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# Something Rotten: *Hamlet's* Onto-Ecology

Christopher Ross McKeen

“In this very violence something rotten in law is revealed.”

—Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” (68)

The field of *Hamlet* criticism in recent decades can be described as a resistance to ‘modern’ readings of the play. This approach is most evident in Margreta de Grazia’s recent book on the play, in which she argues that only with modernity—broadly defined as the epoch stretching from the eighteenth century to the later twentieth—does Prince Hamwlet emerge from the play as a fully psychologized and interiorized individual whose internal crises elide other issues the play raises, issues that would be far more important to Shakespeare’s Renaissance audience (de Grazia 18–19). Implicit within this argument is an understanding of modernity as the age of the individual subject, whose philosophical primacy was unthinkable beforehand and has become untenable in our own postmodern age. Delineating the limits of the *Hamlet* of modernity will, implicitly, open up new possibilities for interpretation that get beyond the modern centrality of the individual subject.<sup>1</sup> And yet, as Katharine Maus suggests, the assumption that subjective interiority did not exist, at least as we conceive of it, in the early modern period might itself be a projection of our own; “Perhaps it is not the people of early modern England,”

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1 De Grazia defines her objective as “not to identify what the play was in 1600 but rather what it could not possibly be after 1800 and as long as Hamlet’s interiority was taken as the vertical subject of the play” (5).

she writes, “but we, the postmodern academic heirs of Wittgenstein, Lacan, Marx, Austin, and Foucault, who experience difficulty thinking of individuals apart from external matrices . . . and who are attracted to the notion that selves are void” (Maus 27–28). Despite their differences, however, both de Grazia and Maus tell a history of the individual subject, the former narrating its rise in the eighteenth century, the latter its gradual fading from critical consciousness. For both, intriguingly, *Hamlet* holds a crucial position, either as a figure around which modernity’s notions of the subject congealed or as a sign for the crucial problem of interiority in a past era.

In this thesis, I would like to approach the problem of *Hamlet* and the history of the subject from a somewhat different angle. Rather than attempting either to demonstrate the emergence of the modern subject in *Hamlet* or to demystify this subjectivity by reference to historical and political forces, I will argue that the play itself already stages this conflict for us by binding subjectivity to a temporal horizon. This temporal structure, however, is complicated by the presence of the enigmatic ghost, whose appearance initiates the play’s action. As a result, the play figures time not as a linear movement, but as a cyclical reincorporation of the past into the present, a notion made manifest in the play’s pervasive imagery of death and decay. In Prince Hamlet’s imagination, human creatures become masses of flesh, processing the dead remains of other organisms, only to die, rot, and change into new matter. Such decay extends further into the entire state of Denmark and eventually serves as a symbol for the erosion of systems of meaning that give order to human life. Within such a conception of human existence, our ontological status gets caught up in a network of living things and we become mere moments in impersonal life processes that transform the body from one matter and use to another.

### The problem of interiority

Hamlet’s ontological anxieties first appear, not in relation to larger political, historical, or ecological forces, but on a very personal level through a problematic relationship within his own being. With his first appearance onstage in act one, scene two, Hamlet articulates this internal division through his insistent use of the word “seems.” After

his mother asks why the death of his father “seems . . . so particular with thee,” he replies,

Seems, madam? Nay, it *is*. I know not ‘seems’.  
 ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,  
 . . . . .  
 Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief  
 That can denote me truly. These indeed ‘seem’,  
 For they are actions that a man might play;  
 But I have that within which passeth show. (1.2.75–85)

These lines, which describe a severed relationship between appearance and reality, *is* and *seems*, might suggest that Hamlet faces the crisis of the Cartesian *cogito*: body is severed from mind as mere representation and appearance, with no necessary connection to true thinking essence. Yet whereas Descartes performs his exercise in skepticism as a model for what any might do, Hamlet’s complaint is more individual; as his frequent use of personal pronouns suggests, he sees himself as an exceptional case in which bodily actions fail to refer to interior states. Only *he* has “that within which passeth show.” The rupture between outward action and his inward grief becomes, for Hamlet, a defect in his own body.

