience for her impending madness and possible suicide. She, clearly, believes every word Hamlet says and every mad act he performs, and consequently her commitment to her father is sorely tested in this scene. Her choice to obey him was made in I.iii, and here Polonius sacrifices her on the altar of loyalty to his king. Still, as Claudius states, “Love? His affections do not that way tend, / Nor what he spake, though it lack’d form a little / Was not like madness” (164–166). The immature Machiavellian has succeeded only in arousing the suspicions of the seasoned one.

The Hamlet opening III.ii is not a dejected and deprived lover, nor is he on a suicidal path. We often see Hamlet accused of inaction, but we tend to forget the many times he does act, only not decisively, and not killing Claudius. The beginning of the third act shows us a man busy and intent on perfecting the players as he sees fit, so his “Mousetrap” performance will be perfect. Whether or not Claudius sees the dumb show preceding the play-within is another debatable point; I believe that he does, and that he uses the information he gleans to blame Hamlet’s disruptive behavior for the interruption of the Gonzago play. Alvin Kernan, in Shakespeare, the King’s
Playwright,\textsuperscript{[29]} gives sketches to illustrate the set-up of the Great Hall at Hampton Court and Christ Church Hall in Oxford, used by King James I for theatrical performances before the court. In both cases, the king’s state is prominently placed and elevated, visible to all spectators in the hall at all times. The monarch is used to being scrutinized and never being private. Claudius is accustomed to navigating similar court life and would not be caught by a ploy as simple as Hamlet’s, given the warning of the dumb show. Hamlet’s impatience with the slow workings of his own plot, his excitement, and the manic interruption of the Gonzago performance, all give Claudius reason to terminate the play, ostensibly to spare the royal family further embarrassment.\textsuperscript{[30]} Hamlet is convinced of victory and in spirits so high as to be outrageous. Horatio’s cool reply to him,

\begin{quote}
Ham. O good Horatio, I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?
Hor. Very well, my lord.
Ham. Upon the talk of the poisoning?
Hor. I did very well note him. (III.ii.280–284)
\end{quote}

does not pinpoint any guilt on Claudius; it can be seen as an attempt to calm his friend’s exhilaration. Nowhere in III.ii does Hamlet signal suicidal thoughts; rather, he feels that he is acting and accomplishing something. This impression is underscored by the soliloquy ending the act (379–390), easily the most bloodthirsty and stereotypical avenger’s speech we hear from Hamlet.
That Claudius does feel guilt, but no true remorse, we learn in III.iii, where Hamlet has his penultimate soliloquy, “Now might I do it pat” (73–96). We are, again, far from the structured progression of “To be,” and back to passionate debate and exclamations, invective (as in I.v and II.ii), and words instead of action. Hamlet’s is a universe infused with Christian ethics, and the idea of Heaven and Hell and the fate of Claudius’ soul is Hamlet’s excuse for not killing him here. His frenzy and excitement, carried over from the Mousetrap scene, sustain him for a line and a half only, then deliberation sets in. Hamlet makes time for himself to think, which always stops him from violent action. There is no hesitation, because no time to ponder, when he kills Polonius in the next scene, nor when he boards the pirate ship on his way to England, as reported in his letter to Horatio in IV.vi. Again, we see no indication of suicidal thoughts. This soliloquy can be read as the callous deliberations of a traditional avenger in a tragedy of blood, a stark contrast to Claudius’ ruminations about guilt and repentance, an oddly moving speech which resembles “To be” in its organized structure. Newell observes:

In a brilliant stroke of dramaturgy, Shakespeare’s sets up a tensely dramatic juxtaposition of soliloquy with soliloquy and of soliloquy (3.3.73–96) with stage image that gives the sharpest possible focus to the two disparate moralities on exhibit in the play, with Hamlet caught between them, as seen from his opening lines... In Christian context, the desire to damn Claudius eternally is a far more terrible revenge than taking his life. (119, 124)
This soliloquy is a preview of the Hamlet who returns from England and calmly says of Rosencrantz’ and Guildenstern’s deaths: “… [T]hey did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience” (V.ii.56–57) and “[A] man’s life’s no more than to say ‘one’” (74).

In IV.iv we see Hamlet soliloquize for the last time.[31] “How all occasions do inform against me” (32–66) is less passionate and more logically constructed than most others, but still nowhere near as tightly put together as “To be.” Hamlet has been developing from the utterly lost son always in the public eye, in I.ii, over the performance of “To be” and the cold cruelty of “Now might I do it pat,” to a man who ponders society’s choice of “the right decision.” He is still upset with his lack of ability to act, he, who has ample motive—and now he is on his way to England, further removed from revenge than ever. Fortinbras has no other motive for invading Poland than the need to channel the energies of his army; honor demands it. Hamlet compares his own inaction to Fortinbras’ action, and finds himself downright dishonorable and unworthy. This soliloquy is absent from the First Folio, the “bible” for many critics; it is, however, an important addition.

