

Shakespearian self-knowledge: the synthesizing imagination and the limits of reason*

WILLIAM R. MORSE

Given the centrality of selfhood and identity to Shakespearian drama, post-structuralist theory's powerful deconstruction of the enunciating subject, the 'I' of Western discourse, must speak immediately and powerfully to our understanding of the plays. But paradoxically the effect of this deconstruction has redounded to Shakespeare's credit: we discover that, writing at the founding moment of our own intellectual epoch, he is there before us in his prescient insight into the implications of the sea-change from analogical to modern analytical discourse. Alive as he is to the presence of both a decaying traditional discourse of analogy and the incipient order of 'a discursive class ... **determined** as true, objective, and the permanent manifestation of universal common sense, [one that] marks a denial, an occultation, of the acknowledgement that the human view of the world is necessarily a "perspectival" one',¹ Shakespeare produces a canon remarkably sensitive to the blind spots and real dangers, both personal and cultural, of the new discourse.

With his own neoplatonic commitment to the human condition of immersion in life and world that produces perspective, to the materiality of language, and above all to metaphor as the basis of language rather than merely its ornament, Shakespeare proves to be himself something of a deconstructionist, and **the key** to this stance is his understanding of the cognitive functions of the imagination. Shakespeare's work reveals, both through the failure of discursive reason in the great tragedies and the invocation of imagination in the comedies, tragedies, and romances, an ongoing and progressively more pointed critique of the limits of this reason in the intellectual life of the individual. For Shakespeare, the world of human rationality encompasses *a* world, not *the* world, for it stands in inevitable distinction from the material reality of human existence. Whether he symbolizes the world of discursive reason by the city of Athens, the prison of Denmark, the court of Henry IV, or the house of Gloucester from which Lear is exiled, that world is always one of concepts, narrower

* A draft of this paper was read at the *Themes in Drama* International Conference held at the University of California, Riverside, in February 1988.

than, and standing at one remove from, the world those concepts purport to embody.

In Shakespeare's plays, the true reality encloses the conceptual one, and whether that reality appears as forest or moor, sea or island, the imagination is the vehicle that takes us to that reality and helps us to understand what we encounter while there, as well as how the two worlds coexist, interact, and ultimately interpenetrate. Shakespeare associates his 'green world' at times with feelings, at times with belief and faith, and always with nature and human nature; through the course of the plays we see, coming progressively more clearly into focus, a vision of the healthy individual, and the healthy society, as one aware of its manifold worlds and the place of each in the life of that individual, that society.

Traditionally, this integrative function of the psyche had been assigned by religious belief to the higher Understanding, Aquinas' *ratio superior*, but of course as Shakespeare writes the tradition is in decay. The modern concept of 'individuality' itself arises only when this breakdown eliminates socially generated identity as a basis of selfhood. Its failure suggests, in that historical moment before a new discourse asserts itself, the *constructed* nature of human reality, and Shakespeare himself participates in this questioning of the traditional verities in his exploration of the constructedness of European cultural reality. But he interrogates even more acutely the failure of the rising essentialist ideology to address the human need for belief as the absolute ground for any subsequent act of comprehension: the plays ponder the human need for belief, and they come to understand belief as that mirror or glass that we 'hold up to nature' in order to reify the flux and protean mutability of reality, impressing on it an order and shapeliness susceptible of comprehension. The godhead one worships constitutes the ideal of the self by which that self is defined, **measured, and** most fully empowered, and neglect of this truth results in a failure at the heart of individuating selfhood. Characters such as Claudius, Iago, and Edmund embody this debased denial of human potential in their bestial lack of higher human values. Articulated at the inaugural moment of a new discourse for which the individual as enunciating subject constitutes the central authority, Shakespeare's vision animates a thoroughgoing critique of the ideology of rationality that has remained relevant throughout the subsequent development of rationalist discourse.

Up to a point Shakespeare's critique of discursive reason directly parallels traditional Scholastic teaching – the new rationalists of Shakespeare's plays empower Aquinas' '*ratio inferior*' or discursive reason at the expense of that more comprehensive '*ratio superior*' by which the individual was intuitively to understand metaphysical reality and thus give a meaningful context to the work of the lower faculty. His vision of the

imagination, however, radically subverts Scholastic tradition in the sense that he recognizes in the 'constitutive power of the traditional 'higher' reason the synthesizing aspect of the imagination itself, this constitutive power both explaining the imagination's mediating role between reason and the passions and validating art's reliance upon the imagination.

