

# Shakespeare's Double Play

by David P. Gontar (October 2014)

In which we hoist a dram of eale with Messrs. Frank Kermode and Ted Hughes, and Prof. J.E.G. Dixon joins in.



This heavy-headed revel east and west  
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.  
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase  
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though performed at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.  
So, oft it chances in particular men  
That, for some vicious mole of nature in them –  
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,  
Since nature cannot choose his origin,  
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens  
The form of plausible manners – that these men,  
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,  
His virtues else be they as pure as grace,  
As infinite as man may undergo,  
Shall in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault. The dram of eale  
Doth all the noble substance over-daub  
To his own scandal.  
(Q2, I.4 (I. 18. I))

## I. Hamlet's Secret Identity

In his recent *Shakespeare's Language*, Frank Kermode draws attention to Prince Hamlet's blog on the "dram of eale," claiming it's a sort of personal confession rather than abstract disquisition.

[Hamlet] may be thought to have *himself* in mind, not as a drunkard, of course, but perhaps as a melancholic. He is saying something obliquely *about himself* in the context of a generalization about human character . . . (Kermode, 107, emphases added)

This is plausible. But in employing the “dram of eale” trope does Hamlet intend his sadness, or that which yields it? A “vicious mole of nature” planted in the human breast bears toxic fruit, *n’est-ce pas*? This “dram,” then, is a conceit used to characterize not melancholy but rather that from which it stems. Shakespeare seems to imply that there is a dose of toxin in our constitution which often undermines the strengths of individuals and conduces to their own “scandal.” We may view this as a secular reprise of an old religious idea. (See, *e.g.*, *Genesis*, 3:1-24) We are invited to consider that in the dram of eale oration Prince Hamlet is pondering the root of his private disconsolation.

What makes him so ill-sorted, so cranky? In Act One, he actually muses about doing away with himself on account of nothing more than the insouciant coupling of Gertrude and Claudius. (“O, that this too too solid flesh,” I, ii, 129-159). Grant that sprinting to the altar after the loss of a husband may not be in the best of taste, it will yet be readily agreed that no one in the “real world” becomes self-destructive on that account alone. And childish pouting at those nuptials is conspicuously poor deportment indeed. Certainly this hysterical behavior is a clue to the original condition of Hamlet’s psyche. Ignoring it might allow the meaning of the tragedy to slip away.

Horatio and Marcellus lead their grumbling friend to the ramparts at Elsinore where a peregrine spirit resembling his father has been seen in the wee hours taking a turn amongst the crenellations. As festive cannons blast the frigid air, Hamlet delivers this jeremiad on the “dram of eale.” As he hasn’t yet come across the ghost, he knows nothing of his putative father’s murder. The “dram of eale” refers not to that. It may be associated with his queasy sense that something is amiss in Denmark, but, whate’er it be, it is squarely lodged within himself, as coterminous with his “birth.” And yet there is nothing palpable. What bothers him is a mere quiddity, its features not yet come to light. It must be something “scandalous” in him – but what? This is the cryptogram we are charged with deciphering on pain of misconceiving the entire drama. When he sets out on the path of revenge, we tend to forget that Hamlet’s malaise precedes that mission. The only thing we know at first is that he professes to be in protracted mourning over father’s death, and seems to come all unglued over the union of his mother with the late king’s brother. Yet a similar deed ruffled no feathers when young Henry Tudor took to wife Katherine of Aragon, the widow of his deceased brother Arthur. And the Gertrude/Claudius match is easily accommodated at the amiable court of Claudius. Only the dark Prince is distressed, a solitary party pooper. Why should this

“common” conjugal union (I, ii, 72-72) trouble him so? Even as an affront to public decency, it’s trivial, a mere social wrinkle. The atmosphere at court is that of a jazz funeral. Aren’t Claudius and Gertrude right to chide him for his surly manner? What’s he to Gertrude or she to him that he should weep over her, especially during her honeymoon?

We must either lay hold of the secret or give up on these maddening scenes. But to prevail we need to recognize that the most searching question is not, “Why does Hamlet delay in taking revenge for his father’s murder?” but rather: What is the basis for the state of profound dejection in which we find him *as the curtain rises*? Unless these early doings are pure chaff, they serve a vital purpose. Perhaps if we focus on what the “dram of eale” represents we will be in a better position to understand Hamlet’s temporizing. But the more closely we examine Kermode’s exegesis the less it appears to teach us about the nature and significance of this lethal brew.

It is more than a little curious that not only does Hamlet not explain his moroseness, he rejects out of hand the crowd of eager do-gooders who would assist him in learning what ails him. The ministrations of Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are sharply resented by him. Recall his shrill accusation that R&G would presume to “pluck out the heart of my mystery.” (III, ii, 353-354) Aren’t they at least in part acting in his own behalf? Would he prefer to suffer hidden grief in isolation? His intolerance of their curative interventions appears as an extension of his unwillingness to look with sufficient intensity into himself to detect the cause of his unhappiness. What on earth is so disturbing that it cannot even be glimpsed?

Most striking is that Hamlet’s willful myopia about himself is shared not only with his compatriots but with the audience as well. The “inexpressibly horrible thing” which T.S. Eliot complains Hamlet cannot “heave up” into his consciousness remains lodged within his soul and ours, no more to be exhumed by us than it could be by the anguished hero himself. And whatever is afflicting him behaves like a contagion. René Girard’s thesis that love in Shakespeare is transmitted mimetically seems to apply, then, to other phenomena as well. Hamlet’s nescience is mesmerizing.

What is this play into which we march so boldly but a hall of mirrors, a respiring dream with which we so merge with the protagonist that we become afflicted by his complexes and limitations? After all, you can’t have it both ways. Fail to identify with the protagonist and it’s impossible to appreciate and understand him. But just to the extent I do identify with him, his symptoms become mine, and the objectivity necessary to know him dispassionately or scientifically evaporates. We are stunned. We cannot perceive his blindness because we

ourselves have a blind spot as voracious as any black hole in space. In attending to this play, then, we do not read "about" Hamlet, but enter body and soul into his dream of life with him. There is thus no way to make our entrance into Hamlet's cosmos without becoming entranced. Can we awaken in the midst of his reverie without bursting its seams?

The proof of our utter somnolence and oneiric delusion is the astounding fact that, although all the information we require is in plain sight, after 400 toilsome years, what lies at the root of Hamlet's psyche remains clouded. So tainted are we by Hamlet's pathology that we cannot connect the dots.

Take Frank Kermode as an example. What's on his radar?

