

“What is he whose grief bears such an emphasis?”

Hamlet’s Development of a Mourning Persona

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Long viewed by scholars as destructive to his selfhood and detrimental to his swift execution of revenge, Hamlet’s concern with the outward expression of his grief actually plays an integral part in his struggles to forge a mourning identity in the wake of his father’s death. The Shakespearean prince’s attempts to faithfully perform his interior bereavement, I contend, are challenged by his father’s command to enact his mourning through outward revenge, which at first seems contrary to Hamlet’s hope to discover a mourning persona consonant with his grief. By the conclusion of the drama, though, Hamlet embraces mourning as part of his selfhood, allowing it to become something he can both feel and enact. Indeed, his final words to Horatio suggest that Hamlet believes that grief can be expressed in an authentic way and that the work of mourning can unify the self.

In Hamlet’s first lengthy statement to his mother, he claims that the external signs of his grief—his “inky cloak,” “windy suspiration of forced breath,” and “fruitful river in the eye”—cannot fully signify his interior feelings.¹ Instead, Hamlet asserts, “I have that within which passes show,” and declares all his outward marks are “but the trappings and the suits of woe.”² These words, according to many critics, attest to the start of modern subjectivity, or the individual awareness of an interior self. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, writes that “*Hamlet* seems to mark an epochal shift not only in Shakespeare’s own career but in Western drama; it is as if the play were giving birth to a whole new kind of literary subjectivity.”³ And while some scholars claim that early modern subjectivity is at best materially based and could not have existed during the sixteenth century, even Francis Barker, who suggests that Hamlet’s subjectivity is

1 *Hamlet*, 1.2.77, 79-80. (A. R. Braunmuller’s 2001 Penguin edition.)

2 *Hamlet*, 1.2.85-86.

3 See Greenblatt, “Hamlet,” 1685.

emergent rather than “fully realized,” concedes the Danish prince’s words show that “an interior subjectivity begins to speak.”⁴

Yet despite Hamlet’s obvious if insufficient shows of grief, modern scholarship rarely links its consideration of Hamlet’s engagement with human mortality to his interiority, instead often discussing his subjectivity (or lack thereof) in terms of his conscience, his moral sense, and his possible psychological maladies.⁵ Some scholars, in fact, view the character’s inwardness and single-minded focus on his response to his father’s death as ultimately destructive of his selfhood. Newer assessments of Hamlet continue to support this interpretation. Greenblatt, for example, proposes that the prince’s conscience produces “corrosive inwardness,” while Bernhard Greiner even suggests that as an individual mourning the death of his father and contemplating his own demise, Hamlet cannot “maintain possession” of his subjectivity and has, in fact, lost himself.⁶ I, however, argue that the play indicates that, bound by his duty to his father to place revenge before his own desires, Hamlet does not lose his selfhood but instead recognizes his inability to outwardly express a grief consonant with his feelings and the expectations of others.

It should be noted that, for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, mourning was often a public and cultural performance, read by others and judged on the basis of its show of sincerity or lack thereof.⁷ Indeed, calls to revenge in early modern drama are often based on the idea that by directing mourning into masculine action, individu-

4 Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body*, 34, 32.

5 There are a few notable exceptions. Arthur Kirsch, for instance, contends that “if vengeance composes the plot of the revenge play, grief composes its essential emotional content, its substance.” Kirsch’s reading, however, focuses on Freudian readings of grief and fails to take into account the Ghost’s command that forces Hamlet to direct his feelings of sorrow into physical revenge. See Kirsch, “Hamlet’s Grief,” 17. In a more recent treatment of mourning in Hamlet, Tobias Döring suggests the prince’s revenge functions as an ineffective and problematic type of remembrance that tries but ultimately fails to replace Catholic lamentation rituals following the English reformations. See Döring, *Performances of Mourning*.

6 See Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 208, and Greiner, “The Birth of the Subject,” 4.

7 For a more detailed discussion of the outward signs of mourning, see Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 421-455.

als could both outwardly show their sorrow and purge themselves of grief.⁸ Citing a wide range of Renaissance dramatic texts, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Spanish Tragedy*, Tanya Pollard, for example, argues that “the medical, or restorative notion of revenge draws on a homeopathic idea of fighting like with like,” and notes that the central characters of these plays hope to heal their griefs through violence.⁹ Yet while this channeling of male grief into violent action allowed for a socially acceptable expression of passion, many early modern writers also criticized revenge as detrimental to the selfhood and healing of the individual. Not only could violent masculine grief threaten an uncontained cycle of revenge, it also could, according to Francis Bacon, prolong the mourning period: “This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well.”¹⁰ In a recent study, Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. outlines other ways that revenge similarly threatened the individual. Contending that tragic subjectivity stems from an individual character’s realization that his or her desires directly conflict with the social order, Sullivan identifies in the figure of the revenger a divided self, torn between the individual ego and the will of the reigning monarch.¹¹ Taking revenge, therefore, might not only heighten and extend the individual’s sorrow for the deceased but also sever the person from his or her socially-constructed self.

Hamlet’s role as revenger and its link to his experience of grief exemplifies one man’s struggle to portray a sorrow consonant with

8 Contemporary proverbs employed by a number of playwrights suggest that by refusing to give voice to their griefs individuals suffered loss more acutely. See, for instance, the list, based on the proverb “grief pent up will break the heart,” compiled by Dent, *Proverbial Language*, 389.

9 Pollard, “A Kind of Wild Medicine,” 69. Jennifer C. Vaught also notes that Laertes combines weeping for Ophelia with violence, which she contends illustrates “coupling grief with violent action wards off the wide-spread anxiety in the Renaissance that tears shed by men are effeminizing.” See Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion*, 123-124.