Shakespeare perceives that the new rationalist ideology fatally divorces the individual from much of his own nature, instituting a pervasive alienation that can never be reconciled within a conceptual world empowering itself by a forgetting of its own roots in material reality, that is, desire, and the body.² While the rationalist claims to focus the individual's energies more productively on the material world, on 'knowing' reality by objectifying it in the cause of Bacon's 'advancement of learning', this can come only at the price of disengaging intellect from the subjective self; the rationalist gives no thought – is incapable, within the new discourse of 'reason', of giving thought – to the alienated nature of the conceptual world he so energetically analyzes.

Observed from such a perspective, the tragedies, in particular, can be read as dramas of rationality run mad; as various characters blindly elevate the reason to preeminence, the individual is alienated from the reality of both world and self, and that person capable of resisting or overcoming this alienation through an act of imaginative belief, even at the cost of life itself, becomes the tragic hero. Hamlet, Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra illustrate the issue most clearly, while Othello, Macbeth, and Coriolanus evoke more ambiguous responses precisely because of their own more complex involvement in the fallen world of reason.

A discussion of *Hamlet* will serve to begin to illustrate these points. But rather than begin with the physical action of the play (that is, the act of revenge, long delayed and finally accomplished, by which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* fulfills its debt to its sources and genre), I will grant the play its own priorities and consider first the anterior issue of the play's *demands* for action. We must always attend to Mack's crucial perception that 'Hamlet's world is preeminently in the interrogative mood',³ so privileging either particular assertions of the value of action or our own cultural preference for it constitute an unwarranted assumption: all 'action' in *Hamlet* is problematic. Mack's observation on the interrogative draws our attention to a persistent, resonant question on the lips of all the major characters: 'what's the matter?'⁴ Already a dead metaphor to the ears of Polonius or Claudius when they use it, its recurrent presence nevertheless plays constantly against Hamlet's own question, 'what is a man?' and thereby defines the play's central preoccupation. To face human nature, as it is reflected in Hamlet, is to ask, with Barnardo, 'who's there?' If the physical act of revenge that so burdens Hamlet stands at the heart of the play, for

Shakespeare this act takes on its largest significance as it forces the protagonist to investigate and finally to answer this question of the true 'matter' of human nature.

Because the essential 'thought' of the playwright here seems to be a question, the structure of the play naturally takes the shape of a debate on that question: the dramatic conflict between the major characters defines two conflicting positions on this question 'what is the matter?' or 'what is a man?' The thought of the dramatist, then, finds its fullest articulation, not in Hamlet's pursuit of revenge, but in Hamlet's pursuit of an answer to his question, and this will prove to be the *praxis* of the play.

But the 'matter' of the play is complex: if human nature, especially as seen in Hamlet's nature, is the play's central preoccupation, one other motif of 'the matter' is prominent, and crucial, and that is the matter that is the raw material of art and artifice. The 'matter' of Polonius' conjectures on Hamlet's madness, the 'matter' that Hamlet reads, the 'matter' of Pyrrhus' revenge, the 'matter' of the Mousetrap, the 'matter' of Hamlet and Gertrude's talk, the 'matter' of Claudius' plotting with Laertes, the 'matter' of Osric's embassy, and, most troubling perhaps of all, the 'illness about the heart' that Hamlet ultimately dismisses as 'no matter' – Shakespeare constantly conflates within the action of the play the two senses of his own matter, that is, the theme of the play and the raw material of his art. And the two gradually coalesce, for to Shakespeare human nature is in its essence aesthetic, and humanity's most natural activity lies in the shaping of a sense of self within the larger shaping of one's sense of the world.

Shakespeare's repetition of the central question points to a clear structural antithesis in the play: Hamlet reflects constantly upon his own nature and the nature of the world he inhabits, while the denizens of Claudius' Elsinore think about such things very little if at all. The hero sets himself to answer the question 'what is a man?' against the backdrop of a society that never asks this question – because it takes for granted a particular answer to it. Such a perspective suggests that 'the matter' of the play is **not** simply human nature generally, but more specifically the nature of **that** consciousness that distinguishes the species.