Indeed, despite Hamlet’s insistence in this soliloquy that he experiences an inner state not manifest in outward appearances, he is continually surprised to find that other characters may be similarly divided. Upon learning that Claudius murdered his father, for example, Hamlet replies by setting down in his memory that “one may smile and smile and be a villain” (1.5.109). Hamlet has discovered that, not only can Claudius appear as something he is not, but he can do so by choice. The king’s separation of his outward appearance from inner being is an act of deception, and thus an expression of his control of appearances, rather than an insufficiency of appearance. Claudius’s self-control presumably even inspires Hamlet’s own campaign of deceit, “put[ing] antic disposition on,” thereby becoming, in essence, an actor, turning the dissociation of appearance and inner being that had been his weakness to his own advantage (1.5.173). Nonetheless, Hamlet continues to depend on bodily signs as a means of “reading” others, particularly in his use of players to expose Claudius’s guilt. There is a profound irony here:

Hamlet (and Shakespeare, self-referentially) uses theatre in order to provoke a bodily response in the king that will reveal the state of his soul. Yet theatre, as a cultural practice, relies on the separation of outward show and inner being. Actors drawn from the lower classes may present themselves as variously kings, merchants or the opposite gender. More to the point, an actor may feign emotional states and mental conditions: in Hamlet's words, the actor, "in a fiction, in a dream of passion / Could force his soul so to his whole conceit," that the performance becomes more believable than reality (2.2.529–30). Hamlet goes on to admit that the power of such performances can "Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed / The very faculty of eyes and ears," so that the audience can no longer trust its own perceptions (2.2.542–43). In sum, Hamlet's treatment of performance, both on stage and in life, shows it as allowing one's actions to be divorced from one's inner states, making any attempt to read into a person's mind through their appearance problematic at best. Despite this difficulty, however, the prince decides to rely upon a scheme of performing a reenactment of his father's murder before Claudius, in the hopes of provoking some legible response.

What is perhaps most surprising, then, is that the plan works. Claudius is disturbed by the play, and, as we learn by his soliloquy in the next scene, Hamlet correctly interprets his behavior. Yet almost immediately thereafter, Hamlet's belief in the possibility of reading the inner state of an individual from outward, physical appearances proves false and prevents him from seizing his revenge. Following the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet finds Claudius in his chambers in an attitude of prayer, apparently "in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage" (3.4.85–86). Assuming Claudius's appearance allows him to understand, referentially, the state of his soul, Hamlet allows his uncle to live, not wishing to send the murderer directly to heaven. Such appearances, of course, deceive the prince, for Claudius finally admits "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below," and his attempts at prayer fail (3.4.97). Claudius's performance may deceive Hamlet, but he cannot similarly fool himself.

Shakespeare's presentation of the mind-body problem, as the preceding analysis has shown, significantly complicates the central

thesis of Cartesian dualism, that mind and body are two distinct and unlike substances. Rather, the varying relationship between mind and body—the latter sometimes faithful to, sometimes misrepresentative of the former—positions them as interacting substances closely bound to one another in something of a power struggle. Claudius, in hiding his guilt, Hamlet, in feigning madness, and the actors—both the characters and the living performers onstage—are able to exert a measure of control over their bodies, putting them to deceptive ends. Conversely, Hamlet’s frustration at the start of the play and Claudius’s fruitless attempts at prayer provide us with two opposite, yet structurally similar moments in which body and soul refuse to act in harmony. In the first, Hamlet’s body does not adequately express his inner anguish; in the second, Claudius’s soul is unable to comply with the king’s physical attitude of repentance. Within the play, then, the crucial question in the mind-body problem is not whether the two correspond exactly with one another—whether outward appearance is true to inner being—but whether they function in harmony with one another, working towards the same end, be it deceptive or honest.