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. (IV.v.53–56)
These lines give us an insight into what Hamlet perceives as his duty, a duty he is unable to fulfill. A great man, here Fortinbras, whom Hamlet admires for his excellence though the two never meet, does not shirk his duty to act, just because the grounds for action may seem insufficient. Fortinbras marches to Poland, his Captain knows and accepts the futility of the quest, but also the necessity for it, and Hamlet is left to ponder his own inaction and deficiency yet again.

This is the last of Hamlet’s moments with the audience. The resolution in the two closing lines, “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (65–66) may be what is behind spurring him on to surreptitiously murder Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by proxy. The last third of the play has no soliloquies. Shakespeare uses the means of the soliloquy as a device to bring the character and the audience closer together. It is difficult to resist the appeal of a character who communicates directly, whether it is the “bad boy” lure of Richard III or the tortured soul of Hamlet that barrages us. Once characters who have been wooing our feelings in soliloquy stop doing so, audience alienation sets in. When we have heard nothing more from Hamlet before Act V, we are ready to look at him from a distance when he returns from England, and there is much for us to analyze. He is now a calculating killer of his erstwhile friends; the Gravedigger’s student of death and decay—and able to joke about it to boot; Laertes’ bane at Ophelia’s graveside; and Osric’s tormentor before the genre-appropriate revenge bloodbath in the final scene. Hamlet has become much like
Claudius, and a not unimportant step in this process is the performance he delivers in “To be.” But he has also matured in ways that remove him from Claudius. He is no schemer by nature; his innocent step into Claudius’ final trap demonstrates that. And finally he is calmly willing and able to accept death and mutability as a necessary part of life (V.ii.215–220). In many ways, this Hamlet we are looking at from some distance is a more likable and admirable person than the Hamlet who left for England. Here is maturity, poise, in short, here is the Hamlet Gertrude and Claudius asked for in I.ii, but with owned and earned depth and complexity. Part of this shift may be the complete absence of the Ghost from the last act. Hamlet has finally freed himself of his obligation to his father; only when Laertes and Gertrude expose Claudius, in V.ii, for murder and conspiracy is Hamlet able to act, still without forethought, but able to pursue his revenge to the bitter end. The incest is avenged, his mother’s death is avenged, but not his father’s murder. His most princely and rulerly act is perhaps giving Fortinbras “[his] dying voice” (V.ii.361) and asking Horatio to be his chronicler so the truth may be known and preserved (347–354).

In all but one soliloquy, Hamlet is driven by guilt, berating himself for the actions he is honor-bound to take, but which human decency and insecurity prohibit him from perpetrating, or wishing damnation on Claudius. In all but one, he, Hamlet the man, son, thinker, is actively debating with himself, comparing himself to others, rebuking himself, sometimes in very strong language. That one soliloquy is “To be.”
When we compare Act V’s much more mature Hamlet, helped along on the course of acceptance of his father’s death, decomposition, and ultimate nonexistence, even as bones, by the Gravedigger and Yorik’s skull, we see the blooming of the sometimes Machiavellian seed sown in Ophelia’s closet. This Hamlet can send two men to their deaths, but also ask Laertes’ forgiveness. I see “To be” as a progression along the Machiavellian path of Hamlet-the-avenger before his redemption—not as a soliloquy, but as a deliberately constructed means to an end, intended for an audience other than the paying one. Fortunately, Hamlet, a character it is difficult not to sympathize with, transcends his teachers and dies redeemed.

**Endnotes**

[1] The OED online, an invaluable resource.


[4] Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1990) goes as far as removing the soliloquy from its context and placing it in Old Hamlet’s burial vault, thus stressing the suicidal aspect of the speech. Kenneth Branagh focuses his camera completely on Hamlet (*Hamlet* 2000).
[5] All references to *Hamlet* will come from the Arden Edition of the play, edited by Harold Jenkins, 1982; all other references to Shakespeare will also be from the Arden Edition. The soliloquies are: 1. “O that this too, too sullied flesh…” (I.ii.129–159), where Hamlet is alone in court; 2. “O all you host of Heaven…” (I.v.92–112), where Hamlet is alone, just left by the Ghost; 3. “Now I am alone. / O what a rogue and peasant slave…” (II.ii.543–601), where Hamlet is alone, just after Player 1’s Hecuba demonstration; 4. “To be, or not to be” (III.i.56–88), when Ophelia is deliberately placed on stage by her father as Hamlet-bait; 5. “‘Tis now the very witching time of night” (III.ii.379–390), where Hamlet, still highly emotional after the “Mousetrap,” is sent to his mother; 6. “Now might I do it pat…” (III.iii.73–96) where Hamlet is with Claudius, who is preoccupied with his unsuccessful prayer; and 7. “How all occasions do inform against me…” (IV.iv.32–66) where Hamlet is alone after speaking with Fortinbras’ Captain. Alex Newell, in *The Soliloquies in Hamlet: The Structural Design*, London and Toronto: Farleigh Dickinson U.P., 1991, even adds I.ii.255–258 (“My father’s spirit—in arms!”) to his list of soliloquies.