1. The dram of eale speech is Hamlet's personal confession. (Kermode, 107)
2. It is about Hamlet himself. (Kermode, 107)
3. The dram of eale is a fundamental defect, the moral correlative of "birth." (line 9)
4. It so undermines the virtues of its host that it causes a "scandal." (line 22)
5. The drinking analogy is suggestive of a seminal substance taken within the body so as to cause corruption. (line 19)
6. It is "obvious" that at work in the language of Hamlet are the topics of adultery and incest. (Kermode, 101)
7. These ideas are related to questions of personal or dual identity. (Kermode, 101)
8. When we are introduced to Prince Hamlet, his mood is strongly dysthymic. Particularly disturbing to him is the habit of Claudius of referring to him as "my cousin . . . and my son." (Kermode, 103)
9. The first words Hamlet speaks, "A little more than kin, and less than kind," are a bitter retort to Claudius's reference to Hamlet as "my son." (Kermode, 103)
10. Whatever is ailing the Prince is internal. ("I have that within which passeth show;" Kermode, 104)
11. Hamlet refers to Claudius as "my uncle-father." (Kermode, 112)
12. Hamlet is revolted and disgusted with incest. (Kermode, 112)

13. As everyone knows, Gertrude and Claudius marry soon after the coronation.

14. Hamlet is passed over for the Danish throne.

15. Prince Hamlet seems to have a great fear of women because of the risk of being cuckolded by them. (Kermode, 115-116)

Can these jig saw fragments be assembled in such a way that we begin to discern at least in outline what Hamlet's problem is? Can we detect the elephant which is not only in the room but treading on our toes?

Let's see.

Hasty marriage implies prior acquaintance. We have no way of knowing how long Gertrude and Claudius have known one another, and there is certainly a dramatic insinuation that King Hamlet has been cuckolded. As the dram of eale is potable, it connotes sexual deliquescence. Exchanging and internalizing of bodily fluids would have been involved in any such amatory enterprise and could easily have led to pregnancy and birth. These were the days before birth control and abortion. Any child born of such an extramarital affair would be the product of adultery and incest. Under those circumstances the reference of Claudius to Hamlet as "my son" would gain in sense, as would Hamlet's reference to Claudius as my "uncle-father." Conceiving of Hamlet as an incestuous bastard would entail an "unkindness" on his parents' parts. Were he the son of Claudius, Hamlet would be the object of a great scandal, explaining why his actual identity is never vouchsafed to him by his mother or anyone else. In practical terms, Hamlet would be left with a dual identity, at once the son of King Hamlet the Dane and simultaneously the son of Claudius! There would then be excellent reason for him to be disgusted with his mother, not, weakly, on account of free-floating misogyny, but directly, because her infidelity brought him into this condition of low repute. And Hamlet's genealogical corruption would render him ineligible to succeed King Hamlet the Dane, hence explaining why he is passed over for the Danish throne at the outset of the play. These interlocking implications achieve an extraordinarily high degree of coherence and explanatory value. It is that coherence and heuristic potency which have yet to be addressed by conventionally minded readers.

No doubt all of this can be discussed and even challenged, but the fact that these implications are never confronted so as to bring the issue up for examination strongly suggests that the brains of generations of readers have been short-circuited. Myopic literary criticism recapitulates the neurotic rationalizations and prevarications of the lead character. As good exegetes, we would certainly need to rule out the possibility that Hamlet

is an incestuous bastard. But unless those terms were included in a differential diagnosis they could not be rationally set aside. The condition precedent to insight is raising the right question. To do so we must emerge from our mental fog. What we are constrained to acknowledge at last, therefore, is the existence of a mass parapraxis whose astonishing longevity implies that this play has never been read objectively but always in a state akin to hypnotic trance. Like his predecessors, Frank Kermode had in his possession every scrap of data needed to grasp the crux of Prince Hamlet's malaise. He knows quite well that Hamlet's emotional breakdown commences prior to the encounter with the ghost. Yet this crucial fact is glossed as complacently as if we were all high school sophomores.

We . . . hear Hamlet's first soliloquy well before Hamlet has understood that he is to be forced into the role of avenger, although he already hates his life because of his mother's too hasty marriage to a man he despises, his false father. (Kermode, 104)

Really?

Notice that in this characterization the aspects of (1) mourning and (2) incest are omitted, allowing full responsibility for Hamlet's suicidal despair to be chalked up to Gertrude's zestful remarriage to her brother-in-law. But, after all, how old is this guy, now an advanced philosophy major at the university? Is he a helpless child confined in a flat and forced to put up with an abusive step-father? On the contrary, he is a dazzling courtier, a brilliant young grad student trained in the arts, residing independently at Wittenberg. Can such a royal superstar, "th' observed of all observers," having noted his mother's rush to conjugate the verb "to be" with a loutish lord, suddenly "hate his life" and toy with self-annihilation? Impossible. As Eliot in his positivist mood pointed out, an objective correlative is wanting. Kermode does nothing more than repeat the same canard he heard in prep school, never considering its incongruity and insufficiency. Yet ironically, it is just here that we totter on the brink of *Verstehen*: of course Hamlet hates his life, but *not* because Gertrude marries Hamlet's "false father" but rather because she weds his *true* one. The drummer to which Mr. Kermode marches detours in the absolutely wrong direction, and his followers are either blind or sleepwalking.

It is thus crucially important to assess Hamlet's cognitive state at this juncture. Though he is introspective, spectacularly intelligent and aware of everything, he is unable to fathom what is happening to him. He is running away from something but afraid to turn round to see what it is. For it's not the fear of mere illegitimacy, but the hideous prospect that he may be the son of the man he hates above all others, his *bête noir* 'Uncle' Claudius, which leads to Hamlet's disintegration. Descent from Claudius spells his ruin. Intense dread thus smolders

throughout the action, belching forth in the Closet Scene like ash and smoke in a seismic eruption. Think of it: like father, like son; were Hamlet the offspring of Claudius it would be all too likely that those wretched qualities for which Hamlet despises him are, if truth be known, part and parcel of the prince. In a very real sense, "Hamlet" is Claudius, Jr. That is a revelation so repugnant that the slightest color thereof would hurl him into madness. It cannot be. But how to ward off an idea without some sense of what it is and what it portends? Under such circumstances, consciousness oscillates, swings from vague apprehension of the very worst to panic, flight and forgetfulness. Madness, then, is not mere deviance or delusion, but the desperate attempt on the part of human beings to escape from a painful reality which is already in some sense intuited. During his entire life, Hamlet has been uneasy. Rumors about him have long circulated at court. He is different. He scents an atmosphere of derision, and naturally attempts to clear the air with bonhomie, jests and diversions. He plays the fool. All to no avail. His stubbornly keen perceptions of those around him convey the unwanted tale, for "there is a kind of confession in [their] looks which [their] modesties have not craft enough to colour." (II, ii, 281-282) Over and over he tells himself their smirks are cordial smiles, and at times almost believes it. Thus it stands when he receives word at Wittenberg that his father has died. He hies him home to find his uncle-father on the throne. His uncle? Prince Hamlet, the only son of King Hamlet the Dane, beloved scion of the Danish people, superlatively educated and groomed for rule, is thrust aside in favor of the late king's smarmy, complacent, mediocre brother. Why? Why elect the "incestuous" brother instead of the royal son and heir apparent? Is not the most refulgent character in all literature bright enough to tie his own shoelaces? Put two and two together? Can he not see that the reason he is not chosen as Denmark's sovereign is because those rumors slithering through the drafty halls of Elsinore are true? "Daylight and champaign discovers not more." (TN, II, v, 154) There is an absolute bar. He is not the late king's son. Of course he can figure this out, but it's too repulsive. He must therefore exercise all his ingenuity not to make the inevitable inference – but to avoid it. And that is what this awesome play is all about.