In this way, *Hamlet* situates the ontological<sup>2</sup> question of the relation of mind to body in the self to the Renaissance virtue of self-discipline. The control of the self constituted a central moral imperative of Renaissance ethics, influenced largely by the revival of Stoicism and the continued influence of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* both within philosophical circles and in the grammar schools (Scodel 1–4). Moreover, as Michael Schoenfeldt has argued, self-discipline also entered into medical discourse as the path to health through regulating the body’s humors, such that “the consuming subject was pressured by Galenic physiology, classical ethic, and protestant theology to conceive all acts of ingestion and excretion as very literal acts of self-fashioning” (Schoenfeldt 11). Such self-control would seek to counteract the influence of the body on the mind as articulated by the humoral theories of the body in the Renaissance, in which the disposition of the various humors within the body shaped the character of the individual (Schoenfeldt 2–3). Humoral theory thus

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2 Ontology is the branch of philosophy concerned with Being, that is, the nature of existence.

provides us with two possible lines of influence in the creation of the self, one originating with the body to shape the soul, the other beginning with an act of the will to control the body's actions. Importantly, it is the latter mode of self-fashioning that is tied to virtue and considered a distinctly human mode of being. Drawing from Aristotle, Renaissance natural philosophers developed a theory of the organic soul composed of three levels: the vegetative soul, common to all living beings and responsible for the nutrition and reproduction; the sensitive soul, responsible for movement and perception; and the intellectual soul, responsible for the will and the higher mental faculties, such as reason (Park 464). Thus, the virtuous individual will manifest his<sup>3</sup> humanity through actively shaping his identity, and by doing so through rationally determined moderation. Thought and action become the key distinguishing features of the human, and, as a long tradition of *Hamlet* scholarship has argued, a conflict between these two spheres constitutes the core of Hamlet's crisis in the play.

It is perhaps no accident, then, that Hamlet pointedly raises this conflict through the question of the animal. In act four, scene four, the prince chides his own inaction, asking, "What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?—a beast, no more" (4.4.9.23–25). The physical demands of the body render the human an animal. Only a few lines later, however, the prince continues his self-interpretation to describe how "Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th'event" has kept him from committing the act of revenge he has sought (4.4.9.30–31). In these lines, Hamlet establishes the grounds for an opposition between animal and human upon this "thinking too precisely on th'event," a situation possible only for humans, possessed of the intellectual soul. Curiously, though, Hamlet places the proper path for human action between these two extremes: while action (a property of the sensitive soul) without memory (a property of the intellectual soul) prevents him from achieving his revenge, so too does an excess of thought.<sup>4</sup> Hamlet's search for a middle way

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3 Or her, though the position of women in Renaissance philosophy is, of course, problematic at best.

4 For the properties of the three "souls" that compose the individual, see Park 466.

thus exposes a paradox built into the very manner of separating human and animal, for it is only by an excess of thought that the determination of a correct path can be found. Indeed, soliloquy itself dramatizes thought over action; it functions as a kind of internal deliberation, with characters arguing with themselves again and again. To posit the possibility of an excess of thought, to interrogate oneself in order to determine if one is “thinking too precisely” is already to think too precisely.

The crisis of action that arises with the question of this excess of thought is akin to what Heidegger describes as the ontico-ontological difference. Heidegger explains this distinction in the introduction to *Being and Time* with his definition of the human mode of being as *Dasein*: “Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned *about* its very Being” (Heidegger 53). This is to say, humans are distinguished from among other existing entities because they care about what that existence means. They exhibit something of an excess of thought that reaches out of their mere fact of being in order to reflect upon the nature of their existence. This fundamental characteristic of *Dasein*, however, also constitutes its fundamental problem, for that entity that begins to question the meaning of its own Being is already wrapped up as a part of the question: “We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself” (Heidegger 54). We thus seem to face an endless feedback loop, in which the question of Being can never definitively be answered, as any answer can only be provided from within Being itself. To resolve this challenge, Heidegger must displace the very problem he raises by asserting that, while ontology necessarily presupposes Being, it does so “not as an available *concept*” but as a void, “not a matter of grounding in deduction but rather of laying bare and exhibiting the ground” (Heidegger 49). At the center of our Being is only an empty place where presence should be. Heidegger’s ontological question thus involves, albeit on a less directly psychological level, the same problems of interiority that plagued Hamlet and that have become so crucial to our historical narratives of the Renaissance period. Like subjective interiority, Heidegger’s notion of Being constitutes an obsessive point of



inquiry, yet remains an inaccessible, or at the very least, elusive blank spot, only approachable through the networks of meaning produced through “being-in-the-world.”