10 Bacon, “On Revenge,” 16.

11 According to this definition, Hamlet is, of course, the quintessential tragic hero. See Sullivan “Tragic Subjectivities,” 76.

his inner emotional experience. Throughout the play, the prince's subjectivity is bound up in questions of how to balance his affective commitment to his father with his own performance of mourning. This balancing act, however, is difficult because the Danish prince at first finds the masculine form of mourning his father demands to be incompatible with his interior experience of grief.¹² Resolving this issue by exploring different modes of expressing his grief, including excessive mourning, channeling his passions into violent revenge, and finally merging his passions and beliefs, Hamlet works to develop a mourning identity.¹³ Indeed, by the end of the play, the Danish prince comes to realize that his father's call to revenge reflects his desire for an authentic expression of his selfhood—one that indicates his ability to convey his internal affective state through both action and public verbal expression.¹⁴ Hamlet's struggle culminates in the graveyard scene, where, confronted with the death of Ophelia, he finally comprehends and accepts that the outward actions of mourning can be fitted to his personal case and can adequately express his interior sorrow. Far from being destructive, grief instead serves as

12 Throughout the play, taking revenge is coded as a distinctly masculine form of mourning, while the inward and personal experience of grief is often depicted as feminine. Claudius, for instance, characterizes Hamlet's initial reactions to his father's death as "unmanly grief." See Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.3.94. Such gendered designations of grief also informed contemporary theologians, who often criticized female mourning as excessive and personal. For more on this topic, see Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England*.

13 My argument, that Hamlet wants to express his grief in a way that is "consonant with his emotions," is attested to by his initial statement to his mother and Claudius. By self-anatomizing his own mourning, Hamlet shows that he possesses all of the outward markers of extreme grief, but notes that "that within" is beyond his performance. According to Drew Daniel, "the nomination of 'that within' in a speech produced here for Gertrude's and Claudius' and our own audition marks not the assertion of a fact but the expression of a wish." As Daniel points out, this speech "betrays Hamlet's desire" for the enactment of a privately felt and understood melancholy. See Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage*, 122.

14 In considering what defines emotions as authentic, a recent interview with Barbara H. Rosenwein provides important context. While our contemporary society judges emotional authenticity as free from formal language and spontaneously expressed, understanding the emotions of another human being (in all cultures) requires shared cultural structures of meaning. Thus, Rosenwein notes, "Emotions are largely communicative tools, and if we are to understand one another, we are wise to express ourselves through well-worn paths that all of us are familiar with." Hamlet's attempts to express his inward and authentic emotions, I argue, rely not on spontaneously expressed feelings, but rather, he tries out and refashions different conventional approaches to grief to see which of these genres most fully communicate his interior state. See Rosenwein, "AHR Conversation," 1496.

the catalyst by which Hamlet unifies himself. Consequently, Hamlet resolves what other early modern dramatic characters could not—he is able to both be and seem the grieving son.¹⁵

Most scholars exploring grief in Renaissance England note that following the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century, a new style of mourning emerged that stressed moderate grief rather than the excessive outpouring of sorrow more common in the medieval era.¹⁶ For example, John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury during Elizabeth's reign, warned his parishioners to moderate their shows of grief following the death of loved ones:

Wee are not therefore forbidden to mourne ouer the dead: but to mourne in such sorte as the heathen did, we are forbidden. They, as they did neither beléue in God, nor in Christ, so had they no hope of y^e life to come. When a father saw his sonne dead he thought he had beene dead for euer. He became heaueie, changed his garment, delighted in no companie, forsooke his meate, famished him selfe, rent his bodie, cursed his fortune, cried out of his Gods . . . Thus they fel into dispaire, and spake blasphemies.¹⁷

For Jewel, immoderate mourning signified lack of faith in a divine plan and a failure to firmly trust in the eternal afterlife of believers. Theologians and philosophers often linked excessive mourning instead to either “barbaric” others or women. Mourners, and mourning men in particular, were expected by physicians and divines to conform to social norms and moderate their grief lest they become

15 Carl Schmitt contends that the play represents authentic tragedy because it relies upon a tragic reality (built either on commonly held myths or cultural understanding) shared by the audience. Building on this idea, I argue that Hamlet's emotions must not only allow him to perform his grief to his own satisfaction, but also elicit empathy from the audience because of collective knowledge of sorrow's affects. See Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*.

16 Stephen Pender, for instance, argues that “the emergence of the idea of moderate grief reflects a shift in practices devoted to burial and bereavement and is underwritten by changes in theological and ecclesiastic attitudes that led to less attention being paid to predestination and purgatory.” See Pender, “Rhetoric, Grief, and the Imagination,” 54-85. It should be noted that while theologians during the early stages of the reformation were more rigorous in their condemnation of overwhelming grief, these would later “yield to increasingly more tolerant conceptions of moderation.” See Pigman, *Grief and the English Renaissance Elegy*, 27-39, especially 28.