Hence with his return to Elsinore, Hamlet's existence becomes a prison. (II, ii, 246) It is a nightmare, a condition too awful to be true. It is a "bad dream." (II, ii, 256-267) And it is that bad dream into which we are flung, like the discombobulated visitors to Prospero's magic isle.

Not to worry. After a few hours we settle everything. We become scholars. Not only do we understand the play in its totality, we are lords of the text. We can evaluate it, detect its flaws, nod sagely with T.S. Eliot when he pronounces it an aesthetic "failure," or take refuge in the inertia of literary history. We are sophisticated, transcendent, above the clouds,

gazing down in benign condescension on poor William of Stratford and his quixotic efforts at stagecraft. And yet, strangely, we omniscient ones are no more successful than the play's demented hero, who cannot bring himself to see the painfully obvious. What has become of our vaunted insight? Our hermeneutical passion? Our relentless objectivity? They are as useless here as the weapons raised against Prospero by his unruly guests. We parrot what we learned in high school, and *voilà!* – The problem vanishes. We are indeed such stuff as dreams are made on (*The Tempest*, IV, i, 156-157), and when we step inside Hamlet's world we drain the cup of eale with him. Naturally our hasty textual renderings and conjectures, all clashing with each other and ushering in interminable disputes and ivory tower dust ups, soon collapse, persuading many cynical minds that the text is really nothing in itself, void of meaning, and will be, like an overly cooperative wench, whatever we wish it to be. We can trample it at will. Thus we pass in an instant from knowing everything to knowing nothing about *Hamlet*. We are then even less able to discern the truth of his being. Whether we play the role of theatrical conquistador, or clueless library visitor, in the end we crash and burn, and do so because we have not once taken the script for what it is. We have not the perspicacity of modest Bottom, who exults that he has dreamed a dream "past the wit of man to say what dream it was." (*MND*, IV, i, 203)

We are blinded by hubris. Paul de Man points out that each critic is afflicted by his own blind spot. The greater our insight, the more we inevitably overlook. It seems too that there is something infectious about this blindness, because there is an "aspect of literary language [which] causes blindness in those who come into close contact with it." (de Man, 106)

The insight exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe blindness as a phenomenon in its own right – the question of his own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask . . . . He has to undo the explicit results of a vision that is able to move toward the light only because, being already blind, it does not have to fear the power of this light. But the vision is unable to report correctly what it has perceived in the course of its journey. To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides. (de Man, 106) [*Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, by Paul de Man, University of Minnesota Press, 2d ed., 1983]

Reading and criticism have been dim for the past four centuries as a consequence of Hamlet's own inability to see himself. As he fears unconsciously to see himself as a possible son of his supposed uncle, and remains in flight therefrom, so it falls out that everyone who follows his footsteps, entering into his language and spirit, embraces to an indeterminate extent the prince's neurosis. Everything is taken at face value. Hamlet is Hamlet. Who would quibble over



that? But if, as Harold Bloom contends, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, is actually an extended poem, that is, a constellation of shifting metaphors afloat on the tides of language, it can never be explicated in literal terms. The son of the late King Hamlet the Dane casts a long shadow as the son of the King's brother. Modern criticism, for all its vaunted sophistication, misses that shadow.

But while we can acknowledge esoterically that Hamlet is none other than the son of Claudius (thus neatly accounting for why he cannot rush to his revenge), at the same time we cannot just dismiss the exoteric reading which, with some warrant, treats Hamlet as the son of King Hamlet the Dane. (Gontar, 406) Hamlet is the literary character *par excellence*, pointing like the Cheshire cat in opposed directions. He will not be reduced to a monocular apparition, a one-dimensional man.

Let's dwell on this for a moment. *The Tragedy of Hamlet* is a work of fiction. Prince Hamlet as we know him in this play never existed. As such, it would be a piece of arrant nonsense to contend either that this non-entity was the actual "son" of the late king or his brother. The question is not, Who is Hamlet's father? – but: What is the most satisfactory reading we can have of this play? Had these strange events actually occurred, what sense could we make of them? And it should be obvious that there is more than one way of accomplishing that. At first blush the Prince is generally received as the son of Hamlet the Dane. It is only after sustained reflection that we eventually find (with critics such as T.S. Eliot) that taken superficially the play presents so many baffling questions as to be nearly indigestible. As we gasp and grapple with this dilemma, it gradually dawns on us that some of these nagging questions and dilemmas might be eased if we perceive Hamlet's origins differently.

Though he misses the content of Hamlet's secret identity, Mr. Kermode makes a substantial contribution to the subject by underscoring *Hamlet's* doubling technique as an external representation of the protagonist's personal dualism. Thus, over and against Prince Hamlet we have the pedestrian Laertes, a natural foil. (Kermode, 105) We note Shakespeare's use of gratuitously paired persons, including minor figures Cornelius and Voltemand, and Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. (Kermode, 102) Why are we given a couple of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum courtiers? Why should two ambassadors have been sent to Norway? (I, ii, 26-41; II, ii, 59-85) Couldn't one have done the job? After all, Mountjoy the herald of France who visits King Harry in *King Henry V*, is *solus*. As for Hamlet, sooner or later we find that he has not one self but two, at once the son of King Hamlet the Dane and, as *doppelgänger*, the bastard son of Prince Claudius. There is not one ghost in *Hamlet* but two: (1) the ghost of the late king, and (2) the ghost-like Prince Hamlet, son of Claudius. It is the latter which haunts the hero and drives him mad. The doubled figures in the play reflect and underscore Hamlet's schizoid

identity.

This pregnant line of inquiry is extended and reinforced if we recall Hans Holbein the Younger's renowned 1533 English portrait *The Ambassadors* fashioned during the later reign of King Henry VIII. The reader will recall this painting, featuring an anamorphic skull visible only at an awkward angle. Though it's hard to imagine how a country bumpkin such as William of Stratford might ever have seen such a masterpiece, Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, Great Lord Chamberlain, and most likely a grandson of Henry VIII through Henry's daughter Elizabeth, would have long been familiar with this remarkable tour-de-force depicting George de Selve, Bishop of Lauvar, (1508-1541) and the esteemed French envoy Jean de Dinteville (1504-1555). The hypothesis that Shakespeare's Cornelius and Voltemand are patterned after Holbein's Dinteville and Selve should not be peremptorily dismissed. For it may well be that Holbein's ghostly skull is the forebear of *Hamlet's* spectral self and graveyard skull. The analogy is plain: as Holbein situates the spectral skull between the pillar-like figures of two French nobles, so Shakespeare gives us a divided Prince Hamlet suggestive of being simultaneously the son of Hamlet, Sr. on the one hand and Prince Claudius on the other. Lodged between these two father figures is the ghostly Prince Hamlet, exhibiting Janus-faced features which may not be resolved. Just as we cannot see Holbein's anamorphic skull unless we view the painting at an odd angle, so we cannot see Hamlet's ghost-like second self unless we step back from the action and observe the play from a different perspective, one in which we refrain from taking the narrative as it appears in plot summaries. When we begin to interrogate the play as it interrogates itself, Hamlet's second self suddenly materializes before us. Negative capability is all.

