

# The last soliloquy and how hamlet gets transformed psychologically

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Though the identity of the “ editor” responsible for deleting Hamlet’s final soliloquy from the 1623 Folio edition of Hamlet may be lost to history, the possible reasons for his omission of the Quarto’s fifty-eight lines are as relevant and accessible to the present day as a membership card at Kim’s video rental. The question posed by an editor in 1623 - to delete or not to delete - is echoed by contemporary film directors. In a 1998 interview for Cineaste magazine Kenneth Branagh defended his film’s interpretation of the scene from criticism that it was artistically overdone:

In addition to amplifying the scene with sweeping crescendos and flamboyant cinematography wherein the camera zooms out to reveal a tiny Hamlet in the shadow of Fortinbras’s massive army, Branagh chose to give it a final punch by making it the final scene before the film’s intermission, thereby allowing extra time for his audience to reflect upon its meaning. But Branagh’s adamant insistence on the scene’s importance is by no means a universal sentiment. Michael Almereyda’s 2000 adaptation of the film has Ethan Hawke recite the soliloquy in an airplane toilet. And Franco Zeffirelli cut the scene entirely from his 1996 film starring Mel Gibson.

This modern discrepancy in film adaptations can be used as a tool to illuminate the original controversy of the scene in 1623, and more importantly, the significance of the scene itself. How can one director find the scene utterly crucial to the plot and another director deem it unnecessary and disposable? Why does it exist in the Quarto and not the Folio? How is the play altered when the scene is eliminated? The answer to these questions lies not only in the text itself, but also in the reaction of the

audience to its meaning. This essay is my attempt to unravel the scene's mystery by looking closely at the omitted text itself, and its role in the larger scheme of Shakespeare's play.

Hamlet's conversation with Fortinbras's captain is initially a somewhat straightforward exchange of information, but the tone of the passage intensifies with the Captain's line " Yes, it is already garrisoned" (4. 4. 27). This line triggers a sudden epiphany in Hamlet, and the philosophical tone of his response implies that the conversation has suddenly become more significant to him. The Captain uses the word " garrisoned" in reference to the specific plot of ground in Poland, but for Hamlet the " garrisoned" field in Poland is a symbol of man's will to protect his convictions. The land, like a man's honor, is of no monetary value, yet it will always be protected and barricaded within the human psyche. Hamlet's mental jump from the microcosm of a Polish field to the macrocosm of universal human sentiment is made evident in his reply " Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats will not debate the question of this straw" (4. 4. 29). His use of the word " straw" instead of " land" signifies his mind's equation between the Polish field and human emotion." Straw" is the debased form of grain, of little value and highly flammable - just a man's honor is commercially valueless yet extremely volatile substance. The popular expression " man of straw" was used even in Shakespeare's time to describe a man with shallow convictions and the expression " in the straw" as a euphemism for childbirth. Thus " straw" is Hamlet's way of likening the present situation in Poland to a universal human frailty and susceptibility to emotion. Hamlet realizes that no

amount of money or military strength can successfully “debate” or challenge the straw of true human conviction. Yet Hamlet is still aware that these convictions, like straw, are potentially harmful; they are the “impostume of much wealth and peace” (4. 4. 30), self-given cancers which cause men to die willingly for illusory ideals.

The exchange described above is the cornerstone of the scene and the driving impetus of Hamlet’s soliloquy. In between the his conversation with the Captain and the beginning of his soliloquy, Hamlet has a brief interaction with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wherein Rosencrantz asks “Will’t please you go, my lord?” and Hamlet replies “I’ll be with you straight. Go a little before” (4. 4. 34-35). These two short lines implicitly foreshadow the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which occur “a little before” the death of Hamlet.

More importantly, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern epitomize the fallacy of human conviction that Hamlet ponders in the scene. From the moment of their arrival Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow the King’s orders without question. In their initial discussion with Claudius and Gertrude, Rosencrantz states, “Guildenstern states “But we both obey/And here give up ourselves in the full bent/ to lay our service freely at your feet/To be commanded” (2. 2. 27-34). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become victims of their own shallow convictions and their unconditional obedience – their blind compliance with one king’s orders results in their death by another king. Thus their brief conversation with Hamlet is a significant as a preface to his soliloquy as they provide a direct parallel to “The imminent

death of twenty thousand men/That for a fantasy or trick of fame/Go to their graves like beds" (4. 4. 64-66).

Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of the scene is his final soliloquy in the play. Inspired by his conversation with the Captain, he becomes increasingly obsessed with the notion of Fortinbras's troops dying for a "fantasy." By the end of the soliloquy he has resolved to dismiss his previous apprehensions about seeking revenge, yet he has not actually decided to act. His dramatic conclusion, "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!" (4. 4. 70) reveals that he only intends to change his thoughts, not necessarily his actions. He arrives at this resolution via a twisted mental journey in which the rationality which previously subdued him is overcome by a sense of honor, an intense human emotion which, like the "straw", cannot be won over by rational alternatives.

Ironically Hamlet overcomes his rationality in a somewhat rational manner. The tone in the beginning of his soliloquy implies a sensible and sane contemplation. He first admits that his revenge is "dull," an acknowledgement to himself that he has never been naturally predisposed toward a rash, impulsive act of bloody revenge. He then attempts to logically determine the value of revengeful emotion in order to decide whether his "dull" revenge should be sharpened. He realizes that a man who adheres strictly to rationality can only "sleep and feed," and a person who neglects emotion in the name of rationality "A beast, no more" (4. 4. 34). He reasons that humans are distinguished from all other animals by their unique ability to utilize time by remembering the past and planning for the future, and that

God would not have blessed men with such a capability “ to fust in us unused” (4. 4. 43).