17 Jewel, *An Exposition*, 161.

like those deemed unable to control their passions: women, children, and racial others.¹⁸

Even so, when unexpected or violent death occurred, immoderate individual grief was often viewed as a normal, if temporary reaction, and sometimes exhibited itself in physically observable ways, including both mimetic illness and excessive violence. In fact, in early modern England experiencing the death of a close family member or friend could cause some individuals (both men and women) to respond with overwhelming grief that took the form of a sympathetic sickness.¹⁹ In addition, excess grief in men, when combined with masculine action, was rendered socially acceptable in early modern society.²⁰ When, for instance, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Macduff responds to the sudden murders of his family by telling Malcolm he "could play the woman with mine eyes," but instead chooses to channel his grief into violent revenge, Malcolm judges that "this tune goes manly" and advises his companion to let his mourning become "the whetstone of your sword, let grief / Convert to anger. Blunt not the heart, enrage it."²¹ While under normal circumstances early modern people judged immoderate mourning to be effeminate and ill-advised, when passionate outpourings of sorrow seemed to confirm authentic inward emotions they elicited praise from contemporaries.²² And, in a culture fascinated with the dichotomy between an interior and exterior self, over-the-top displays of the passions often seemed to more fully denote feelings than stoic reserve

18 Pender, "Rhetoric, Grief, and the Imagination," 54-55.

19 Weisser, *Ill Composed*, 81-82, 93.

20 For a more extensive discussion of male mourning being channeled into violent revenge, see McCarthy, "King Lear's Violent Grief," 151-168.

21 *Macbeth*, 4.3.233, 238, 231-232. (Stephen Orgel's 2000 Penguin edition.)

22 As Todd Butler points out in a recent article on victim impact statements, displays of grief (in our contemporary society and in the early modern period) are assessed both by the closeness of the grieving individual to the deceased and by the way that the performance of mourning is consonant with the feelings of the bereaved person and the understandings of those gathered to witness such enactment. See Butler, "Victim Impact Statements," 851-852.

did. These enactments of grief, therefore, while suspect, also could verify individual sorrow and even, according to some writers, allow individuals to lessen their grief.

Hamlet recognizes this performative aspect of mourning when he notes that the outward markers of sorrow and the various “forms, moods, shapes of grief” function as “actions that a man might play.”²³ For Hamlet such enactments of grief are inadequate, as the “customary suits of solemn black” and physical manifestations like tears and a depressed posture fail to “denote me truly.”²⁴ Few other characters in the play, however, express a similar scepticism about the ability of knowing others through outward signs. Polonius, for instance, advises his son Laertes that “the apparel oft proclaims the man.”²⁵ Laertes, likewise, when warning his sister of the danger Hamlet presents to her female virtue, suggests that even though constrained by his social position, Hamlet’s “temple,” or physical body, functions as the ambassador of his inward self, expressing outwardly his inner desires.²⁶ And Claudius, for all his criticism of Hamlet’s grieving demeanour, accepts the prince’s sorrow as part of his “filial obligation” and a trustworthy representation of his interior sorrow.²⁷ Even Gertrude, who suggests that by altering his outward manifestations of grief Hamlet might move beyond a state of mourning, observes the particularity of her son’s sorrow with a genuine belief in his pain and conveys a desire to help him moderate his passions.

While Hamlet’s sorrowful demeanour and outward expressions of grief, therefore, seem very real, if immoderate, to his family, for him they seem singularly inadequate. In particular Hamlet questions his inability to adequately express his deep sorrow at his father’s death, despite his effort to perform his passions through “outward

²³ *Hamlet*, 1.2.82, 84.

²⁴ *Hamlet*, 1.2.78-83.

²⁵ *Hamlet*, 1.3.71.

²⁶ *Hamlet*, 1.3.1-14.

²⁷ *Hamlet*, 1.2.91.

show.” His demonstration of mourning, at this early point in the play, suggests an attempt to project a self most in line with his grief. For Hamlet, the death of his father ushers in a nihilistic viewpoint: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!”²⁸ Unable to move beyond his grief, Hamlet allows his sorrow to tinge everything he sees with emptiness. Although castigated by his uncle for his excessive grief, Hamlet suggests that such public displays of anguish mark him as a reasonable human being in tune with his passions. For Hamlet, sincere mourning—a mourning that upholds both traditional practices and speaks to inner sorrow—denotes rational humanity.

Yet as Michael Schoenfeldt notes, for early modern individuals “the pain of grief is an intrinsically private experience,” which is evidenced by Hamlet’s perspective taking over the play and by his inability to publicly articulate his grief, save to the theatre audience.²⁹ Therefore, despite his disgust over his mother’s incestuous relationship with her former brother-in-law, Hamlet cannot openly speak about his pain over Gertrude’s betrayal. Instead, he can only lament: “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue,” suggesting not only that his grief is inherently interior and impossible to speak of fully, but also that openly condemning his mother’s remarriage is politically dangerous. This inability to publicly articulate his grief causes him greater sorrow and a forced inwardness and isolation from those individuals he cares about, including his mother and Ophelia.³⁰ In the politically corrupt world of Denmark, outer shows of excessive grief offer the prince his only avenue for expression, forcing him to initially stage his mourning identity through outward signs rather than openly articulating his inner condition.

28 *Hamlet*, 1.2.133-134.

29 Schoenfeldt, “Shakespearean Pain,” 195.

30 *Hamlet*, 1.2.159. As Schoenfeldt notes, a number of early modern writers, including Montaigne and George Puttenham, suggest that speaking about pain and grief could relieve individual suffering because articulating sorrow is by nature communal and reciprocal. See Schoenfeldt, “Shakespearean Pain,” 197-199.