Shakespeare, as is his wont, conceives of this situation metaphorically: Denmark's predicament is figured as a fall into consciousness. Claudius poisons his brother in the garden, and the fatal act exiles Denmark from the edenic realm of the elder Hamlet, inaugurating a diminished, fallen human existence aptly reflected in the dark atmosphere of the court. The figure of fallen humanity seems to express for Shakespeare the painfully reduced human consciousness associated with the new rationality of his day. Committed to a calculating rationality closely analogous to the traditional *ratio inferior*, Claudian Denmark stands fundamentally exiled from the ground of primal reality by its own essentialist conceptualizing. The court

mind, like the new rationalism, comprehends the world of concepts that it has manufactured in order to objectify the world, without appreciating the gap between conceptuality and the reality it would ostensibly represent.

Hamlet asks his question in the context of a world that assumes man to be the rational animal. Claudius' regicide has been an act of calculation and 'policy', and that act overthrows a world traditionally based on 'custom' and 'antiquity', a world whose basis was moral. The values associated throughout the play with Hamlet Senior locate his earlier Elsinore within a larger frame, a spiritual reality, that governs and regulates the social community itself. Claudius' usurpation, then, is profoundly revolutionary and institutes a new society founded upon a new basis. Where Hamlet Senior governed according to tradition and accepted precedent, Claudius elevates the common reason to unilateral government of himself and his state. The play, in other words, presents an experiment on the question of whether man is indeed 'the rational animal' as the backdrop to Hamlet's intense questioning of human nature.

The action of the play implicitly characterizes the limitations of Claudius' view. In such a corrupt world, devoid of any grounding ideals, every self is its own agent, and the intellectual power of each devotes itself to self-interest. That such 'reason' fallaciously comprehends its own nature becomes clear as the reason of each of the various characters panders in its own way to the 'rude will' it claims to control. Even Hamlet himself is sunk in this new state; his own hatching of plots in this dungeon of Denmark, a world of night and dark interiors, is no accident, for the new ideology of rationality has reduced Elsinore to the materialist universal machine, devoid of spiritual light. Though Shakespeare's vision predates Hobbes's, it lacks nothing in stark intensity; the alienation of this world is all too familiar to a twentieth-century audience.

Over against these transient, scurrying human plots stands the irresolute world of Hamlet's delay, and his madness. They cannot be separated – Hamlet's adoption of his 'antic disposition' is simultaneous with his turn to delay, the disposition accompanies the delay, and its absence upon his return coincides with the play's resolution. But in the strictest sense 'madness' describes, not an inherent condition, but rather the hero's alienation from the community of values and norms represented by Claudius' Denmark: to say that Hamlet is 'mad' is to recognize that he perceives a different reality than does his community. Thus the oft-repeated question 'Is Hamlet "really" mad?' can be put more fruitfully as 'In what sense is Hamlet mad?' For his 'madness' grows to at least a relative coherence when seen from the perspective, not of Denmark's court, but rather of rebellion from that world. 'Hamlet's madness thus becomes a test of the authenticity of his culture', as one critic puts it,⁵ and stands in an essentially critical relation to the dominant language as well as the

dominant ethos of the court. Those commentators who simply accept Hamlet's 'madness', and then go on to censure his 'failure to act', are adopting the Claudian imperial standard when they do so – Claudius of course acts regularly, and consistently, within a world ordered and 'purposed' by rational coordinates.

But human purposes themselves are a crucial issue in the play. What is the basis of that fracture of purposes and ends of which the Player King speaks? Standing at the very center of this self-reflexive play about acting – a player playing a player who plays the role of king in the play-within-a-play – the king recognizes that

... what we do determine, oft we break.

Purpose is but the slave to memory,

Of violent birth, but poor validity,

...

What to ourselves in passion we propose,

The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.

And he ends his commentary with the comment that

Our wills and fates do so contrary run

That our devices still are overthrown,

Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

(III, ii, 187–213)⁶

Although *Hamlet* criticism has traditionally focused almost exclusively on the hero's 'purposes' as 'of violent birth, but poor validity', the Player's comments extend far beyond Hamlet himself. Both of Elsinore's mighty opposites (as well as their inferiors) are actively engaged in proposing purposes to themselves, and Hamlet is equally active in meditating on 'the purpose of acting', Pyrrhus' 'black purpose', Claudius' 'founding' purposes – 'my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen' (III, iii, 55) – and his own, because this is the business of consciousness in a rationally-conceived, that is a causal, world frame.