[10] See, e.g., the table from William Clerke’s *The Triall of Bastardie*, London 1594, qtd. in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 1997. Henry VIII’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon was not too distant in time; Henry claimed incest and the toll it took on his soul as an argument for the divorce, as Catherine was his brother’s widow; the Pope refused permission.

[11] “A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken, which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not; a beard neglected, which you have not… Then your hose should be ungartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your shoe untied, and everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation…” (AYLI III.ii.363–371).

[12] We know from the many contemporary editions it went through that Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was a popular text; various signs of an imbalance of the humors, such as love-melancholia or melancholia bred out of envy or fear, would be instantly recognizable by the audience.


[14] By now we have a report of his “performance” before Ophelia in her closet, and we have seen him become the melancholy prince before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; his Pyrrhus-speech, however, may reveal a questionable taste in drama.

Puritan claim that theater is immoral and ungodly; the material discussed can be found on p. 246.

[16] In Lawrence Olivier’s film version of *Hamlet*, her prayer-book is turned upside down in her hands, and Hamlet’s suspicion arises the moment he notes this. Delightful though this moment is, the realization, in my interpretation, is in place before the scene begins.

[17] Newell entitles Chapter 3, his chapter on “To be,” “Discourse of Reason.”


[19] Socrates debates whether life is preferable to death. As Bugliani points out, this work was well known to readers of the period and “would have been immediately recognizable to Shakespeare’s audience” (p. 17); moreover, this topos was to be found in school books and works, in Latin and in translation.


[21] To mention just a few examples, in I.ii.150, Gertrude is compared to “a beast that wants discourse of reason; in II.ii.303–309, Hamlet defines man through rational qualities; III.iv.65–67, 70–76, where Gertrude is accused of lack of reason and judgment in marrying Claudius; and IV.iv 33–39, where Hamlet again debates reason and passion.

[22] The Greeks were the first to theorize that a person’s health depends on a balance of four humors within the body; these are blood, black bile, phlegm, and choler.
Mediaeval medicine embraced this theory, which is still very much in evidence in the Renaissance. Each humor was linked to an organ of the body, had its corresponding element, and possessed two of the four qualities, dry, cold, moist, and hot. Blood was created in the heart, was hot and moist, and corresponded to water; an excess caused amorousness. Black bile was created in the spleen, was cold and dry, and corresponded to earth; an excess produces melancholia. Phlegm was created in the brain, was cold and moist, and corresponded to air; an excess prompted phlegmatism. Choler was created in the liver, was hot and dry, and corresponded to fire; an excess caused hot temper, be it lust, anger, or rashness. Illness was attributed to an imbalance of humors, and could often be observed in a change of complexion or personality.

[23] I have caused much havoc in classes, especially among graduate students, by calling this speech “Hamlet’s Philosophy 101 A+ essay.”

[24] Hamlet’s taste in theater seems questionable too; the Pyrrhus speech (II.i.446–514) is far from the kind of drama Shakespeare gave his audience, and as a dramatic speech it is in stark contrast to the following soliloquy; few, I expect, will disagree with Polonius’ “This is too long” (494). Derek Jacobi’s interpretation in the BBC Hamlet, 1980, is delightfully in accord with my views.

[25] “Gracious” has been seen as a vocative (Harold Jenkins, e.g.), directed at Claudius or Gertrude. It can, however, also be a direction to Ophelia, meaning: 1. luxurious and elegant, i.e., seductive; 2. full of tact and politeness; 3. displaying divine grace. This gives Ophelia a range of options, reaching from what Hamlet later makes of it to the praying maiden.

[26] Stage convention dictates that this kind of “invisibility” is announced, by the character or by a fellow actor. For example, see A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II.i.186–187
(OBERON: I am invisible; / And I will overhear their conference), and Othello, IV.i.92
(IAGO: …will you withdraw?).

[27] It is stressed several times throughout Hamlet that Denmark is an elective
monarchy, as it is in Saxo Grammaticus’ Gesta Danorum, narrating the history of
Amleth, the original source for the play.

[28] Johnson saw it as “grave and solemn,” while Dover Wilson saw it as ironic
(Hamlet, ed. Jenkins, note to III.i.89).

[29] Alvin Kernan, Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright, New Haven and London: Yale
U.P., 1995; see sketches between pages 168 and 169, and discussion in chapters 2 and 10
especially. In all cases, his sketches are based on documents contemporary with the
performances he discusses. There is an intriguing suggestion that the Danish court in
Hamlet could mirror James’ actual royal “state” as set up in the great hall.

Greenwood Press, 1996, chapter 16, for a thorough discussion.

[31] As Newell points out, this soliloquy is absent from the Folio and Quarto 1; it is
included in Quarto 2.


[33] Machiavelli advises: “… we can draw… a notable lesson: princes should delegate
unpleasant jobs to other people and reserve the pleasant functions for themselves”
(Prince 52), a piece of advice which Claudius has heeded throughout the play, but
which Hamlet is now learning.
[34] When Richard stops addressing us, we begin to see how lucky we were not to stay “bosom buddies” with him, and we truly thank our stars when Buckingham is executed.