The visitation of his father's ghost, however, makes Hamlet channel his grief into revenge, a position that threatens to inhibit Hamlet's mourning by further limiting the way he can express his identity as a mourner. By asking Hamlet to revenge his death, the Ghost relies on Hamlet's love and sense of duty, urging him to action on the basis of his feelings: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love. . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."³¹ Hamlet responds in kind, promising that because of his love he will channel his grief into a violent revenge:

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.³²

Here, the "wings" Hamlet invokes suggest the iconography of death as a winged angel, linking violence to prayers and love, suggesting that revenge is both divinely sanctioned and the most apt form of grief. And, according to Stephan Laqué, "the ghost's appearance seems to serve as a kind of catalyst which causes Hamlet to learn to remember and to learn to mourn."³³ Yet the Ghost's call to revenge is more than just a call to mourn, which Hamlet has been performing in sight of the entire court. Rather, the Ghost's injunction to Hamlet presents the prince a corrective in the precise masculine type of mourning he should be enacting on behalf of his murdered father. His father offers Hamlet only one role as mourner, that of the revenger, who must through violent action remember and honour the dead. Michael Neill correctly notes that Hamlet's task as revenger is "construed as the only kind of reckoning that can perfect this broken narrative."³⁴

In choosing to undertake his father's plan, however, Hamlet is constrained to keep his true emotions concealed, lest he alert Claudius

31 *Hamlet*, 1.5.23, 25.

32 *Hamlet*, 1.5.29-31.

33 Laqué, "Not Passion's Slave," 270.

34 Neill, *Issues of Death*, 218.

to the plot and fail to fulfill his father's will. Although the action of revenge seems to provide the prince with an opportunity for an outward display of grief, it does not resolve his concern with authenticity. Hamlet is compelled by the love he holds for his father to perform a mourning persona that conforms to the Ghost's terms of masculine action, which requires violent deeds, not just the passive feminine signs Hamlet outlined to his mother and Claudius as markers of his woe. Nor can his grief be expressed openly through words. "His encounter with the Ghost," according to Neill, "while it redoubles the burden of memory, also reinforces the necessity of silence."³⁵ Hamlet needs to prove the extent of his grief not with rituals or speech, but through bloody acts. Fulfilling the Ghost's commandment, however, proves difficult for Hamlet for such an identity requires him to reshape his mourning in an unfamiliar way, which will require a reassessment of his approach to performing his grief.

However consonant it is with Hamlet's pain, the Ghost's demand for revenge narrows Hamlet's grief into a socially understandable framework in which his agency is bound to another. Viewed from this perspective, in pursuing revenge Hamlet becomes a sort of martyr to his father's cause, substituting his father's brand of mourning for his own attempts to express his grief and all other passions and relations that have in the past defined his selfhood. In his response to the Ghost's call to revenge, Hamlet promises to "wipe away" from his memory "all trivial fond records, / . . . all pressures past / That youth and observation copied there" and become an empty vessel for his father's demands.³⁶ Thus, Hamlet believes that in order to carry out the Ghost's request he must relinquish his own desires and allow himself to feel only vengeful emotions.

Following the ghostly visit of his father, Hamlet must purge himself of his previous emotional attachments and personal interests in order to direct his sorrow into violence. Forced to replace his passions, including perhaps his yearning for Ophelia and his desire

³⁵ Neill, *Issues of Death*, 225.

³⁶ *Hamlet*, 1.5.99-101.

for the Danish throne, with the singular longing for revenge, fails to resolve Hamlet's issues of performing a grief consonant with his interior emotions; instead, his father's command to revenge necessarily short-circuits his ability to enact a meaningful mourning persona. Indeed, Hamlet's oath to uphold his father's will and subjugate his own desires becomes a desperate attempt to funnel all of his emotions into one brutal act that will prove to himself that he loves and remembers his father. To successfully make his deep loss mean something, Hamlet needs to control and shift his passions from ritualistic expressions of mourning to violent deeds, and such a change requires time. Throughout Act 2, Hamlet manages to hide his desire for revenge from the court so that he can work on channelling his grief into appropriately masculine anger. By playing up the impact of his grief and exacerbating its imprint on his psyche, Hamlet is able to confuse his step-father, mother, Polonius, and Ophelia, all of whom struggle to define and understand the causes of his seemingly mad behaviour. By feigning madness, Hamlet hopes that his family and the court will forget that he mourns or believe that his mourning has caused him to lose his sanity. For Hamlet, his willingness to play the dejected lover and the madman position him to take his revenge.

In a particularly enlightening article on Michel de Montaigne's influence on the performance of identity in early modern drama, Joan Lord Hall notes that "the question of how far a man can avenge murder without being corrupted by adopting the role of revenger is central to *Hamlet*."³⁷ And while Hall's assessment of the prince's performativity is correct, the question of Hamlet's developing habit of presenting himself as mad remains perhaps more central to an assessment of the role of grief in his concept of self. Hamlet's outward shows of melancholy and insanity, while interpreted as truth by other characters, are dismantled through his soliloquies, which reveal a man haunted by his inability to portray a grief consonant with his emotions. Indeed, in soliloquy Hamlet expresses his passions, his

37 Hall, "'To Play the Man,'" 177.

grief, and his fears to the audience. Alone on the stage, Hamlet's soliloquies attest to his conflicted relationship with playing the role of revenger. And through these soliloquies, the audience receives constant reminders of Hamlet's attempts to unify himself through his commitment to mourning his father by avenging his death.

Responding to the player's representation of Hecuba's lament for her lost husband, Priam, one of Hamlet's first major soliloquies attests to the prince's failure to apply his inward sorrow towards the creation of a more authentic mourning performance. By asking for this particular speech, which the player notes "Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven / And passion in the gods," Hamlet allows himself to vicariously experience a fuller expression of grief.³⁸ The player, despite the theatrical and obviously feigned nature of his monologue, lets fall the tears Hamlet has denied himself. So impacted is Hamlet by this sight of grief, that he envies the player who,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage waned
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit . . .³⁹

Hecuba's lament, which Hamlet views as a release of real emotions through artistic conceits, shows the prince how the outward performance of mourning can actually "force [the] soul" to feel true passions. In fact, more than soliloquies, such social enactments of grief could work to bring emotions to the surface and further develop a self in line with individual feelings.⁴⁰ The speech reminds Hamlet of his earlier enactment of excessive grief, interpreted as feminine by Claudius, and which he now struggles to hide through

38 *Hamlet*, 2.2.457-458.