So again with the Player King's words we see the question of simple action – the connective between purpose and end – yawn open, this space becoming, under the force of these concluding couplets, a veritable chasm. The Player King's words are of course appropriate to concentric audiences, and represent a comprehensive commentary on the entire range of purposes that constitute life in the prison of Denmark: our 'thoughts' and 'ends' diverge *because* 'our wills and fates do so contrary run'. Shakespeare will make the distinction more clear in act v, scene i, where the clowns distinguish between the man's going to the water to drown himself and the drowning itself. Because in Claudius' Denmark reason panders the will, and will is proximate in its goals (never ultimate), Claudius cannot purpose action toward his true end, his final fate: death.

It is often remarked that 'in conscience' Hamlet cannot seek death by committing the suicide that some presume to be contemplated in the central soliloquy. But his encounter with the unknowability of that 'undiscovered country' more strictly formulates the impossibility of consciousness (the second Renaissance meaning of 'conscience') positing death as its end or purpose. 'Dread . . . puzzles the will' precisely because reason cannot grasp the abstraction except as a negation; consciousness 'doth make cowards of us all' precisely because 'thought . . . sicklies o'er . . . the native hue of resolution' when faced with the boundary of its conceptual field. Action can be willed only within these boundaries, and reason's boundary is death. We discover as we view the play through the mirror of the Player's vision a fundamental misalignment in Denmark between proximate purposes and ultimate ends. Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even Ophelia – none of these characters act with regard to that true and final end of death, our common 'fate'. Only Hamlet, riven by doubt and confusion as he is, defers action under the suspicion of this blind spot.⁷

From the first in *Hamlet* the question of death shows a tendency to grow from the specific towards the general, and the retributive death of Claudius is intimately entwined with the death of the hero himself, not only in Shakespeare's mind but in Hamlet's. The tableau of the final catastrophe – Hamlet and Claudius both dead, and indeed surrounded by death – only fulfills what has been a constant motif of the play, for the Ghost's indictment is not simply of Claudius, but of fallen nature generally, and thus places Hamlet in the quintessential Western quandary of alienation from the material. While the intellect conceptualizes human nature as dichotomous and thus distinguishes itself from the body by an act of self-exile and alienation, death must inevitably reassert that lower realm's ultimate reality. Reason must dismiss the physical body, even if one day that body's death will conquer reason. The Ghost demands that Hamlet reject fallen human nature even as the Prince discovers that nature in himself: he must 'taint not [his] mind' while ridding his world of that nature that has 'fallen off'. But how can he be true to the command when he is already 'tainted'? The serpent has struck, the world is fallen, the voice of 'revenge' is a voice from another realm, a realm that Hamlet can never know. Hamlet lives, not in his father's orchard, but in an 'unweeded garden'.

This conflation of death and death thrusts itself forward repeatedly in acts II and III. In the Player's speech at the end of act II, are we to relate Hamlet to Pyrrhus' filial piety, or his murderous visage, 'horribly trick'd . . . [in] total gules' (II, ii, 457)? Hamlet stuns us with the casual comment that Lucianus in *The Murder of Gonzago* is *nephew* to the king. With the hero's murder of Polonius our false dichotomizing must cease: though his continu-

ing conscience/consciousness marks him as anything but 'indifferent', both he and the audience henceforth are fully aware that he, just as his antagonists, is a 'child of the earth', and the graveyard scene's function is to explore the now truly universal implications of this through the singular experience of the hero.

Shakespeare thus emphatically presses at every turn the question of the reason and its boundaries. Hamlet's early exclamation against his mother, that 'a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourn'd longer' (i, ii, 150-1), presents it as a paradox: how can a human, blessed with 'discourse of reason', forget even more quickly than a beast? By act iv, scene iv, as Hamlet ponders Fortinbras' army, the idea is less paradoxical:

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd.

(iv, iv, 33-8)

The scholastic echoes of this speech make clear that the calculation of Elsinore is a mere parody of that true, 'godlike' reason of the complete consciousness marking human potentiality in the earlier tradition, for the integrative functions of consciousness responsible for unifying memory, experience, thought, and expectation into a significant whole – that is, for articulating meaning – have been completely dismissed. Though Hamlet focuses on his own failure to act against Claudius, none but Hamlet has fully experienced his human potential for 'looking before and after'. Hamlet's sense of man's capability dwarfs Claudius', and emphasizes the distance between man's broadest faculties – his 'godlike reason' – and that *ratio inferior* of narrow cunning by which Claudius and Polonius seek politically to advance their interests.