I turn to Heidegger, not simply because of the parallels that exist here between his writings and the problems I wish to address, but because of how this notion of “being-in-the-world” allows us to rethink what *action* might mean. It has become a critical commonplace to envision Hamlet as a character flawed by his inability to act, and as in the soliloquy from act four previously quoted, he certainly frames his problem in such a way. Both “bestial oblivion” and “thinking too precisely” lead to inaction, either from forgetting the need to act or from delaying action through excessive consideration. Action, it seems, is only possible between these two ontological poles. Heidegger’s notion of “being-in-the-world” along a temporal axis implicitly places Being in relation to other entities, revealed only through action within these relationships. Being thus changes from an essence to something more diffuse, resembling a network. In this way, action for Hamlet would involve not simply acting out his revenge, but, more significantly, creating a web of meaning in the world; conversely, his inaction cuts him off from such systems of meaning. As outlined in the introduction, de Grazia argues against the tendency in modern *Hamlet* criticism to abstract the Prince from the play; as doing so creates a rupture in the meaning the text creates. I would suggest, however, that within the play itself, Hamlet is cut off from his familiar structures of meaning and that his crisis of action reveals a more fundamental epistemological crisis: Hamlet cannot act, for he cannot interpret the world in which he finds himself.

### Law, ontology, and structures of meaning

This crisis of interpretation is most forcefully represented in the play by the enigmatic figure of the Ghost. The Ghost raises a number of theological concerns, including the possibility that, as Hamlet suggests, it “May be the devil” (2.2.576). Particularly interesting for the questions at hand is the way in which several characters attempt to secure an understanding of this entity through reference to the body it resembles. Bernardo proclaims that the Ghost appears “In the same figure like the King that’s dead” and Horatio addresses it as that

which appears “Together with that fair and warlike form / In which the majesty of buried Denmark / Did sometimes march” (1.1.39, 45–47). Hamlet even more emphatically reads the spirit through the King’s body, asking the Ghost

Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,  
Have burst their cerements, why the sepulcher  
Wherein we saw thee quietly enured  
Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws  
To cast thee up again. (1.4.28–32)

Shortly thereafter, he calls the spirit “dead corpse,” that is, body (1.4.33). The referential relationship between body and soul is still insisted upon, even in the moment where it appears most tenuous. In the Ghost we have the very manifestation of the ontological separation of soul from body, as well as the greatest insistence on the semantic unity of the two. As a result, the apparition escapes any attempt by the characters to interpret it. The Ghost exists ontologically outside of any workable structure of interpretation available to the characters; to be understood, they must turn to the dead King. Even the Ghost itself excludes itself from any available interpretable position, as he informs Hamlet that he has been

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.10–13)

The most obvious referent here is Purgatory, yet for Shakespeare’s largely Protestant audience the existence of Purgatory itself was doubtful—or at the least problematic—rejected by strident reformers, though still upheld by many among the laity (Greenblatt 14). Purgatory itself, then, was part of a structure for interpreting the world that had passed away and become somewhat uncanny, familiar yet uncertain. Residing neither in heaven nor in hell, the Ghost is confined to an ambiguous “outside,” a state, crucially, situated likewise outside of his “days of nature.”

The Ghost’s exclusion from the structures of meaning at work in *Hamlet*—the exclusion that results in its unstable interpretation—also, crucially, founds those interpretive structures. Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet both sets the play in motion and establishes a

new legal situation. For Walter Benjamin, such law-making acts of violence give shape to our notions of history and thus of interpretation more generally. In “Critique of Violence,” he writes, “positive law demands of all violence a proof of its historical origin, which under certain conditions is declared legal, sanctioned” (Benjamin 64). In order for a state to allow an act of violence, the violence must show its derivation from historical sanctions which the state acknowledges as legitimate. However, such historical origins, Benjamin goes on to argue, are themselves rooted in violence without legitimized foundations in history: “If, therefore, conclusions can be drawn from military violence, as being primordial and paradigmatic of all violence used for natural ends, there is inherent in such violence a law-making character” (Benjamin 66). In other words, military violence, and all violence of its kind, establishes a new legal authority, rather than preserving an old one.

