

Hamlet and the Verb "To Be"

By Julian Scutts

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be made? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in real life they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

Matthew Arnold, Preface to 1853 Edition of Poems

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A Synopsis:

This essay compares two passages in which the verb "to be" invites particular attention, in Act I, Sc. II and Act III Sc. I. In one of these the word "be" already enjoys no small measure of attention throughout the world. The appearance of the same word in Act 1, Scene II seems to have slipped critical attention. I will argue that both passages in question throw light on each other, and when viewed in their respective contexts prove to be centred on two contrasts inhering in Shakespeare's use of the word "be", that of being and seeming and that of being and not being. Together they reflect the fact that Hamlet is a drama rooted in questions of ontology, the nature of being, rather than in an interplay of actions. Verbs in literary texts receive relatively attention, perhaps because they tend to submerge themselves in the onward process of sentence construction, and "to be" is perhaps one of the least obtrusive and most inconspicuous verbs of all. When then should it deserve our special attention in Hamlet?

Disparaged but undeniably great

Hamlet has certainly incurred its fair share of adverse criticism, notably from Voltaire, Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot, but in one regard the play marks an unchallengeable achievement. Few other literary works have enriched the English language with such succinct and proverbial phrases as Hamlet has done. Probably most people, when saying "You have to be cruel to be kind", "there's method in his or her madness", "more in sorrow than in anger", "there are heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy", are not making any conscious allusion to passages in Hamlet, but in the case of one quotation they probably are, namely: "To be or not to be, that is the question".

Being and doing

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Hamlet fails to do because of what he is. By contrast, in Shakespeare's most recent literary source for Hamlet, Thomas Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet*, a play we can only reconstruct on the basis of secondary evidence, the protagonist's delay in taking decisive action is dictated by circumstances and tactics, not his own psychological inhibitions or moral misgivings. In Shakespeare's Hamlet the one pivotal and decisive action of the play, the killing of Polonius, is a gross and absurd blunder (indeed, there is the view that Hamlet anticipates the Theatre of the Absurd in significant ways). Polonius's death marks Hamlet's departure from his careful experimental mode of operation as typified by his staging of "The Mousetrap" indication, perhaps, that the real world offers no laboratory conditions for the resolution of all human problems. Indeed, the incongruous relationship between the actions and the inward character of Hamlet provoked Eliot's famous assertion that in Hamlet Shakespeare failed to establish an "objective correlative" revealing how Hamlet's emotions might find their adequate and precise expression in actions and events. Endorsing the opinion of another critic (J. N. Robertson), Eliot argued in his essay "Hamlet and his Problems" in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) that Shakespeare's alleged failure partly the "intractable" nature of the material provided by his sources with its motif of revenge, its ghost and "its despicable intrigues".

Perhaps Eliot did not take full account of one very important difference distinguishing Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet* (and closely associated with it *The Spanish Tragedy*) from Shakespeare's drama, for the Bard inverted the roles of father and son in making it Hamlet's goal to avenge his father, while in Thomas Kyd's play a father avenges his son. In fact, Shakespeare partially returned to the plot laid down by the original Danish story of Hamlet, likewise a son who avenges his father. This inversion or return to source entails an orientation to the future, the expectation of progress, if not a guarantee of its full achievement. At one level Hamlet revolves around the thwarting of a normal smooth transfer from one generation to the next. A reflection of England's looming dynastic crisis? Be that as it may, in Hamlet we witness the interpenetration of two historical planes with one reflecting the transition from paganism (with its ethos of revenge) to Christianity (with its ethos of forgiveness) while the other reflects the transition from medieval society to modern secularism. Perhaps this density of associations offers the main reason why Hamlet has been seen so variously as the champion of conflicting beliefs and ideologies, whether as a Catholic, a Puritan or modern agnostic. In fact, all these elements intermingle in Hamlet's character making him a prototype of the distraught Romantic hero and today's "crazy mixed up kid".

Individual words and the light they shed on the works to which they belong

Amid all the debate and contrary opinions that surround Hamlet I wish to adopt a logocentric approach to Hamlet which involves a consideration of particular words in this literary text. I feel no better point of departure is offered by these words:

To be or not to be, that is the question

Do these words pose a memorable yet isolated expression, or do they point to something of essential importance to the dramatic work in which they found? The same underlying question concerns not only words found in Hamlet but those in all works of literature, a point made clearly by the Russian Formalist Yuriy Tynjanov in an article bearing the translated title of "The Meaning of the Word in Verse". (1) The very formulation of "the Word" arguably betrays the Russian linguist's indebtedness to scriptural precedents such as those laid by the opening of St John's Gospel or in Rabbinic principles of Biblical interpretation, for Tynjanov enhances de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* by contrasting the specific reference of a word in terms of its immediate context with its universal aspect as part of a totality created by all words of like meaning and appearance. A poet's puns or play on words produce much more than the jocular effects of puns in nonliterary language but point to a connection between the specific context-related significance of a word and its universal aspect. For Tynjanov a word derives significance from more than the context supplied by the sentence or passage to which it belongs but also from other wider contexts, including that of the entire work of which it is a part, that of the author's entire literary output, that of his or her historical situation and finally that of its being subsumed by "the word" as Tynjanov defined it in its widest, its universal sense.