Hamlet thus stands in the archetypal human position of having to constitute for himself, against the backdrop and enmity of a meaningless environment, a human, that is to say coherent and meaningful, world, and he eventually does so by accepting his persistent urge to transcend the rational boundaries of his position via the feigning disposition, the urge to play, with its necessary freeing of the imaginative faculty. Whereas the adoption of the 'antic disposition' early in the play is originally an act of calculation, Hamlet's intense confrontation with the artistic set-pieces of the middle acts gradually transforms his understanding of the role of play by providing him with a distanced 'mirror' of the reality of Elsinore. For if 'looking before and after' is Hamlet's ideal, it is also the nature of art, and the crucial speech of the Player King, to which I must now return, enacts it.

As, simultaneously, a character speaking within his own dramatic

cosmos and a voice of some author speaking artfully, the Player King articulates two distinct realities. As a 'King' – a man – the Player asserts the absolute disjunction of purpose and end, will and fate, for all men. But as a character shaped into art by his author's hand, his larger reality is quite other: the very assertion 'that our devices still are overthrown' is itself drawn into a perfectly framed whole as the Player moves 'orderly to end where I begun' (III, ii, 210). Art, unlike reason, does not forget, and within the world of the artistic creation the character speaks lines that do indeed 'look before and after', beyond *The Murder of Gonzago*, throwing an entirely new light on Hamlet's earlier thoughts on play. For the first time since the Ghost left the stage we see enacted a real relationship of purpose and end, even as we hear the Player deny our ability rationally to effect such a union.

Moreover, the Player King's reflections intimately relate him to Pyrrhus' in the earlier artistic inset. For like the Player King, the Pyrrhus of this narrative is both a man and a character of art, and Shakespeare draws attention to his dual nature by 'painting' him a 'neutral' to his duality: though as a man his 'will' drives him on to his revenge, his poet's 'matter' demands the inactivity of a tableaux. This inactivity is so out of character that we dwell upon its 'seeming', and this seeming is precisely echoed in the second inset, where the words of the Player King resolve his human awareness of the divergence of 'will' and 'fate' into the artifactual reality of his own artistic 'end'.

We should hardly be surprised to find these two artistic insets bracketing Hamlet's own famous advice to the players. Most obviously a lecture to the players on the virtues of showing decorum in their art, and thus a Renaissance commonplace, the speech resonates against the matter of the two insets, and thus against Hamlet's practice of his 'art'. Hamlet's predicament is analogous to that of the two characters, and thus Shakespeare forces us to ask whether, and in what ways, Hamlet applies his own advice: how has he and how ought he, 'suit the action to the word, the word to the action'?

Moreover, still caught up in the role of dramatist himself here in act III, Hamlet cannot yet recognize the implications of his poetic principles. His recognition of the problem of the 'matter' in question will finally be reified in the metaphor, not of the dramatist, the creator of plots, but of the actor and the 'matter' of acting itself, a matter beyond the actor's own control and shaped design. 'It is not the contents of a play (the subject matter) but the theatrical mode itself that finally serves "to hold the mirror up to nature."' ⁸ As he recognizes the limits of his rational control of events, the play metaphor will finally force him to imagine some extrapersonal shaper of events, and to project unto the cosmos the directing of his action.

This is exactly what happens in the shipboard incident, but the important point about this 'epiphany', as it has frequently been conceived, is that

it actually includes two distinct, though intimately connected, revelations. Hamlet's perception of that 'divinity' that he now assumes will 'shape his ends', stems from his immediate confrontation with his own death: 'where I found ... an exact command ... that, ... no leisure bated, ... my head should be strook off' (v, ii, 18-25). The monosyllabic terror of that line conveys the breakdown of all Hamlet's intellectual constructions; free finally and irrevocably from the delusions and perversity of the world of Elsinore, Hamlet is momentarily stripped of all the contextual density that constitutes the world for the individual: he is stripped bare as Lear will be, and stands before death as 'the thing itself, unaccommodated man'.