39 *Hamlet*, 2.2.491-495.

40 According to Ramie Targoff, during the early modern period many individuals believed that "external practices might not only reflect but also potentially transform the internal self." See Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 3.

his “antic disposition.” His engagement with the player’s speech is more than just Hamlet’s realization that representations of mourning are “things a man might play,” rather it is a trigger causing him to bewail his inability to express his passions. The player, who cannot truly feel sorrow, yet can display all the outward signs of grief in a meaningful way to the audience, shows Hamlet the possibility of using performance to generate real grief. For Hamlet, the player’s speech mirrors his own desire to mourn his father through outward signs of sorrow. Due to his father’s ghostly decree, however, Hamlet must remain “Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / And can say nothing.”⁴¹ Indeed, although “prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell” Hamlet struggles to enact the type of grief his father demands of him.⁴² His delay in carrying out this violent form of masculine mourning, of being able to channel his grief into proper revenge, seems based upon his inability to access the necessary passions in a manner that is simultaneously socially acceptable and authentic to himself. Yet, as the player’s speech reveals, part of this process involves acting out grief, which may serve as a catalyst by which Hamlet can harness his emotions towards that end.

While in soliloquy Hamlet expresses his grief and laments his inability to swiftly carry out his father’s command he struggles to perform his mourning publicly because avenues for its expression are not consonant with his interior sorrow. The soliloquy in particular, because of its private nature, inadequately addresses Hamlet’s needs. The prince requires not just the lone expression of his interiority, but rather a relational communication that allows for a social verification of his grief. Indeed, perhaps the clearest manifestation of early modern subjectivity is not the soliloquy, but instead social enact-

41 *Hamlet*, 2.2.507-508. Scholars often read the phrase “unpregnant of my cause” as representative of Hamlet’s inability to act on his father’s command and take revenge. Yet instead of discussing action, Hamlet here brings up speech acts, suggesting that without the ability to verbally express his grief to others he is unmoored from the very feelings that prompt him to enact vengeance.

42 *Hamlet*, 2.2.523.

ments of the self.⁴³ Restricted by the Ghost's directive to transmute his grief to revenge, Hamlet initially resists. He wants to mourn in a way that he controls and his father's attempts to orchestrate Hamlet's emotional response, while couched in terms of love, sever the prince from performing a grief consistent with his emotional state and his understanding of his selfhood.⁴⁴

To get around his inability to sincerely enact his grief, Hamlet turns to the theater, staging before the court a representation of his mourning that vicariously voices his suffering. *The Murder of Gonzago* works to not only convince the prince at last of Claudius' guilt, it also functions as a way for Hamlet to publicly express his ideas about grief and death, while at the same time doing so from a distance in order to test his resolve to avenge his father's death. In particular, the Player King's words reflect on Hamlet's need to embrace his masculine mourning persona in order to carry out revenge. For Hamlet, the *Murder of Gonzago* is more than simply a mouse-trap; instead it serves as a way for the prince to work through his grief and resolve many of the issues first raised in Hamlet's Hecuba soliloquy.

The Player King, although representative of the deceased monarch, King Hamlet, also acts for Prince Hamlet, expressing his conflicted position in regards to mourning and hope for a harmonious end to both the plot in which he is embroiled and his own life. As the Player King questions his queen's promise to never marry again if he should die, his words seem to echo Hamlet's earlier ruminations:

43 John Jefferies Martin promotes this idea in his study of early modern individualism, contending that "the Renaissance self, while protean, was almost always understood as the enigmatic relation of the interior life to life in society." See Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, 16.

44 As Stanley Cavell notes, "the father's dictation of the way he wishes to be remembered—by having his revenge taken for him—exactly deprives the son, with his powers of mourning, of the right to mourn him, to let him pass." See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 188.

But what we do determine oft we break.
Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity,
Which now, the fruit unripe, sticks on the tree.
.....
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.⁴⁵

Here the Player King laments the distance between the Player Queen's earlier emotional experience and her current loss of passion, which he fears will cause her to break her promises. More than simply suggestive of Hamlet's own delay, such sentiments explain how Hamlet's ability to mourn in the masculine way proposed by his father hinges on the prince's capacity to harness his passions for a specific purpose. Similarly then to his response to the Hecuba speech, Hamlet recognizes that without the enactment of his grief to bring his passions to the forefront he remains unable to employ his emotions towards revenge. In short, Hamlet has not yet learned to combine public verbal expressions of sorrow with masculine action. Furthermore, by suppressing the outward performance of his grief, Hamlet has blunted the passions required for such action.

Near the ending of the Player King's speech, however, the theme turns to mortal ends, proposing for both Hamlet an end that matters. While acknowledging that his queen's promises and passions will probably end with his demise, the Player King still notes the possibility of individual meaning in the face of others' mutability:

But, orderly to end where I begun,
Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.⁴⁶

These lines testify to Hamlet's overarching problem of how to enact his grief. The Player King's words epitomize the dichotomy between Hamlet's will (his desire to make his mourning consonant

45 *Hamlet*, 3.2.183-187, 190-191.

46 *Hamlet*, 3.2.206-209.

with his inner passions) and his fate (his need to fulfill the Ghost's command). Yet even within these constraints, the prince holds out hope that while his narrative ending may not be of his choosing, his thoughts will remain his own, which suggests possibilities for the development of a positive and meaningful mourning persona—one that combines social communication with masculine action.