Reflections on the verb *to be*

Can one *to be* consider in the light of Tynjanov's theory of the word? As many a teacher of language will know, *to be* is in some ways the most problematic, irregular and infuriating of verbs. With other verbs, at least, the infinitive signals the formal unity of its various forms and manifestations irrespective of tense or declination. *Be* as a word occurs only in the infinitive, the imperative and subjunctive categories. Second, while verbs generally denote some form of action, *to be* denotes a state of existence with no necessary reference to any action at all. Some languages can apparently dispense with the verb altogether. In certain ways it poses an obvious antithesis of *to do* and it is only in the imperative that *be* is dependent on *do*. This contrast finds a parallel in the basic issue that confronts us in Hamlet.

The very ubiquity to the verb *to be* in all its various forms renders it virtually featureless and inconspicuous in all but the most exceptional cases, the line *To be or not to be* posing one of them. Let us, however, consider another case where *be* deserves attention. It occurs early in the play in a scene placed at a juncture before Hamlet meets his father's ghost.

If it be

The following reference to the text of the play in Act I, Scene II reveals Shakespeare's interest in the verb *to be*, containing as it does a contrast between being and seeming, essence and appearance Act I, Scene II

Queen: *Alas!*

Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,

Passing through life to eternity.

Hamlet: Ay. Madam. It is common.

Queen: If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

Hamlet: Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not *seems*.

The appearance of the word *be* in the words of Gertrude quoted above has nothing of the resounding effect of *be* at the beginning of Hamlet's famed soliloquy. Even so, in his reply to his mother Hamlet pounces on Gertrude's choice of verbs changing the form of the verb *to be* from the diffident subjunctive to the bold indicative, which he then juxtaposes with *seems*. The use of quotation marks in this case draws attention to words as individual bits of language rather than on the information conveyed by words when assuming their usual subservient role. In treating *seems* as a noun and thus deviating from the rules of grammar, the author again makes us aware of the mechanics of language which we constantly use without reflecting on them. Hamlet proceeds to expatiate on the difference between what is and what seems – between Schein and Sein - in the lines quoted below:

It is not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Not customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, not the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected "haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. : these indeed seem.
They are all actions that a man might play :
But I have that within which passeth show.

Hamlet in Act I scene II evinces all the main traits of character that later come to the fore and manifests his basic attitudes to the world. These will undergo little qualitative change, even after he has cause to wrestle with the possibility that Claudius has killed his father. We find in this scene anticipations of what will more fully emerge in great soliloquy in Act III, Sc. I. In Act I Sc. II he already contemplates suicide while expressing countervailing fears instilled by religious teaching when saying in the soliloquy that ends this scene:

Oh, that this too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
Oh that the Everlasting had not fixâ€™t
His canon "gainst self-slaughter. ..

These lines together with inferences we can make from the special permission required for Opheliaâ€™s burial suggest that Shakespeare was somewhat preoccupied with the issue of suicide at the time of writing Hamlet. Speculations about the author apart, Hamlet questions even before his encounter with the ghost whether life has any true meaning. The profundity of his underlying pessimism is temporarily occluded by his situation as a son mourning his fatherâ€™s death, but Claudius and his mother shrewdly note that he exceeds the limits of filial piety normally demanded by decorum. Claudiusâ€™s objection that even mourning a parentâ€™s death can become obsessive and eventually exceed a socially acceptable limit comes over as sagacious and temperate advice should we disregard his personal vested interest in raising it. As his exclamation "Frailty, thy name is woman !â€¦ makes abundantly clear, Hamlet has already developed a strong antipathy to womankind, which augurs ill for any future relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The reason is clear. What most galls him at this stage, as later, is the unseemly haste in which his mother has entered into marriage with Claudius, his fatherâ€™s brother, a marriage he decries as "incestuous", the same word the ghost will also employ in due course. His invective seems to combine his own sense of disgust with a defence of the Churchâ€™s laws on marriage. Talk of "incest" immediately recalls the Freudian Oedipus complex.