In response to this revelation he undergoes a second – or, more accurately, he imaginatively creates a second. His own plots overwhelmed by a rush of apparently fortuitous events, Hamlet frames a pattern of these events, and then projects the pattern onto 'a providence' and 'a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we *will*' (v, ii, 10-11). The revelation is seen by many Christian commentators on Shakespeare as a clear indication of his new religious affiliation, but, strictly speaking, nothing in the play authorizes such a reading. Shakespeare himself is preoccupied with this distinctly different question of the process by which Hamlet himself *creates*, rather than simply *discovers*, his final belief. Hamlet does not merely turn to a preconceived godhead. He formulates for himself, in the light of all his experience, a deity in his own image that can nevertheless account for the larger world of mutability whose presence now fills his consciousness. Acutely aware of the failure of his own project to shape the world of Elsinore to his desires, he spontaneously predicates a divinity 'like' his own conception of the shaping hand, but extra-personal. As Pyrrhus' will was stymied for one moment by the 'matter' of his author, and as the Player King recognized 'our fate's none of our own', so now Hamlet accepts the submission of *his* matter, both his human nature and his social role of revenger, to his own 'heavenly maker'.

In act v we see a Hamlet who much more adequately embodies his own highest standards. His 'smoothness' even 'in the very torrent, tempest ... and whirlwind of his passion' (iii, ii, 5-7) flows precisely from the 'temperance' of his now calm mind. His passions now generally 'suit the action to the word, the word to the action' (lines 17-18), whether parodically matching Osric's verbosity with absolute nonsense or seriously requiting deadly treachery with deadly revenge. This ultimate congruence of his advice with the largest issues of the play finally fulfills all the expectation it aroused, for we now can see that 'the purpose of playing' is nothing less than the purpose of life, 'whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature' (iii, ii, 21-35). In a dark world full of journeymen who have in their pride erected an image not 'made well', Hamlet stands apart as one who has finally learned to 'imitate' properly.

However, where Hamlet in his ignorance learnedly espoused in act III, scene ii the mirror of Ciceronian *mimesis*⁹ – an artistic imitation like the Mousetrap that would objectify the virtues and sins it reflected – he now sees a profounder truth, for the mirror revealed in act V is not mimetic but Pauline, reflecting not ‘nature’ as it appears in daily intercourse, the human nature of Elsinore, but rather that larger, truer nature that for Paul is explicitly God and for Hamlet is the metaphoric, metamorphic imagination¹⁰ that echoes, in human nature, nature’s own mutability in all of its various rhythms. In Paul’s Christian formulation

we all beholde as in a mirrour the glorie of the Lord with open face, and are changed into the same image, from glorie to glorie, as by the Spirit of the Lord.
(2 Cor. 3:18)

The Pauline mirror, in other words, is an ideal that reflects upon both human virtue and scorn according to the *disparity* between the individual and its reflection – ‘darkly’, as Paul elsewhere describes the reflection.

In *Hamlet*, I believe, the ‘mirror’ is not Christ, but rather Hamlet’s own imaginative ideal; Shakespeare’s interest in Hamlet’s belief is not strictly theological, but metaphysical in a broader sense, and psychological, and we might thus say that Shakespeare ‘secularizes belief’.¹¹ The early Hamlet, for all his nobility and idealism, can find no firm point upon which to ground his judgement, because he is confined within a solipsistic world of reason elevated to absolute rule. Only the establishment of some extra-rational, fixed absolute of valuation can ever transcend the absolute meaninglessness of such a world. Having irrevocably lost that earlier world of custom on which his father’s realm was founded, Hamlet’s only recourse is to create a new world of meaning, that is to say, a new standard or ideal, and this he does in the last act.

This new standard is a product of his integrative imagination. The divinity’s characterization is entirely metaphorical, a metamorphosis into a world principle of that which Hamlet finds most fundamental and real in human nature. Immersed in a world of plot and counterplot, of chronicle, report and ‘forg’d process’, Hamlet naturally resolves his doubt by the replication of his own previous ideal at a cosmic level, fashioning an understanding of the wholeness of reality out of those elements of his own reality that suggest the possibility of wholeness. As Shakespeare has Hamlet articulate his situation after his revelation, he has been ‘learned’ (i.e. ‘taught’) that our attempts at **control and direction** only ‘rough-hew’ the matter; the ‘divinity’ finally ‘shapes’ them, only the divinity *can* finally shape them. For Shakespeare, Hamlet’s god is like man (and not *vice versa*) in being a maker, because man’s essential nature is that of the maker.