Jacques Derrida extends this general argument in a lecture on Benjamin’s essay and argues that “the very violence of the foundation or position of law (*Rechtsetzende Gewalt*) must envelop the violence of conservation (*Rechtserhaltende Gewalt*) and cannot break with it” (“Force” 38). Even the violence, according to Derrida, inherent in upholding the law in fact creates the law anew with each act of enforcement. The history of any system of laws, then, takes on a complex character, in that it is both revealed (the historical foundations of authority are consistently cited) and concealed (the continual regeneration of this historical foundation is denied via a reference to a justice that supersedes all law). Again, Derrida: “To be just, the decision of a judge, for example, must not only follow a rule of law or a general law but must also approve it, confirm its value, by a re-instituting act of interpretation, as if ultimately nothing previously existed of the law, as if the judge himself invented the law in every case” (“Force” 23). The historical foundations of law are thus insufficient for acts of judgment. “In the founding of law or in its institution, the same problem of justice will have been posed and violently resolved, that is to say, buried, dissimulated, repressed” (“Force” 23). History hides its own historicity. Moreover, a concept of history becomes central to problems of interpretation, for justice requires an

interpretation of the law, and the law's interpretability depends on an understanding of its historical narrative.

If Hamlet, then, cannot act because he cannot interpret his world, this is because his father's murder has instituted a new legal situation and thus a new set of possible interpretive structures. Hamlet plays, for instance, with his dual relationship to Claudius and Gertrude following their marriage, referring to them as "my uncle-father and aunt-mother" (2.2.358–59). Each of these relationships structures Hamlet's social world according to a different set of rules and obligations. Later in the play, when the prince confronts Gertrude in her bedroom, it becomes clear that each of these characters has committed him or herself to either the old or new social order: Gertrude warns Hamlet that "thou hast thy father much offended," to which he responds, "Mother, you have my father much offended" (3.4.9–10). For Gertrude, Hamlet's "father" is Claudius, to whom he owes the deference of a son; for Hamlet, his "father" is the late king, to whom he owes vengeance upon Claudius's head. Claudius's murder of King Hamlet and marriage to the Queen has opened a new way of interpreting Hamlet's social identity. Whereas the Queen is willing to abide by the social structures as they exist under the new regime, Hamlet attempts to secure the validity of the old system by claiming the authority of the dead king.

The Ghost's relationship to these interpretive structures in the law thus brings us back to the ontological questions that Hamlet's soliloquies address so obsessively through its impact on identity. For Giorgio Agamben, a position such as the Ghost's—that of an entity excluded from a system, which nonetheless gives rise to and shapes that same system—grounds our understanding of law. According to Agamben, the political structures of Western civilization are shaped by a notion of the sovereign who stands outside the law, a figure that stands parallel to that of the fugitive reduced to "bare life," Agamben's interpretation of the Greek *zoē* as the pure fact of living, as opposed to *bios* as a qualified form of life "proper to an individual or group" (Agamben, *Homo* 1). Because of this, he writes that "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign*

*power*” (Agamben, *Homo* 6). He goes on to clarify this statement, writing that “at once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested” (Agamben, *Homo* 9). Agamben’s argument rests on a separation of categories from the domain of law, which categories constitute the very possibility of the law’s existence. “Bare life” is excepted from the law in the bodies of those banned from the legal realm, yet such a banned state nonetheless bares a relation to the law, for it is the sovereign, the being who decides on the exception, who institutes the ban.