It should be mentioned in passing that this is not the first time that Hans Holbein the Younger enters Shakespeare commentary. In the analysis of the character Pointz in *King Henry IV*, we noted that in 1533, the same year *The Ambassadors* was painted, this artist made a well-known sketch of an English noble, "N. Poincs, Knight." This startling fact adds weight to the view that the author of the Shakespearean corpus was familiar with Holbein and influenced by him. (See, Gontar, 77-78) If we then repeat the exegetical exercise by considering the author himself, we see that Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford suffers the same schizoid condition: on the surface he is of course properly remembered as the son of John de Vere, the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. But a more thorough probing reveals compelling evidence that in reality he was – and remains – the biological son of Thomas Seymour and Princess Elizabeth. Oxford, the secret son of Seymour, writes his major play about Prince Hamlet, the secret son of Claudius. It is these shadows, these ghosts, which haunt the popular Shakespeare industry today.

It bears repeating, then, that the thesis advanced in *Hamlet Made Simple* and in the present essay is emphatically not the woolly-headed notion that the literary character Prince Hamlet "is" the son of literary character "Claudius." That sort of naïve literalism is ruled out *ab initio*. What we have done is trace the deconstructive action of the play in which an exoteric Prince Hamlet is shown to collapse into his opposite, as we apprehend the filial relationship of this Prince to "uncle" Claudius. Significantly, the dialectical transition from the fatherhood of the late king to that of his brother depends on the affirmation of the former. What makes the melancholy Prince so fascinating is precisely the way in which the shadow cast by the son of King Hamlet the Dane morphs into the "Mr. Hyde" figure of the bastard son of Claudius. Thinking through Hamlet's initial identity forces us to a more thorough understanding. What we are brought to see is that, from a phenomenological point of view, Hamlet is double. Seeing him that way gives him three dimensionality and meaning.

What role does the dram of eale play in all this? It is nothing less than a symptom of a "mind diseased." (*Macbeth*, V, iv, 42) The dram of eale soliloquy dramatically demonstrates that, prior to visiting his supposed father's spirit and learning of the murder, Hamlet is not only suffering depression but has reflected on his dysthymic mood, and located its source in a kind of physical and metaphysical poison which taints him at the heart's core. Though his severe father complex prevents him from a clear idea of his origins, like a good shaman Prince Hamlet uses figurative language whose particular terms, when extracted and set in order, point unmistakably in the direction of his mother's extramarital affair and pregnancy at the hands of Claudius. Hamlet is thus despoiled *ab ovum*. He has two fathers. He knows and knows not. That is his tragedy and his glory.

We turn now to Shakespeare's use of language to see how that reinforces Hamlet's dual identity.

## II. Shakespeare's Double Play

### 1. Frank Kermode

Looking back once more at the dram of eale speech, we notice it features a number of conjunctive locutions. "East and west," "pith and marrow of our attribute," "pales and forts of reason," and "nature's livery or fortune's star," constitute a set of paired phrases typical of Shakespeare's style, especially, claims Kermode, in *Hamlet*. This recourse to phrasal coupling has been taken up by Ted Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), and more recently by Frank Kermode in *Shakespeare's Language* (2000). Both focus on the way in which conjunctive language is related to and expressive of theme and action in

the plays and poems. As we began with Kermode's analysis of the text, we will continue with that, and then have a look at Ted Hughes.

Early on, Kermode is struck by the prominence of duality in the play's verbiage.

Meanwhile, the doubling and antithetical phrases continue as an undertone: "This spirit, *dumb* to us, will *speak* to him"; "As *needful* in our loves, *fitting* our duty." (Kermode, 100, emphases in original)

The language of *Hamlet* continually varies in this and similar ways. It is dominated to an extent without parallel in the canon by one particular rhetorical device: it is obsessed with doubles of all kinds, and notably by its use of the figure known as hendiadys [hen.d??.d?s]. This means, literally, one-through-two, and can be illustrated by some common expressions such as "law and order" or "house and home." (Kermode, 100-101, emphasis and pronunciation added)

The play has many doublings, but those which exhibit hendiadys are marked by identifiable tension or strain, as if the parts were related in some not perfectly evident way. (Kermode, 101, emphasis added)

The Fifth Edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* puts the meaning of 'hendiadys' this way: "A figure of speech in which two words connected by a conjunction are used to express a single notion that would normally be expressed by an adjective and a substantive, such as *grace and favor* instead of *gracious favor*." (*American Heritage*, 819)

Kermode continues as follows.

It would be perhaps too much to claim that a study of this device can take us to the heart of the play . . . My purpose in drawing attention to hendiadys is largely to show that in the rhetoric of *Hamlet* there may be a strain, virtually unnoticed, of a kind of compulsion that reflects the great and obvious topics, adultery and incest, deep preoccupations given external representation. These preoccupations seem to be related to a concern with questions of identity, sameness, and the union of separate selves – joined opposites . . . as in marriage and, in a pathologised form, incest. (Kermode, 101, emphasis added)

This exposition relating the congruent structures of Shakespeare's dramatic language and the major themes of the play is nothing short of an epiphany. The conjunctive phrases mirror Hamlet's divided identity, mired in incest and adultery. The "tension and strain" of hendiadys

come to embody the tension and strain in Hamlet's splintered psyche. The problem is that the oppositional elements noted by Kermode's analysis (adultery, incest, identity, union of separate selves, et al.) only come cleanly into focus when we perceive Hamlet's shadow self as son of Claudius. Note that the adultery and incest Kermode has in mind are exclusively functions of marriage to a deceased brother's wife. That is 'adultery' in a weak sense of the term, based on the inference that, having become one flesh with her husband, mating with his surviving brother is consanguineous *de jure* and so proscribed. What are these two selves? Kermode isn't very helpful on that one. But think about it. The Ghost calls his brother an "incestuous [and] adulterate beast." (I, v, 42) As we have nothing in the text to demonstrate that Claudius engages in sexual relations with anyone other than Gertrude, the implication in accusing him of adultery is that Claudius's affair with her began during her marriage to King Hamlet. Nothing rules that out, while cohesion with much in the play rules it in. Hamlet thus unconsciously fears that his mother had an adulterous, extra-marital liaison with Claudius, of which he, Hamlet, is the product. He is a legitimate son because he is born within the bounds of marriage, but illegitimate insofar as he is not his lawful father's issue. As Hamlet the Dane's child, he is putative heir to the throne of Denmark, but as the son of Claudius he cannot become king on the death of the reigning sovereign. Ironically, the "strain, virtually unnoticed," is unnoticed by Kermode himself, that is, the tension between Hamlet's two different progenitors and the Prince's two selves that eventuate and square off against one another in the darkest recesses of his soul. This is Shakespeare's double play.