Hamletâ€™s killing of Polonius occurs significantly enough in his motherâ€™s bedchamber and a reference he makes to Nero points to his fear of becoming an unwilling matricide. This reference finds an odd parallel on the occasion when Hamlet hails Polonius as Jephthah, the biblical judge who kills his next of kin, in that case his own daughter. Few other plays outside Hamlet show how people advertently or inadvertently bring death and harm to their nearest and dearest, whether son, mother, sweetheart, uncle, niece or prospective brother-in-law, a fact which seems to symbolize the interdependence and inextricability of human relationships and hence the impossibility of surgically clean assassinations. One of the more laudable motives that inhibits Hamlet from killing Claudius stems from this recognition. On the philosophical level Hamlet fears committing himself to action because the consequences of deeds are unpredictable and

may well become the agents of evil. It will also be interesting to take some account of C. G. Jung's variant understanding of the Oedipus complex, which he, more emphatically than Freud, uncovered in that stage in cultural development when great heroes like Ulysses and Hercules were identified as human embodiments of the sun on its course through day and night. According to Jung the male libido seeks its source and future goal in embodiments of the female anima, which in line with the logic of Jung's main argument conflates mother and bride. Jung saw art as a possibility of evading the logic implied by this dread of incest, a possibility afforded by the artist's exercise of boundless creativity in the media of sound, word and physical substances and in imaginative powers of sublimation. Hamlet's prevarications stave off death until the play's cataclysmic end with a commensurate extension of the scope given to the development and articulation of words. As we know from *The Thousand and One Nights* verbalizing can be a very effective way of stalling. Besides, deferred action heightens interest in psychological and mental tensions.

What a difference a ghost makes

The entrance of the ghost occurring at a juncture set between the passages under consideration does not induce a fundamentally new attitude in Hamlet but at most serves as a catalyst effecting an acceleration of already existing trends. The ghost makes Hamlet aware of the possibility that his father was killed by his own brother, but is a supernatural agent necessary as the only way of pointing to such a possibility? On the strength of circumstantial evidence alone Hamlet has reason enough to suspect his uncle of being responsible for his father's death. The evidence provided by a ghost was in any case suspect according to the tenets of Christian doctrine. The question as to whether the devil could assume the appearance of innocent mortals was a contentious issue that was still being hotly debated at the time of the notorious witch trials in Salem Massachusetts. Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost leads to no resolution of Hamlet's . It intensifies already extant emotions and tensions to the point of making him even less capable of reasoned action. The experience of encountering a supernatural being serves only to produce feelings of headiness and frenzy of the kind that has induced many a disoriented and distracted young person to commit extra-judicial executions in the name of a higher authority. Making decisions is difficult enough when one has this world's parameters to contend with without having to worry about otherworldly dimensions. Hamlet's fear that the ghost might pose a malign influence, a centre of contagion, is not to be dismissed lightly in view of subsequent events culminating in the play's final massacre.

To be or not to be

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Hamlet's unresolved state of mind that follows his encounter with the ghost is mirrored in the second passage in which the verb 'to be' is foregrounded. The celebrated soliloquy confirms what we have been able to infer from Hamlet's utterances in Act 1, Scene II. He is not an assured believer in the promise of eternal life according to the Christian creed though he nurtures lingering fears about the possible suffering of a departed soul in purgatory or hell.

But is the soliloquy exclusively concerned with the question of the soul's survival after death? The words 'To be or not to be' cannot be adequately paraphrased by 'to live on or not to live on'. The initial prompt for the soliloquy is instigated by Hamlet's act of contemplating suicide, but beyond this point the soliloquy makes little reference to Hamlet's personal situation but rather expands into a general discussion of the ills attending the condition humaine .

Viewed in a linguistic or grammatical light, "To be or not to be" poses a striking use of the infinitive which in subsequent lines recurs in "to die", "to sleep", and "to dream", creating the effect of an algebraic formula devised to disclose in terms of the known. However, as Hamlet himself admits, his linguistic-analytical approach to comprehending non-existence must ultimately prove inconclusive as a human being can never directly confront death in his or her mind without dying in the process, only the thought of death or images for death derived from the mind of a living person. Thus Hamlet tests the very limits of thought and its principal vehicle, language, particularly language that relies on the use of metaphors. Here the verb "to be" plays a central role, for in the processing of creating a metaphor we elucidate the nature of the object of comparison by associating it with something other than itself. Put simply, a metaphor arises when you say that something is what it is not. Rational metaphors such as similes state that one thing, person or entity is like another. However, absolute or mystical metaphors state that one such thing, person, etc is the other without further qualification.