It is worth noting here that Agamben uses a number of topographical metaphors in his analysis of the structures governing law’s relationship(s) to its subjects. He writes of how the collapsing of exception and rule in the modern state brings *bios* and *zoē*, along with notions of “outside and inside” the law, into “a zone of irreducible indistinction” (Agamben, *Homo* 9). Agamben is not alone in his use of this metaphor: Jacques Derrida takes up a related set of spatial concepts in his reading of Franz Kafka’s “Before the law” in his essay of the same name. Midway through this essay, Derrida examines the multiple senses of the “before” in the title with respect to the story’s two characters: the doorkeeper and the man from the country “are both before the law, but since in order to speak they face each other, their position ‘before the law’ is an opposition.” For this reason, although “the law figures itself as a kind of place, a *topos* and a taking place,” this place is split, both by the characters’ spatial relationships and by the doubling of the phrase “before the law” as both title and *incipit*: as Derrida writes, “The double inscription of ‘*Vor dem Gesetz*’ flanks an invisible line that divides, separates and of itself renders divisible a unique expression. It splits the line” (Derrida, “Before” 200–201). Both Derrida and Agamben, then, describe the topography of law as bound into indeterminate and paradoxical structures. Derrida differs from Agamben, however, in articulating a multiplicity in law’s relation to its subjects, whose statuses “before the law” take on differing modalities. The “before,” moreover, takes on temporal, as well as spatial dimensions; entry to the law, for the man from the country, is always “delayed, adjourned deferred” (Derrida, “Before” 202).

This spatio-temporal characteristic brings the relation of law to its subject into correspondence with Heideggerian ontology, with its articulation of the temporal horizon of Being. This alignment of time and space gives law what we might call a “world-making” character. Much like Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*, the human subject before the law is open to a closedness; although the door to the law “always remains open, marking a limit without itself posing an obstacle or barrier,” the man from the country “must force himself, give himself an order, not to obey the law but rather to *not gain access* to the law, which in fact tells him or lets him know: do not come to me. I order you not to come to me. It is there and in this that I am law and that you will accede to my demand, without gaining access to me” (“Before” 203). The subject before the law, like *Dasein* before its own Being, is profoundly aware of the inaccessibility of that foundational category as such.

Both Derrida’s and Agamben’s analyses of law presume a singularity of the law, which may nonetheless relate to subjects (as Derrida notes, in particular) in different ways. As Bradin Cormack has recently noted, “English law presented itself to Tudor and Jacobean culture less as a given whole than as, still, a system of shifting jurisdictional realities” (Cormack 2). Jurisdiction, rather than sovereignty, becomes the focus of Cormack’s critique of early modern law because although “as the infrastructure of the juridical order, jurisdiction is already inside the discourse and technology that critical genealogy means to counter,” it nonetheless “remains a powerful index of just how unstable these operations are, and as such constitutes a limit within the law where critique does become imaginable” (Cormack 7). By presenting the law as a number of overlapping spaces, each governed by a different set of rules, jurisdiction reveals the contingent nature of legal normativity. Furthermore, if we are to understand law as a kind of ontology, as Derrida’s essay certainly does when mapped against Heidegger, we might then see jurisdiction as opening up a space for divergent “ways of ‘being-in-the-world,’” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has phrased this possible rereading of Heidegger with an attention to historical and cultural difference (Chakrabarty 21). Rather than the monolithic tyranny of Being which critics of Heidegger have seen in his thought, both Chakrabarty and (read

ontologically) Cormack envision a *Dasein* in which the *Da*—the ‘there’—is multiple.

My criticism of his treatment of the law notwithstanding, Agamben takes up this understanding of multiple “ways of ‘being-in-the-world’” in another work, *The Open*, in which he addresses the problem with respect to animal being. In exploring the possibilities of post-human thought through a thorough rereading and critique of Heidegger, Agamben turns to animals for a model of different possible ways of existence that might have no relation at all to the Being of *Dasein*. Of particular relevance here is his discussion of the work of zoologist Jakob von Uexküll on the meaning of environment, *Umwelt*, as distinguished from objective space, *Umgebung*, as that space which carries with it certain marks of significance for an individual (*Open* 40). Each species inhabits an *Umwelt* which overlaps with all other species in the *Umgebung*, as indicated by the various significances a flower may have for a cow (food), an ant (path), or a human girl (for a bouquet) (Agamben, *Open* 41). Agamben thus complicates the concept of a binary human/animal divide, allowing for a plurality of animal worlds, which, as Laurie Shannon has indicated, is more in line with Renaissance classification of what we call “animals” into beasts, birds, and so forth (Shannon 173–4). This coexistence of several of spheres of effective meaning within a single space shares a structural similarity, furthermore, with Cormack’s notion of jurisdiction.