A particularly illustrative linguistic doubling is observed by Kermode in the exchanges with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet ends his interview with the spy-courtiers by mentioning that radical doublet "my uncle-father and aunt-mother," which contains in little the whole charge of incest. Later (IV, iii, 49-52) he will call Claudius "mother," disgusted at the idea that Claudius is of one flesh with Gertrude, as in a different sense he himself is. Here is an exquisitely horrible case of there being "division none," [referring to *The Phoenix and Turtle*] now characterized not by happiness of true love but by its opposite, the disgustingness of incest. (Kermode, 112)

It is ironic that this analysis does not foreground Hamlet's doubleness but actually conceals it. On the conscious level, operative in a surface reading of the text, it is the union of Claudius and Gertrude in matrimony and intimacy ("one flesh") which makes of Claudius Hamlet's "mother." But unconsciously, however, there is a stronger and more turbid current of meaning: Hamlet as the issue of Claudius and Gertrude is the product of the incest he abominates. This situates the "disgustingness of incest" in Hamlet himself and raises its

significance exponentially. The dram of eale lies within him, working to his scandal. Thus, it is not correct to say that the locution "my uncle-father and aunt-mother" "contains in little the whole charge of incest," as that charge must perforce include Hamlet himself, who is much more than innocent bystander. If husband and wife are "one flesh," then when the marital union of King Hamlet and Gertrude is followed by the union of Claudius and Gertrude, Prince Hamlet has three mothers and three fathers, and he is of "one flesh" with all these. That is, in ultimate terms, Prince Hamlet cannot be distinguished from the substance of the man who made him an incestuous bastard. Further, in Gertrude's incestuous and adulterous conduct Hamlet must find *himself*. It is the sheer magnitude and force of this egoistic vortex which so dominates the text of this play that it pervades its very language. Mr. Kermode notes the linguistic symptomatology but neglects its ground.

Consider "To be or not to be." A fair interpretation of that most famous discourse is the acid test of any reading of *Hamlet*. What Kermode proffers on this score is wide of the mark. Remember that this critic begins by observing that in the dram of eale speech Hamlet isn't talking about humanity but about himself. (Kermode, 107) But by the time we reach the soliloquy to end all soliloquies eight pages later, we learn just the opposite.

[O]ne thing is surely obvious: Hamlet is referring his own to a more general view of the human condition. . . . (Kermode, 115)

The soliloquy is "a way of considering the human condition more largely." (Kermode, 115, emphases added). Would it not make more sense instead of creating a glaring contradiction to just admit that both speeches have general and personal meaning and application?

Though some scholars have stood on their heads to deny that the "to be or not to be" speech in Act III is about suicide, when it is read in the context of "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" speech in Act I, the conclusion that both speeches center on self-destruction is unavoidable. Hamlet has not in Act III forgotten the suicidal impulse which plagued him in Act I. Should I live (and act) or should I cash in my chips and depart? – is the question. But why is Hamlet wrestling again with the same suicidal ideation? He doesn't tell us immediately, though we learn more in the ensuing dialogue with Ophelia. Again he gives no express explanation for his impulse to do away with himself in "to be or not to be." Has anything changed? Well, Hamlet now knows that his Uncle Claudius is a murderer who poisoned the King and appropriated the Queen his mother. If, then, he is nauseated by the prospect of being the natural son of this reprobate, this adulterous villain, he must be now even more offended, considering the likely prospect that his actual father is a murderer and now his step-father.

Hamlet tells us that he is in dread. (III, i, 80) But in the compression of the soliloquy that term "dread" is not completely unpacked. Yes, we dread the "something" after death, but part of that dread (*pace* Socrates) is precisely our ignorance of what that something is. We fear the unknown. But there is implicitly more. The dread of death is counterpoised to the dread of life. As living, I must accept my dram of eale, *i.e.*, my origins in the loins of some unknown progenitor who has passed his concupiscence and other peccancies on to me. On a symmetrical reading, if I choose to embrace death and emigrate to that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns," might I not discover that in fact the traveler does return, to be reborn as yet another link in the chain of bastardy? For in essence, none of us knowing our paternity, we are one and all *de facto* bastards, as we learn from Posthumus Leonatus (*Cymbeline*, II, v, 2) and Thersites (*Troilus and Cressida*, V, viii, 5-14) Hamlet's dilemma in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy is thus consonant with the theme of doubled existence. As living self, I dread the discovery of adulterous, incestuous origins; as self-destroying self, I dread the eternal return which will send me back into this world of bastards.

Sequent to this great soliloquy is the cruel encounter with Ophelia, in which Hamlet challenges her "honesty," that is, her chastity. "Why," he asks her, "woulds't thou be a breeders of sinners?" (III, i, 123-124) Mr. Kermode notes properly that in the Nunnery scene, Hamlet dwells in horror on women's capacity to cuckold their husbands. (Kermode, 115-116) But on the standard model of the plot which Kermode follows, in which Gertrude and Claudius do nothing worse than marry without extensive delay, there is no cuckoldry. That syndrome involves a woman who betrays her husband during marriage. The scenario adopted by Kermode contains no cuckoldry. Why, then, would this allegation be uppermost in Hamlet's mind at this particular moment? The "Hamlet" who speaks these lines is he who fears that Gertrude did cuckold her first husband. Hamlet's anxiety reflects the unease and profound pessimism of an incestuous bastard. As such, he feels that, were he to marry Ophelia, she would likely cuckold him and possibly humiliate him by bearing some other man's child. But Mr. Kermode doesn't pick up Shakespeare's cues and has no way to account for the reference to cuckoldry. He notes that Hamlet accuses his mother of quickly marrying Claudius because of "inordinate sexual appetite," (Kermode, 122) never considering that the pall cast over Hamlet with respect to that concupiscence reflects his fear that he is not the son of the man whose name he bears.