The issues raised by Hamlet's most famed soliloquy are all-pervasive in this play and possibly others written by Shakespeare, being rooted in the spirit of an age in transition, an age when leading minds were increasingly concerned with the nature of metaphors and language. What after, all posed the central point of contention between Protestants and Catholics in Shakespeare's age if not the metaphor contained in the words "This is my body"? The flowering of the theatre in Elizabethan England could be seen as a reaction to the vacuum left by the cessation of medieval church ritual after the introduction of the Reformation. The final scene seems to derive much of its imagery by ironically inverting aspects of the Eucharist with the icons of the table and the cup of wine and by Hamlet's ironic use of the word "union" when ending Claudius's life.

Hamlet and other persons surrounding him question not only the validity of words and their ability to represent truth but all signifiers in the domain of semiotics, of which language is only a part. Perception and memory as representations of reality are not always to be assumed to be reliable, a point already intimated in the first scene when Horatio and Marcellus discuss the sight of the ghost.

Before my God, I might not this believe

Without the sensible and true avouch

Of my own eyes

Horatio to Marcellus Act 1 Sc. 1

The unsettling implications of the Copernican revolution are apparent in Hamlet's protestation of love written on a note to Ophelia:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;

Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love

Letter read to Gertrude by Polonius Act II Sc. II

Indeed the spirit of doubt conjured up in these points anticipates the pose of absolute scepticism adopted by Descartes towards outside reality which found definitive expression in the dictum *Cogito ergo sum*. Shakespeare gave voice to what has become a central Postmodern attitude to the arbitrariness of the sign, most notably in Juliet's words "What's in a name?" A corollary to the arbitrariness of the sign on the philosophical level is the manipulation of the sign on the moral and aesthetic planes. The case of *The Mousetrap* demonstrates the relevance of drama to politics, leading some to conclude that this play within a play recalled the uproar caused by the performance of *Richard II* at the time of the Essex rebellion. The motif of the jester in *Hamlet* epitomized by Hamlet's meditation on a Yorick's skull belies the Prince's declaration that he rejects all actions "that a man might play". In this light we may interpret the deaths of Hamlet and Laertes as a reflection of an inseparable connection between sportive play and the reality it imitates and is normally supposed to harmlessly replace.

To thine own self be true

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This above all ; to thine own self be true.

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Act I Sc. III

Polonius's parting words to Laertes betoken more than a piece of well-meant paternal advice. They are predicated on the age-old philosophical viewpoint that a person's knowledge of the world and all acts stemming from it are profoundly affected by the extent and character of that person's self-knowledge. In philosophical terms, this means steering a middle course between the Scylla of solipsistic isolation and the Charybdis of a belief in the possibility of achieving absolute objectivity detached from morality and self-interest.

In *Hamlet*, such an insight evidently arrives too late to be of much practical assistance to the main players at the end of the drama. On the other hand, approaching death has a remarkable way of concentrating the mind and sharpening awareness of what essentially matters. In *Hamlet* and more obviously in *Romeo and Juliet* it proves not only to be the dreaded universal destroyer but also the reconciler of what cannot be united on this imperfect earth. *Romeo and Juliet* at least points to a beneficial result of death for the surviving society. *Hamlet* and *Laertes* are reconciled at the point of death not simply because they realize that they have fallen victim to *Claudius*'s evil machinations. They acknowledge their mutual affinity as brothers in death. *Gertrude* drinks the poisoned wine despite *Claudius*'s warning not to do so, which makes her dying act a token of a desire to expiate her guilt and declare solidarity with her son, thus, in the terms of *Jung*'s theory of the unconscious, symbolizing the union of the male libido and the female anima. *Horatio* volunteers to kill himself too, but *Hamlet* lays upon him the charge of reporting to others the tragic events he has witnessed, doubtless for the sake of posterity. Someone has to live on to report the tale, as Shakespeare himself well knew. *Fortinbras*'s commentary of "The sight is dismal" on surveying the corpses of members of *Denmark*'s royal house might be taken as evidence of Shakespeare's descent to banality at so solemn a moment in the play, but perhaps *Fortinbras* is reminding us

that death is a banality that in the end overtakes all, the good and the evil, the wise and ignorant, nor can society and physical universe itself defer death's triumph indefinitely, be this the work of Doomsday or the second law of thermodynamics, whether the world ends with a bang or a whimper. At least, in a certain regard, the mind's recognition of the Eternal Now renders it indestructible, leaving it to each individual to decide whether the thought of death degrades or elevates the human spirit.

(1) Jurij Tynjanov, "The Meaning of the Word in Verse", in *Readings in Russian Poetics / Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Mateijka and Krystina Pomorska (Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 1978), pp. 136-145

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