Despite his staging of his interior thoughts through *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet still struggles to come to terms with the mourning identity imposed by his father. Although he believes Claudius' guilt verified by his reaction to the play, Hamlet at first fails to avail himself of the opportunity for revenge when he sees his uncle at prayer. In the closet scene, however, Hamlet finally takes masculine action, and thinking that his uncle hides behind the arras, stabs Polonius instead. Thwarted in his intention, despite his enactment at last of masculine grief worthy of his father's memory, Hamlet subsequently wavers in his decision to transmute his sorrow into revenge. Visited by the Ghost, Hamlet admits to his tardiness in performing his father's directive and links again his failure to a lapse "in time and passion."⁴⁷ In return, the Ghost exhorts him that "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose," thereby reminding him of his duty to honor his promise to his father and his need to use the passion, linked by Hamlet via the Player King to purpose, to shed the blood of Claudius. Yet Hamlet's response to the Ghost's directive is compromised by Gertrude's reaction to the wildness of her son's gaze, threatening Hamlet with disclosure of his excessive grief. He begs his mother:

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. Then what I have to do
Will want true color—tears perchance for blood.⁴⁸

Hamlet fears to express his grief in the excessive style that characterized his demeanor before the Ghost's call to revenge. Differentiating

⁴⁷ *Hamlet*, 3.4.107.

⁴⁸ *Hamlet*, 3.2.127-130.

between the two competing forms of mourning, Hamlet realizes that by stabbing Polonius he has embraced the masculinity identity of a revenger (albeit the death of the old advisor is the intent of neither Hamlet nor the Ghost). Thus, Hamlet struggles to negotiate the strictures placed upon the expression of his grief, still hoping to find a way to perform a mourning that seems authentic to his passions.

Hamlet's reaction to Polonius' death reveals his continuing doubts about revenge as the proper form of mourning. He regrets the murder, viewing it as God's punishment:

For this same lord,
I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.⁴⁹

The prince's words here suggest that his violent action stems not from his own will or passion, but rather from a divine force that controls his destiny. By accepting his role as "scourge," Hamlet becomes, according to sixteenth century definitions, both "an instrument of divine chastisement," and a destroyer of lives.⁵⁰ Yet at this point his role in the narrative of revenge still remains reactive, based as it is on the will of the father or heavenly forces. Deprived of the expression of his passions, Hamlet now seems stripped of the impetus required to carry out his father's command. Instead, the only type of agency accessible to him at this point, due to the absence of any other route of expression consonant with his interior grief, seems to be an in-depth contemplation of mortality. Therefore, rather than moving swiftly to kill Claudius, Hamlet spends considerable time focusing on humanity's powerlessness over death. These musings, like his own inability to reject the role of mourning revenger, suggest to him the meaninglessness of grief amidst the horrific commonness of death and its annihilation of human differences.

⁴⁹ *Hamlet*, 3.4.172-175.

⁵⁰ See "scourge, n." *OED*.

Following Polonius' death, Hamlet obsesses in particular over the process of bodily decay, and by doing so, forces himself to confront what Gertrude and Claudius had previously noted: the universality of death. Such contemplation, however, moves Hamlet towards accommodating the ubiquity of mortality within his need to personalize his grief.

Robert Watson notes that the fear of death “lies in its indifference, which steals away the differences by which and for which we live.”⁵¹ For Hamlet, this indifference is summed up by his observation to Claudius that “Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but to one table.”⁵² Indeed, as both Watson and Neill point out in their studies of early modern understandings of death, one of the most fearful aspects of human mortality for a society fixated on the differences of status was the ability of death “to abolish all the boundaries of humane definitions and significance.”⁵³ Fear of death as “The Great Leveler” permeates Renaissance literature, and a wide range of individuals commented that death assaulted identities rooted in outward markers of difference.⁵⁴ For Hamlet the power of death to erase identity exerts a powerful and sobering reality. As John Hunt points out, the body, Hamlet realizes, is merely “a shadow through which nonbeing beckons . . . a composition of parts that will inevitably fall apart and decompose.”⁵⁵

Hamlet's attention to death's levelling attributes continues in the graveyard scene, which critics often argue is the most significant scene of the entire play because it moves Hamlet towards his final revenge. The space of the cemetery, as Neill reminds us, is a paradoxical location signifying not just memory, as shown through

51 Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, 98.

52 *Hamlet*, 4.3.22-24.

53 Neill, *Issues of Death*, 12.

54 See, for instance, the early modern theologian William Harrison's observation that human bodies “will become a thing of naught: the beautie of them will fade, they shall be deformed, and most ougly to behold.” Harrison, *Deaths Advantage*, 26-27.

55 Hunt, “A Thing of Nothing,” 34.

monuments to the dead, but also oblivion, represented by the confusion of skulls and decaying human remains.⁵⁶ The gravedigger epitomizes the latter idea through his song:

But age with his stealing steps
Hath clawed me in his clutch
And hath shipped me into the land,
As if I had never been such.⁵⁷

Throughout the scene, the gravedigger constantly refers to the leveling aspects of the graveyard, responding to Hamlet's morbid curiosity with tales of decay. Yet although Hamlet seems adept at grasping the graveyard's denizens' loss of distinction, he constantly reimagines the dead as living beings, as if fighting the annihilation of death. In the space of the graveyard, rather than focusing on death's universality, Hamlet ponders the individual lives of the deceased and comes to view personalized grief as worthwhile.