## 2. Ted Hughes

Though unmentioned by Frank Kermode, perhaps the earliest scholar to seriously explore Shakespeare's linguistic doubling was the Poet Laureate of England (1984-98), Ted Hughes (1930-1998). His *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* performs *en passant* a searching analysis of this trope, its structure and meaning. Like Kermode, Hughes is a traditionalist

who attempts to press the juggernaut of Shakespearean poesy into the shallow and incommensurable straits of Stratfordian biography. (See, e.g., Hughes, 127, 134) But where Kermode identifies *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as the *summa* of double epithet and hendiadys, Ted Hughes offers a developmental account of these devices whose apotheosis is not *Hamlet* but *All's Well That Ends Well*. Where Kermode helpfully explains such replications as the "external representation" of Prince Hamlet's two divergent personae, for Ted Hughes the purpose and significance of such poetic conjunctions are far broader and more polyvalent. He approaches Shakespeare as a systematic mythographer whose poems and plays are (excepting the histories) one and all celebratory variations on the bipartite divinity standing as the fountainhead of western culture. (Gontar, 161 ff.) Of course it isn't possible to cover Hughes' vast and intricate metaphysics and literary theology in a few pages. In what follows we will focus attention on the functional role played by the double epithet in Shakespeare, tracing Hughes' exposition from *Titus Andronicus* through the history plays (which employ the locution in question absent the mythology), to the crescendo in *All's Well*, and then on to *Hamlet*. We will find that although neither Kermode nor Hughes ever grasped the author's (or Hamlet's) actual or full identity, and could not make valid textual or historical correlation with the polarities of the double epithet, both these thinkers shed light on Shakespeare's utilization of this conceit, and, ironically, they form a brace of analysts whose work recapitulates the double epithet they took up individually.

Although he concedes that Shakespeare had some recourse to paired epithets prior to *Hamlet*, Frank Kermode sees that tragedy as the grand finale of doubling. (Kermode, 100) In this it is "without parallel in the canon." (Kermode, 100) Yet no effort is made in *Shakespeare's Language* to demonstrate the truth of this claim or assess the role of dual phrasing in the works which precede (or follow) *Hamlet*.

Ted Hughes, on the other hand, tells us that "something like [the doubling in *Hamlet*] "occurs from quite early on." (Hughes, 132) He begins with a citation from the early *Titus Andronicus*.

TAMORA

They told me, here, at the dead time of night,

A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,

Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,

Would make *such fearful and confused cries*,



As any mortal body hearing it

Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.

(II, iii, 99-104, emphasis added)

Though this seems innocent and straightforward enough, the conjunct in the fourth line is full of strain and tension, strain and tension presaging the scene in which Bassanius is slain and Lavinia raped and disfigured. Under Ted Hughes' microscope a seemingly inert conjunct is revealed in startling motion.

The 'and', it seems, is not only filler but a symbol . . . of impassioned headlong flight. . . . At the same time, the two adjectives begin to look less perfunctory. 'Fearful' bears the two opposite meanings of 'full of fear' and 'causing fear'; 'confused means only suffering from confusion'. When the two words are combined in this way – that is, separated for distinction and comparison to be made by that 'and' – while the context evokes the active sense of 'fearful', the participle 'confused' activates its passive sense. The line then creates a dramatic scene, in which fiends, snakes, toads and urchins are making noises so frightful that they themselves are terrified by them and so crying worse – in a howl-back amplification of their own cries, an especially diabolical idea of infinite terror in a dark wood: existence terrified by its own existence. (Hughes, 133)

Hughes might easily have gone into greater detail to expose the power of Shakespeare's conceit here. For example, this speech of Tamora stands diametrically opposed to her seductive invitation to Aaron given moments before in which this very part of the forest is described as though it were an earthly paradise where snakes make no frightful noises in a dank pit of doom but "[lie] roll'd in the cheerful sun." (II, iii, 13) Tamora's contradictory characterization of this glade is therefore itself "fearful and confused." Because of the ambiguity in this locution, it suggests in miniature the disposition of the parties, Tamora and her sons "fearful" and Lavinia "confused." On the other hand, insofar as the two descriptive terms amount to the same thing, they reflect the villainous siblings, Chiron and Demetrius, who murder Bassanius and pillage Lavinia. When these two barbarians are in turn executed by Titus, they also utter their own fearful and confused cries.

Hughes moves now to the more mature Shakespeare of the history plays. Four illustrations are given.

1. "A beauty-waning and distressed widow" (R3, III, vii, 184)

2. "Seduc'd the pitch and height of his degree" (R3, III, vii, 187)

3. "Be judg'd by subject and inferior breath" (R2, iv, 128)

4. "The tediousness and process of my travel" (R2, II, iii, 12)

The "double epithet" as used by Shakespeare runs the gamut from tautology (*i.e.*, mere filler or rhythmic marker) to contradiction. As we continue to examine various specimens throughout the corpus, we find greater subtlety and variety of sense and significance. "In each case," says Hughes, "it seems clear enough that the two qualifiers are being weighed against each other – across the fulcrum of that 'and' – and with conscious deliberation. In general, each word supplies a different point of view . . . ." (Hughes, 134)

However, we have to do here with no literary quirk. In order to help us to grasp the rich and full meaning of what is unfolding, Hughes interrupts his technical treatment of double epithet to set this locution in social and political context. It is nothing less, he says, than "a sort of regal gesture" or a "small grand moment." (Hughes, 134) That is, as we have long suspected, the language of Shakespeare is the idealized language of the court, the monarch being always the prototypical speaker. So far, so good. But at this point Hughes descends into Stratfordian bathos, which we reproduce here for the reader's edification.

There is little doubt that Shakespeare delighted in 'stateliness' – to the point of infatuation. The huge proportion of his work devoted to kings and their courts being 'stately' and 'ceremonious' was satisfying a powerful hunger. It touched those 'strong shudders' and 'heavenly agues' that stirred in the base of his spine. His addiction to the 'grand' was like a permanent psychological pressure. It is one aspect of his sheer sense of theatre, of what suddenly hushes the groundlings and makes the gods listen, but was no small part of the tremendous sense of 'things high and working, full of state and woe' for which he was able eventually to create a whole new kind of drama. These lines [*e.g.*, 1-4 above] speak directly for that ear. (Hughes, 134)

There is nothing objectionable in placing the Shakespearean conceit in its early modern social setting. The foregoing is admirable. But Hughes' Stratfordian presuppositions make of our poet a grotesque snob, toadying up to elites whose ranks he would give his own mellifluous tongue to invade. Is Shakespeare to be viewed as Malvolio? (See, Gontar, 121 ff.) There is no evidence that the author of the plays was "addicted" to sycophancy, or given to "low-crooked curtsies and base spaniel fawning." (*Julius Caesar*, III, i, 43) On the contrary. The author of these poems and plays was opposed to snobbery with every fiber of his being. Rather than

portray such a genius and teacher of humanity as a hopeless lick-spittle and hypocrite, it would obviously be more congenial and economical to view the proclivity to stately and grand language not as an affectation of a bizarrely gifted groundling but as the natural self-expression of an artistic lord. Wouldn't that be William of Ockham's (1285-1349) view of the dispute?