This invocation of God’s desire marks a pivotal point in the soliloquy in which Hamlet abandons logical reasoning and extols irrational action. The defeat of his rationality becomes glaringly apparent when he accuses himself of both “ bestial oblivion” and “ thinking too precisely on th’ event” (4. 4. 44-45). In his enthusiasm to justify his plan for revenge, Hamlet ignores the paradoxical nature of his thoughts and fails to realize that it precisely his “ thinking too precisely on th’ event” which separates him from “ bestial oblivion.” This contradiction illustrates the core psychological conflict with which Hamlet struggles: Is it more suitable to the human condition to act upon reason or sentiment? The answer to this question is achieved by Hamlet in his soliloquy; his use of reason to justify sentiment is evidence that both rationality and sentimentality are necessary to avoid “ bestial oblivion” and achieve true humanity.

Hamlet’s abandonment of rationality is inspired in great part by his exaggerated admiration of Fortinbras, who he describes as “ a delicate and tender prince/Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed/Makes mouths at the invisible event” (4. 4. 52-54). Hamlet is awestruck by Fortinbras’s ability to rally not only himself but thousands of men to fight for a triviality. Hamlet’s romanticization of Fortinbras is ironic in that Hamlet’s father murdered Fortinbras’s father, and the vista of Fortinbras’s army that Hamlet observes is a direct illustration of Fortinbras’s capability for revenge. Thus Hamlet’s admiration for Fortinbras is immediately self-defeating. Hamlet is admiring

the very capability for revenge which will bring about the demise of both himself (when he is killed by Laertes) and his kingdom (when it is taken over by Fortinbras).

Hamlet's high regard for Fortinbras is so intensely felt that by the end of the soliloquy it resembles envy: "How stand I then/That have a father killed, a mother stained/And let all sleep, while too my shame I see/The imminent death of twenty thousand men" (4. 4. 60-64). Yet even as Hamlet feels shame for his feebleness, he recognizes the preposterousness of his admiration for Fortinbras. He describes Fortinbras's army as fighting "for a fantasy and trick of fame." His use of the word "trick" indicates that his common sense continues to battle his emotions, and he is aware that the entire ideology embodied by Fortinbras is but a "fantasy." Though he is conscious of the absurdity of his sentiment and states "the numbers cannot try the cause" (4. 4. 67), Hamlet is ultimately won over by an emotional conviction to embrace bloody thoughts. The soliloquy's conclusion serves as a resounding emphasis to Hamlet's initial observation that no rational device - neither money nor armies - will be able to "debate the question of this straw" (4. 4. 28-29).

If Hamlet's final soliloquy is an illustration of his decision to favor sentiment over reason, its removal from the text alters the significance of the last scene. As mentioned above, his conversation with the Captain causes Hamlet to realize that honor, though not a tangible object, is "already garrisoned" by men; in other words, the desire to protect honor is a basic human instinct. If the conversation never took place, however, Hamlet's

understanding of the other characters in the play would alter because he would not have realized that their actions were based on a “garrisoned,” uncontrollable human response.

For example, if his conversation with the Captain is what truly enables Hamlet to respect the virtues of honor, the sympathy he feels for Laertes in the final act becomes questionable in its sincerity if the Captain scene is removed. Before the duel Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, informing him that, “What I have done that might your nature, honor, and exception/Roughly awake/Here I proclaim was madness.” Since his awed admiration of “honor” is only expressed in his final soliloquy, its deletion from the text renders Hamlet’s apology dubious. How could Hamlet genuinely empathize with Laertes’ “terms of honor” (5. 2. 261) if he has little respect for honor itself?

If Hamlet’s perceives honor only as a shallow human fallacy (and he seems to before his encounter with the Captain), then his apology must also be shallow and his eager agreement to allow Laertes to avenge his honor, “I will embrace it!” a cynical comment (5. 2. 268). Indeed Laertes, unaware of Hamlet’s new regard for honor, accuses Hamlet of mocking him when Hamlet claims, “I’ll be your foil, Laertes; in mine ignorance/Your skill shall? stick fiery off indeed” (5. 2. 272-275). Hamlet’s soliloquy supports this statement as genuine, the absence of the soliloquy suggests Hamlet is being sarcastic.

Thus Hamlet’s final soliloquy is proof that he is capable of empathy, that he has overcome his “bestial oblivion” and become human. Without the

soliloquy's revelation, all of Hamlet's actions in the final scene are arguably performed out of his rationality. Even his final decision to murder Claudius can be seen as a logical choice given that his imminent death will exempt him from any bad consequences of his actions. If the emotional rebirth embodied by the last soliloquy is absent from the play, Hamlet's final act of revenge is as passionless as a honeybee delivering its single stinger into the hand which has already squashed it.

Thus the soliloquy provides crucial evidence that Hamlet's character develops over the course of the play and suggests that even the actions of the most extremely rational men can be influenced by fallible human sentiment. This disturbing conclusion may be the reason why editor's and director's are compelled to delete the soliloquy - the prospect that logical human beings can lose their ability to control their impulses is extremely frightening. Nonetheless, the final, convincing testament to the soliloquy scene's importance is Hamlet's choice to use his last breath to give Fortinbras his kingdom. He does this out of deep appreciation for Fortinbras, who unknowingly inspired Hamlet's emotional renaissance. Hamlet's statement " He has my dying voice" (5. 2. 393) is a thoroughly emotional revelation and a conclusive confirmation of his psychological transformation.