Moreover, Agamben’s interest in referentiality returns us to the issue that opened our reading of *Hamlet*, that is, the (uncertain) capacity of external signs by the body to refer to states of the soul within. For Agamben, it appears, this sort of referential capacity is specifically characteristic of *animal* engagement with the world: for animals, he writes, there exists “an intense and passionate relationship [with their marks of significance] the likes of which we might never find in the relations that bind man to his apparently much richer world” (Agamben, *Open* 47). Animals are defined by an obsession with the teleological ends of signs in their environments. They are bound up in the referential relationship of the sign to its signified, what Uexküll describes as the tick’s reaction to the “signal” of butyric acid odors which “causes her to abandon her post and fall

blindly downward toward her prey” (qtd. in Agamben, *Open* 46). Agamben opposes this animal engagement with its environment to a Heideggerian notion of human “openness” to not just environment, but to “world.”

My point with this theoretical digression is to indicate something of the correlation between ontological systems, separating various sorts of beings, and legal structures, establishing relationships between beings and their interpretive worlds. For Hamlet, the crucial insight is the possibility of multiple ways of engaging with this world. Hamlet’s crisis centers not on metaphysics—on the essence of humans or animals *as such*—but rather on the relations between such things, between the “bestial oblivion” and “thinking too precisely” that each turn action into inaction. Following the death of his father, Hamlet is caught between two incommensurate interpretive structures: that in which he must avenge his father’s death and that in which he must show loyalty to the man whom all Denmark apparently recognizes as the legitimate king. The problem *Hamlet* poses thus involves the relationships between varied structures, the way such categories are bound together and function. A concern, we might say, for the ecology of such philosophical and political systems. And in *Hamlet*, this system, too, is falling apart.

### Decay and cycles of history

One can hardly go through a scene in *Hamlet* without some reference to decay and the perverse emergence of life from such rot. To take just two early examples, the world, to Hamlet, is “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely” (1.2.135–7), and with his appearance in the next act he implicitly associates Ophelia with an image of how “the sun breed maggots in a dead dog” (2.2.182). It is no accident that both these images involve not only decay, but also generation: the death of the dog and the plants in the garden give rise to weeds and maggots. Such a link between the two establishes them as part of a cyclical system in which matter transforms and regenerates. This system becomes explicit when Hamlet speaks with Claudius in act four concerning Polonius’s body: Hamlet tells the king that Polonius is “at



supper / . . . / Not where he eats but where he is eaten<sup>5</sup> . . . We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table” (4.3.18–24). And again:

Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king,  
and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.3.27–31)

Human flesh here becomes situated as part of the food chain, both consumer and consumed. Moreover, this network into which Hamlet places the human body biologically becomes highly charged politically. Death does not simply work as the great leveler, making king and peasant equals. Instead, this ecological network makes possible the beggar’s advancement over the king. Nature brings about revolution not only in the sense of a radical change but, more importantly, in a sense of perpetual turning and cycles.

The capacity for such life systems to cut through social classes by treating all as the subjects of the same natural laws parallels a certain concept emerging in the period concerning the power of civil law to create social equality. As Debora Shuger has shown, late sixteenth-century colonial efforts by the English were understood, in some circles at least, as ensuring a type of freedom that cut across social distinctions by making all individuals subject to the same civil law (Shuger 512). In *Hamlet*, however, such social leveling comes about not through law, but through decay; nonetheless, such decay is closely bound to civil law, emerging as what we might call a sort of “natural law.” Early in the play, for example, Laertes describes how, as the legal authority of the land, Hamlet’s actions and condition affect “The sanity and health of the whole state,” which responds to his orders as the “yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head” (1.3.21–24). And yet Hamlet is decidedly not the individual holding authority in Denmark. Rather, the entire system of hereditary monarchy, of the sort with which an English audience would be familiar, has been upset with Claudius’s rather than Hamlet’s ascendancy to the throne (de Grazia 1). Things have come out of order in