At any rate, as we study Hughes' painstaking analysis we do begin to see that the conjoined antecedent and consequent nouns and adjectives differ in connotation and linguistic origin and point of view. Usually it is the antecedent which carries the loftier tone. Thus:

In the second example, the two qualifiers seem tautologous enough to resemble a cut and a slash, or the right barrel then the left for good measure (and for filler). Yet 'pitch' carries the idea of the height from which a falcon might dangerously stoop [*sic*, as 'swoop' was plainly intended] – might pitch, in fact. In other words it brings 'height' as a threat into hovering balance with 'height' as a dignity – a fateful uncertainty everywhere in these plays about pathological kings. (Hughes, 135)

The reader will of course be reminded of King Richard II's mock on Sir Thomas Mowbray, "How high a pitch his resolution soars." (*The Tragedy of King Richard II*, I, i, 109) This neatly illustrates Hughes' lesson, combining "height" and "pitch" with a plain allusion to Richard's superiority over Mowbray symbolized by the royal sport of hawking. The quivering epithets signal how uneasy lies the head that wears King Richard's crown. The third illustration, "be judg'd by subject and inferior breath" recreates "the essential Shakespearean scene, the king's confrontation with the victorious rebel." (Hughes, 135) As for the fourth, "The tediousness and process of my travel," we easily apprehend two "contrasting points of view": "tediousness takes care of the inside point of view, the subjective impression of what had to be undergone, while 'process' accounts for the external record, the actual onerous sequence of obstacles, logistical problems, inconvenience, and so on." (Hughes, 136) Supporting Hughes' argument is the fact that for Shakespeare the antecedent term "tediousness" is a Latinate term bound to be unfamiliar to the commons, who might be expected to know "process."

LEONATO

Neighbors, you are tedious.

DOGBERRY

It pleases your worship to say so, but we are  
the poor Duke's officers. But truly, for mine own part,

if I were as tedious as a king I could find it in my heart  
to bestow it all on your worship.

LEONATO

All your tediousness on me, ah?

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, III, v, 17-22)

Hughes' third stage of epithetical pairing is consistent with the earlier ones, but takes an additional step to reach what he dubs "translation." This occurs when Shakespeare confronts the challenge of communicating dramatically with both the noble theatre patrons, eager for every new and recondite word or phrase, and the groundlings, who also covet such fancies, yet hardly know what to make of them (as the Dogberry incident above shows). Shakespeare's stage gambit is to toss to the lords and educated patrons the unusual vocabulary term as the antecedent, to be followed consequently by the prosaic 'translation' or rough synonym for the thrill of the commons. Once more, Hughes portrays Shakespeare as a learned fool such as the Pedant in *Love's Labour's Lost*, that is, a semi-educated and pompous word addict who stumbles into literary greatness in the manner of Christopher Sly. (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction 1) "One supposes," speculates Hughes glibly, "words simply stuck to him, like tunes to an Irish piper." (Hughes, 138) "Supposes," indeed. Why suppose any such thing? Just as there is no reason to "suppose" that Shakespeare was a snob obsessed with mimicking the English nobility, by the same token there is no reason to "suppose" that Shakespeare's massive vocabulary was anything other than what large vocabularies usually are, the natural product of wide reading, excellent breeding, and good taste. Whatever else he may have been, the author of the quartos, sonnets, long poems and *First Folio* was a supremely educated polymath of the highest order. He was able to give the nobility the words after which they hankered not because he was an idiot savant (as Hughes 'supposes') but because he was a lord par excellence, a teacher's teacher.

Hughes misses the obvious. Though it's possible to characterize Shakespeare's technique of doubling epithets as a pandering to the patricians and a patronizing of the poor, in the end such a description lacks concreteness. History tells a story of more illuminating and efficacious events. After the battle of Hastings in 1066 A.D., William the Bastard and his Norman compeers had a stranglehold on England, evicting the English nobility who were supplanted by Norman French aristocrats. By edict of William, the official language of Britain now became French. Old English went underground along with pagan customs, culture and religion. For many years there were then two languages in England, and the rustic simplicities of Anglo-Saxon were the object of Norman apprehension, scorn and derision. This linguistic

alienation then began to slowly ebb in scope and force, as a close reading of Chaucer will show. Once again English kings took up the native tongue, though it was heavily Gallicized. The “small grand moment” mentioned by Ted Hughes was the Shakespearean heyday during the reign of Elizabeth Tudor. All looked back proudly to the English wars against the French during the reigns of Kings Henry V, VI and VIII. Meanwhile it often seemed to the French that in combating the English they were in fact seeking to destroy their cousins.

DAUPHIN

*O Dieu vivant!* Shall a few sprays of us  
The emptying of our father's luxury,  
Our scions, put in wild and savage stock,  
Spirit up so suddenly into the clouds  
And over-look their grafters?

BOURBON

Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards!  
*Mort de ma vie*, if they march along  
Unfought withal, but I will sell my dukedom  
To buy a slobb'ry and a dirty farm,  
In that nook-shotten isle of Albion.  
(*King Henry V*, III, iii, 5-14)

Hughes' “small grand moment” was therefore a political and cultural triumph in which England affirmed its independence of Continental forces, particularly Spain and France. It was not, as is sometimes thought, the adoption or assertion of ‘pure’ Anglo-Saxon, but rather the fructifying collision of Latin, French and English which exploded in the national consciousness in the works of William Shakespeare. It was this which created that national language and crystallized England's collective consciousness. As the linguistic templates surged against one another the result was not polyglot or pidgin but *poetry*. The rich and evocative cadences of Shakespeare were the crucible in which modern English – and modern England itself – were born.

Ted Hughes deserves credit for drawing our attention to a commonly overlooked detail in this vast panorama: the employment of the double epithet in Shakespeare's plays. Across the conjunctive plain two mighty hosts confront one another and clash, as do subject and predicate via the copula. The result is a chain of metaphor strong enough to bind a nation together at the very instant of its ascendancy. Thenceforward what was to lie at the heart of the English

people was poetry, a poetry capable of ratifying and sustaining heroism in a manner not seen since Homer and Vergil. Though he doesn't quite rise to the occasion, we can detect Hughes' awareness that more was going on in the double epithet than the elaboration of poetic technique.

With a mediumistic author such as Shakespeare, whose compelling theme happened to be an extreme case of the common psychic conflict, the commercial dilemma became a national opportunity. A true 'language of the common bond' in drama, at every level of theme, action and speech, became essential. And, in finding it, Shakespeare invented, as if incidentally and inadvertently, a new kind of drama and a new poetic vernacular. (Hughes, 140)

That, "new poetic vernacular" is, of course, the English language. What occurred in Shakespeare was indeed "the intermarriage of two different linguistic stocks," as Hughes says. (Hughes, 149) But his characterization of those opposing partners as merely "high" and "low" is too abstract, and ignores the relations of language to nationality and culture. Hughes' demonstration of Shakespeare's employment of double epithet in *All's Well That Ends Well* is masterful, however, and were there sufficient time and patience we might relish his illuminating exposition of "on the catastrophe and heel of pastime," (142) and "this captious and intenable sieve," (149).