Hamlet’s newfound understanding of relation to his (and I stress the possessive) providence makes possible a fundamental reconciliation between those fragmented selves that have made him so complex and

confusing a character, especially his public self (reified by his name or reputation), and his personal, felt sense of self.¹² Throughout the last scene our attention focuses, after the agonies his self-division has cost him, on Hamlet's finally achieved integrity. As Ralph Berry recently noted, the final scene, though short, is sufficient: 'a man's life's no more than to say "one"' (v, ii, 74). Unable to enact such a unity earlier in the play, Hamlet is here reconciled to his humanity, its limits, and its prerequisites, and that 'union' that Claudius pledges to the victor Hamlet has rightfully earned. Now we can see why, earlier, the murder of Claudius would not have served: it would have been either an act of reason and calculation or one of passion, not one of the whole man, and thus it would only have furthered his alienation, driving deeper the wedge between self and self-conception. If his action was to be the adequate emblem of the whole self it could only occur once that self was united.

The final scene clearly reveals how central the metaphoric imagination is to Hamlet's final achievement. Hamlet's imaginative enactment of the 'metaphor' actually creates the resolution to the action. If the 'actor' has been an inadequate analogy for the Prince because it expresses to him only one aspect of his self – the calculating player of chameleon public roles – then the 'role' of the fencer unites his whole self: public self, imaged in style, proficiency and strategy, is absorbed into the instinctual passion of competitive confrontation. Hamlet's perception of 'acting' and 'play' has now been fused with his perception of action in life, and with this fusion he is 'ready' to enact that scene that will express his self, if only for a moment, in its true fullness. To speak of the 'tenor' and 'vehicle' of metaphor here, the reality and the image, misses Shakespeare's complex reality: tenor and vehicle coalesce and Hamlet's world reveals itself as metaphoric in its deepest nature. The metamorphic imagination has solved Hamlet's dilemma by imagining a frame for his 'story' capable of instilling meaning in that story by 'shaping an end' to it, and only by his end do we know him.

NOTES

- 1 Timothy Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 37. In dissecting this rise of a new 'discursive class' Reiss follows Foucault's notion of 'epistemic rupture'; his analysis of the development of the new discourse, which he labels the 'analytico-referential', out of the older one, and its gradual 'occultation' of patterning as a basis for discourse, provides the single most thoroughly articulated analysis of the origins of modern discourse, and the tensions at work in Elizabethan-Jacobean culture.
- 2 Francis Barker, in *The Tremulous Private Body* (London: Methuen, 1984), addresses *Hamlet* within the context of his discussion of the emergence of the new

discursive class in just these terms, this 'metaphysic of [the body's] ... erasure': speaking of the spectacular violence of Jacobean drama, he comments that 'the deadly subjectivity of the modern is already beginning to emerge and to round vindictively on the most prevalent emblem [i.e., the body] of the discursive order it supersedes' (p. 25).

- 3 Maynard Mack, 'The World of *Hamlet*', *Yale Review*, 41 (1952), 504.
- 4 I focus on the aesthetic dimensions of the 'matter' of the play at the expense of other lines of development of this crucial concept; Margaret Ferguson, for instance, pursues the hero's interest in using the idiom as a vehicle for illustrating the metaphorical dimension, the 'play', of all language. Nevertheless, her emphasis on the 'materiality' of language suggests a connection to aesthetic issues in the play. See '*Hamlet*: Letters and Spirits', in *Shakespeare and The Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 294ff.
- 5 Anthony B. Dawson, *Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 50.
- 6 All references are to the text of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
- 7 James L. Calderwood, in *To Be and Not To Be* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) remarks of the famous soliloquy that 'the indeterminance of death ... blur[s] his distinction between To Be and Not To Be' (p. 99); it is precisely this indeterminance that lies beyond the realm of rationality, and thus separates Hamlet's self-awareness from that of the other characters.
- 8 Alvin B. Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 106.
- 9 My discussion of *mimesis* here is particularly indebted to Howard Felperin's chapter on *Hamlet* in *Shakespearian Representation* (Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 45-6.
- 10 The phrase was coined by Marjorie B. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- 11 Both the term itself and the idea that Shakespeare has been influenced by the Christian as well as the classical conception of *mimesis* were suggested to me by my colleague Helen Whall.
- 12 On this point see Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be*, Part I.