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5 I have modernized “a is eaten” to “he is eaten” for ease of reading.

the proceedings of the state and “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.67). This imagery of decay throughout the play binds the collapse of legitimate legal authority with the ecological systems that continually create new life out of dead matter. But whereas the legal theorists Shuger cites see equality emerging out of civil law and society, Shakespeare goes further in *Hamlet* to show both law and the reshaping of social hierarchy as the product of natural forces of growth and decay. They are forces that continue with or without human intervention.

The cyclical nature of such systems reflects the narratives of sixteenth-century English histories, and in particular those around 1580. Earlier accounts had tended to portray the English as derived from Roman origins, with the current nation the product of a long decline from Classical civilization; William Camden’s *Britannia* of 1586, however, constructed the history as a gradual ascent from a barbarian past, assisted in great measure by the Romans (Shuger 495–97). What both narratives share is an equation of civilization with the Classical Roman past. Civil, and hence legal authority, are grounded in history. For Hamlet, however, this history is one of decay. “To what base uses we may return” he say to Horatio in the graveyard; the horizon of human being is no more that a return to dust: “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, and of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel” (5.1.187, 192–95). Hamlet reads human temporality, not as Heidegger’s Being-towards-death, but more so as a Being-towards-thingness. Human history and human Being become forgotten as it merges in with the natural world. The result is largely what Walter Benjamin often described as “natural history.” Eric Santner has described this concept of Benjamin’s, writing:

We truly encounter the otherness of the “natural” world only where it appears in the guise of historical remnant. The opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with the materiality in nature—the “thingness” of nature—is, paradoxically, most palpable where we encounter it as a piece of human history that has become an enigmatic ruin beyond our own capacity to endow it with meaning, to integrate it into our symbolic universe. (Santner xv)

Hamlet does manage to integrate these remnants of humanity, but only as objects for mere use.

What, then, can we make of this body-turned-thing, this entity which no longer fits into our semantic web, whose referential power is continually insisted upon, yet which consistently fails to offer any certain semiotic meaning? One possible solution is offered by Benjamin in his concept of history as, in Santner's words, "the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning" that arise through the violence that creates law, not just in terms of legal institutions, but as entire systems of society and meaning (Santner 17). "[N]atural history," for Benjamin, "is born out of the dual possibilities that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that give it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality" (Santner 17). Despite its removal from the human social and semiotic world—the Ghost's position "outside" any realm and the body's transformation in decay—the dead king nonetheless exerts an influence, a demand for attention on the new and strange world. The Ghost stands as an entity with the quality of what Agamben describes as "Being in force without significance" (*Homo* 50–55). The uncanny familiarity of past human existence within the natural world and the objects that surround us appear to call out to us but, removed from the network of reference that once gave them meaning, these beings cannot signify in any usual way. The experience is akin to Bill Brown's interpretation of Claes Oldenburg's *Typewriter Eraser*, an enormous statue of an object once familiar but now completely foreign to a digital world (Brown 15–16). The object feels out of place, even as it remains compelling.

*Hamlet* thus reenacts the central problems in our interpretation of Renaissance culture, our desire to see the period as at once utterly foreign to our own, and yet simultaneously familiar, demanding our recognition as a part of our own selves. The prince reduces the human body to at once a part of history and an object in everyday use, a part of the heroic past and the banal present. The coexistence of these two spheres renders the interpretive ramifications of an ever-changing legal structure, the validity of which must be asserted with each act of justice, into a component of our ecological situation, in

which growth out of decay constantly recycles the material of our lives into new form. Robert Watson has recently argued that late Renaissance concerns with the environment show how “our struggles with ecology are, in an important sense, an extension of struggles with epistemology” (Watson 335). *Hamlet* shows, however, that the reverse may be true—that our struggles with epistemology and interpretation may be tied to our struggles with the ecological processes governing our world.

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