Those pleasant tasks are left for the reader. For we must turn to Hughes' reading of *Hamlet*. Curiously, while Frank Kermode discovers the most consistent usage of doubling language in *Hamlet*, Ted Hughes finds almost nothing of that. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune sail into the sea of troubles with hardly a bubble of concern. (Hughes, 145) Hughes' merit in explicating *Hamlet* is that he recognizes the essentially problematic character of the play. He is thus keenly aware of Eliot's critique, and takes his objections seriously.

Eliot pointed out that *Hamlet*, as a work of art, seems to struggle with a mass of highly pressurized, obscure material that cannot be dragged into the light, as if plot and characters were somehow inadequate to express what *Hamlet*, and behind *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, seem to be aware of and involved with. (Hughes, 235)

This highly significant comment means that for Ted Hughes, as for T.S. Eliot, the standard model of *Hamlet* is unsatisfactory. We cannot take the play as first given, as little minds would have us do. Prince *Hamlet*, says Hughes, suffers a "doubled vision," seeing "his mother from both the loving son's and the loving husband's [Claudius's] point of view, and thereafter

he carries the reaction of his father as well as his own." (Hughes, 233-234) "[H]e cannot separate the mother he loves from the mother he hates." (Hughes, 234) Of course, we have already seen why this is so. Hamlet's perceptions are double because his inner state is schizoid: As Gertrude's "loving son" Hamlet sees himself as the son of the late king. But as the despiser of this woman he feels himself to be at one with Claudius. And as we have seen, the steady drum beat of double epithets which stand in opposition to one another mirrors the adverse identity of Hamlet in relation to his supposed uncle. Let Ted Hughes expound on the Prince's conflicted psyche:

The Prince's murder of Claudius becomes a replay of Claudius's Murder of King Hamlet, but a more complicated example of the Type. In this action one catches sight of the weird *perpetuum mobile* that spins the whole drama into a vertiginous other dimension. When King Hamlet's ghost rises out of Purgatory . . . Hamlet sees, as in a mirror, an image of his own mythic self. He sees himself, that is, as his mother's consort, punished for that incestuous crime by death and now by Purgatory. In the same way he sees Claudius as another image of his own mythic self. In this case he is again his mother's consort, not yet punished, but definitely, inevitably to be punished, and to be punished by him, Prince Hamlet. But this punishment, of himself as Claudius, by himself, will make his mythic life a reality. (Hughes, 237)

There follow three mentions by Hughes of the "something tortuously inexpressible" (238-239), the phrase first used by Eliot to identify and explain the hero's darkness and ultimate failure as a literary character for us. We just don't understand him. That is, we don't understand him so long as we do not recognize that he is just as much the son of Claudius as he is of Hamlet the Dane. Hughes embraces Eliot's thesis that the play is a failure on account of its lacking an objective correlative, that is, a rationale for Hamlet's hyperbolic rage at his mother. But *a posteriori* we know the play is anything but a failure, and that the adequate emotional correlative exists. Hughes tries to get around the dilemma by suggesting that Hamlet's hidden self is merely symbolic or mythical, but that would not be sufficient to account for the self-loathing that runs through the action like a radioactive current. The play quite obviously is not about Hamlet's hate for Claudius but about the hate he cultivates for himself. Remember that Claudius, too, hates himself. (III, iii, 36-72) The idea that Hamlet hates himself because he can't kill Claudius founders on the plain fact that Hamlet hates himself before he knows anything of the murder and before he swears to take revenge. In fact, Hamlet is so busy hating himself that he is incapacitated and cannot perform the deed he is sworn to do. Killing Claudius will in fact be a useless act for it will not kill off the Claudius inside of Hamlet. These tragic twins must die together.

### III. Conclusion

Inner conflict is the hallmark of dramatic art. And while Prince Hamlet's inner conflict has been endlessly debated, those squabbles have done little but disseminate that dilemma among ourselves. Only when we descend to the level of flesh and blood does his predicament become real. Along with the "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy, Shakespeare doubles down on the theme by giving us the dram of eale speech of Q2, later cut from the *First Folio* for unknown reasons. It is a great loss. Together, these two orations establish that Hamlet's malaise is not a function of ghostly deliverances, but emerges from (1) his lifelong suspicions of illegitimacy and (2) the confirmation of that illegitimacy when bypassed for the Danish throne. All of this was thoroughly canvassed in *Hamlet Made Simple*. What has been accomplished in the present paper is to show how the dram of eale speech and the first soliloquy both reflect Hamlet's pre-Ghost anxiety and, by use of the double epithet, give symbolic expression to Hamlet's complex self. We owe a great deal to Ted Hughes and Frank Kermode for their pioneering work in exposing the significance of the doubling theme in the play which reinforces our sense of Hamlet's divided self. Mr. Kermode noted that Hamlet is all about "the union of separate selves." We know now what selves these were. Already in the first soliloquy we encountered: "things rank and gross in nature." And it was pointed out in *Hamlet Made Simple*, that one of the chief points of resemblance between Hamlet and Claudius is their use of the term "rank" as denoting something viscerally offensive. At the same time, the term "rank" also refers to the topmost station in society from which Hamlet is barred.

In the dram of eale speech, in which Hamlet dwells on his own corruption, we find a veritable eruption of doubles, including "east and west," "traded and taxed of other nations," "pith and marrow of our attribute," "the pales and forts of reason," and "nature's livery or fortune's star." In light of all that has been found in this study, we should now be in a position to roughly "translate" the dram of eale speech.

There is something in our natures (especially my own nature) which saps the pith and marrow of my achievements, (that is, the substance of what I am). When I was born there was already something inside me that ruined me and my virtues, even though I did not choose to be born as this person. This "vicious mole of nature" has destroyed my reason, and reduces me from a free and self-determining man to a plaything of fate. Whatever spawned me was a dab of evil that will eventually make me an object of scandal and derision.



What distinguishes this taint from the doctrine of original sin is that the latter is a spiritual legacy of Adam's fall, whereas what Hamlet is talking about is an errant insemination which has left him as a clone of a venal and callow rogue of the type which has always triggered his disgust and revulsion. The corruption then is not cosmetic or symbolic, but resident in the "pith and marrow" of this sad Prince's very bones. Can there be a valid reading of this central document of western culture which ignores these factors? Consider that 99% of the time, *Hamlet* is mechanically trotted out as a humdrum tale of an overly sensitive youth so lost in internal debate that he cannot fulfill his promise to his father's tormented spirit to avenge his murder at the hands of his brother. What is there about human beings that allows them to prefer blindness to insight and cleave to truism instead of truth, unless some vicious mole of nature hath all their noble substance over-daubed to their own scandal? Is being English an intellectual liability? Falstaff seems to hint at that when he observes that "it was alway[s] yet the trick of our English nation, if they have a good thing, to make it too common." (*King Henry IV, Part Two, I, ii, 15-17*) Isn't that what they have done to their black prince? "Ay, it is common," we hear a ghostly voice respond. (*I, ii, 74*)

#### **POSTSCRIPT**

We are all grateful to Professor J.E.G. Dixon for his recent appraisal in [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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