Hamlet's confrontation with the bodies and skulls suggests that, rather than simply signifying the dissolution of humanity, his grief allows him to give the bodies meaning. Neill reads Hamlet's interactions with the gravedigger and skulls as pointing "to an end beyond even the skull's sign of apparent finality—the absolute anonymity and severance from meaning" shown through his final ruminations on the fate of Alexander's postmortem fate.⁵⁸ However, Hamlet's actions and words following this encounter actually show that he refuses to accept meaningless death and the lack of justification for mourning that comes with it. Instead of noting the skulls as only signs of abjection, Hamlet imagines the men who once breathed and moved, questioning, "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?" and inventing a past for the skull: "This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his

⁵⁶ Neill, *Issues of Death*, 234.

⁵⁷ *Hamlet*, 5.1.67-70.

⁵⁸ Neill, *Issues of Death*, 235.

double vouchers, his recoveries.”⁵⁹ Although his historical recovery of the dead man cannot recreate a full person, Hamlet here hints at the details of a life, envisioning social relationships that insert the deceased into the world of the living. The prince individualizes the dead man, providing the unknown skull with a plausible past identity, thereby giving meaning and humanity to what has become merely an object. In addition, Hamlet’s reflections on death extend to a man he once knew, his father’s jester, Yorick. And while the prince is obviously disturbed by the sight of a skull that he once kissed, his thoughts turn to memories of the man that border on the passionate mourning he once tried to display for his own father. Following this train of thought Laqué contends that “the mortal remains are refuse only to the gravedigger, while to Hamlet they are significant objects of contemplation.”⁶⁰

Rather than viewing the burial grounds as a reminder of human indistinction, the graveyard becomes a place where Hamlet can battle his fears of individual annihilation through imagination and memory, and at last reclaim his mourning identity by incorporating outward shows of excessive grief and violent revenge. While in the first three acts, Hamlet has tried to constrain the expression of his grief and channel his emotions into the masculine mourning decreed by the ghost of his father, his unperformed interior passions ultimately resurface as a more authentic performance of grief. Struck by the meaninglessness of life and death posited by the gravedigger, he chooses instead to embrace what he believes will provide significance to the dead: a mourning that will “suit the action to the word, the word to the action.”⁶¹ The graveyard shows Hamlet the need not just for action, but for a personal and personalized action, fitted to his particular case and subordinated to his own sense of self rather than the expectations of others. Hamlet, therefore, redefines himself and gives voice to his passions, allowing himself to embrace his

59 *Hamlet*, 5.1.92-93, 97-99.

60 Laqué, “‘Not Passion’s Slave,’” 277.

61 *Hamlet*, 3.2.17-18.

identity as a mourner who can express himself through both displays of ritualized mourning and through violence.

By contemplating death's ability to strip human beings of individuality, as signified by the skull of Yorick and the opened tombs, Hamlet moves to reassert his identity as prince and lover. Upon learning that the burial ritual taking place in the churchyard is that of Ophelia, the prince reacts with a grief that combines words and action. In her analysis of *Hamlet*, Margreta de Grazia, who interprets the play as preoccupied with matters of inheritance and takes to task the critics who obsess over the causes of Hamlet's delay, notes the difficulty for critics in assessing Hamlet's violent reaction to Ophelia's death and his passionate leap into her grave, asking: "How can such abandon be consistent with the self-possession of his meditation? . . . How is his outrageous lack of control to be reconciled with his new-found composure?"⁶² However, Hamlet's change here is not a shift from composed acceptance of his upcoming death, but instead a realization of how, through both active masculine grief and ritualistic displays of anguish, he can perform his mourning identity. Indeed, Hamlet's passionate enactment of mourning is the result of his struggles to make his outward expressions of sorrow consonant with his interior passions. His response to Ophelia's death, therefore, is a turning point for the prince, allowing him for the first time to connect his inward emotions to the outward presentation of his grief.

Hamlet's first statement to the crowd gathered around Ophelia's newly dug grave is both a claim of selfhood and a definition of that identity as a mourner. Posing rhetorical questions, Hamlet obliges the gathered crowd to gaze upon him and verify his subjectivity:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.⁶³

62 de Grazia, *Hamlet Without Hamlet*, 152. While de Grazia's intervention against the tradition of reading Hamlet through a psychological lens merits further study, her privileging of action over character seems to close off interpretations of the protagonist's reaction to losses that encompass not only the material, but also the social and relational.

63 *Hamlet*, 5.1.243-248.

Instead of hiding behind his “antic disposition,” Hamlet allows himself to express the passions he has kept under wraps since the visitation of the Ghost. He claims that his expression of mourning exhibits strength and passion, moving beyond the earlier suspect shows of grief over the death of his father to a marvellous moment of subjectivity that makes the audience take notice. By publicly—rather than through soliloquy—performing an act of grief that denotes more fully the interior man, Hamlet here comes closest to a genuine portrayal of his mourning identity. Laqué notes that in this scene Hamlet reveals “his new-won capacity to accept the passions,” but this is not completely correct.⁶⁴ The prince, when alone on stage, has deftly expressed his desires, lamented the loss of his father, and raged against his inability to properly harness his passions. This moment, rather than showing just an acceptance of feelings of grief, instead becomes an outward manifestation of “that within that passes show.”

In the churchyard, surrounded by the bodies of the dead and stirred by his newly discovered grief for his former beloved, Hamlet finally performs the mourning identity that defined his earliest attempts to give meaning to his father’s demise. Just as importantly, he also identifies within himself the righteous masculine anger his father’s ghost insisted he needed to become the avenging son. Hamlet tells Laertes that “though I am not splenitive and rash, / Yet have I in me something dangerous,” asserting the mourning identity of violence, but simultaneously noting his ability to base this violence on reason rather than impulsiveness.⁶⁵ He claims to love the deceased Ophelia more than “forty thousand brothers,”⁶⁶ and lists the actions—both those active and masculine and those deemed suspect by early modern thinkers as immoderate and ill advised—that he might perform for the deceased. These performances of mourning, Hamlet declares, show that his grief is more than that of Laertes, and can be exhibited

64 Laqué, “Not Passion’s Slave,” 279.

65 *Hamlet*, 5.1.251-252.

66 *Hamlet*, 5.1.259.

through both feminized forms of lamentation like tears and fasting and manly customs such as leaping into the open grave and fighting. His grief is his own.

Although the graveyard scene provides Hamlet with the ability to fully express his mourning identity and allows him to prepare for the moment of revenge, the prince lets the timing of his bloody action remain undetermined and accedes that decision to providence. Scholars remain notably divided by Hamlet's assertion of providence's place in his life. Neill argues that by alluding to providence, Hamlet "abandons all attempts to script [the ending] for himself" as if placing himself as a passive actor in someone else's plot.⁶⁷ Yet, by using the term "readiness," Hamlet attests to his agency. As James L. Calderwood points out, readiness implies more than simply "a condition of preparedness"; readiness connotes an achievement, a mastery of the self that allows Hamlet to express mourning in its fullest.⁶⁸ And this readiness means that Hamlet, rather than fearing the timing of his death, accepts its possibility and feels prepared to meet that end.

Called upon to participate in a fencing match against Laertes, Hamlet assures Horatio that no matter the outcome, he is at peace with his role and ready to assume his violent masculine identity when needed:

There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.⁶⁹

Here Hamlet figures out how to manage the problem of fate. He declares that despite his lack of control of the timing of his revenge, he can still maintain a self by deciding to perform his vengeance. With his mourning identity finally fully recognized and expressed,

⁶⁷ Neill, *Issues of Death*, 238.

⁶⁸ Calderwood, *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*, 77-78.

⁶⁹ *Hamlet*, 5.2.197-202.

Hamlet therefore attests to a readiness to attend to the violent action of manly grief. If he dies in the endeavour, so be it; the prince is fit both to inflict death and to die because he believes that despite the “undiscovered country” he may enter, the present business of revenge will provide his life and death with meaning as he will at last prove his love for and grief over his father. The significance beyond the mortal life is the concern of providence.

Arthur Kirsch, linking Hamlet’s statement of providential grace to his mourning, surmises that this declaration means “that the great anguish and struggle of his grief is over, and that he has completed the work of mourning.”⁷⁰ Yet this interpretation fails to account for Hamlet’s complaint to Horatio just moments earlier: “how ill all’s here about my heart.”⁷¹ Instead of an end to his suffering, Hamlet embraces his mourning as part of his continuing identity; his grief becomes something he can claim, outwardly give voice to, and enact. The role of the revenger, therefore, no longer feels as if it has been externally imposed; rather, Hamlet accepts this task as consonant with his passions. Unlike Hieronimo, who removes his tongue to end the expression of his mourning over his son’s murder and thereby provides narrative closure to his enactment of revenge, Hamlet chooses to fully incorporate his sorrow into his life and remain ready for the final moment when he can express his sufferings through both word and action. Hamlet’s final moments on the stage show that he has linked his earlier expressions of grief with his father’s call to violent action. When the time is ripe, the prince strikes with words and a sword thrust, declaring before the gathered court:

Here, thou incestuous, murd’rous, damnèd Dane,
Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?
Follow my mother.⁷²

Combining his grief finally with the proper action, Hamlet is vindicated, but his grief continues to work itself out through his own dying fall.

⁷⁰ Kirsch, “Hamlet’s Grief,” 32.

⁷¹ *Hamlet*, 5.2.190-191.

⁷² *Hamlet*, 5.2.308-310.

Hamlet's death provides a conflicting resolution to his problem of constructing the proper mourning persona. As we have seen through the play, Hamlet struggles to incorporate the grief of the avenger into his concept of himself as the mourning son. Because such a role is imposed on him by others and as his expressions of grief are truncated by the need to restrain his public mourning, Hamlet turns inward, relating his passionate sorrow only in soliloquy. After his graveyard confrontation with the body of the dead Ophelia, though, Hamlet realizes that a performance of mourning that publicly incorporates both words and deeds can most fully give voice to his grief. As Robert Watson rightly notes, "by the time Hamlet completes his revenge, he seems no longer to be working at the behest of the ghost, but on behalf of a compulsion to achieve shape and purpose in his own foreshortened lifespan."⁷³ Having obtained the revenge demanded by his father, Hamlet seems to resort to the same anxieties stressed by the Ghost in the first act. He begs Horatio over and over again to remember him, and laments his lack of time:

O God Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.⁷⁴

Hamlet here sounds concerned with earthly matters—his reputation, his inability to express the grief that led to these tragic events, and his need to be remembered. Yet in this call for remembrance, Hamlet offers Horatio a chance to profit from the lessons he has learned about grief. By insisting that his friend "absent thee from felicity" and "draw thy breath in pain," the prince encourages Horatio to feel his grief and give voice to his suffering. Having discovered the way to unify his mourning identity, Hamlet encourages Horatio to believe that grief can be expressed through both actions and public verbal expression, both of which he had struggled to perform. Therefore,

⁷³ Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, 96.

⁷⁴ *Hamlet*, 5.2.327-332.

while Hamlet's final words—"the rest is silence"—attest to the end of his mortal existence, the work of mourning and the ability of those left behind to incorporate grief into their understandings of themselves, remain of paramount importance.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ *Hamlet*, 5.2.341.

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