Complex "thought": paralyzed prince

Literature, British Literature

Hamlet’s self-description in his apology to Laertes, delivered in the appropriately distanced and divided third-person, explicitly fingers the greatest antagonist of the play consciousness. The obligatory cultural baggage that comes along with Hamlet heeds little attention to the incestuous Claudius while focusing entirely on the gloomy Dane’s legendary melancholia and his resulting revenge delays. As Laurence Olivier introduced his 1948 film version, “ This is the tragedy of a man who couldn’t make up his mind.” By tracking the leitmotif of “ thought” throughout the play, I will examine the conflicts that preclude Hamlet from unified decisions that lead to action. Shakespeare is not content, however, with the simple notion of thought as a mere signifier of the battle between the mind and the body. The real clash is a conflict of consciousness, of Hamlet’s oscillations between infinite abstraction and shackled solipsism, between recognition of the heroic ideal and of his limited means, between the methodical mishmash of sanity and the total chaos of insanity. I repeat “ between” not only for anaphoric effect, but to suggest Shakespeare’s conception of thought; that is, a set of perspectivally-splintered realities which can be resolutely conflated, for better or worse, only by the mediating hand of action. Any discussion of Hamlet, a work steeped in contradictions and doubles, necessitates inquiry into passages concerning opposition to thought, namely those of the corporeal. And, as Shakespeare engages the imagination of his audience primarily through metaphor, I will use “ thought” as a catapult to critique sections that are relevant to my argument.

The chief definition of “ thought” revolves around the basic concept of the mental process: “ The action or process of thinking; mental action or activity

in general, esp. that of the intellect; exercise of the mental faculty; formation and arrangement of ideas in the mind” (OED, 1a). A further subset of definitions can be catalogued into a Manichean vision of positives and negatives and which equally apply to Hamlet’s central consideration of consciousness as a blessing or a curse. There is a stress on thought’s potentiality which fits with Hamlet’s obsession with the infinitude of man: “ Conception, imagination, fancy” (OED, 4c). But following this comes the negative view of thought as quasi-action, a direct link to Hamlet’s stall tactics: “ The entertaining of some project in the mind; the idea or notion of doing something, as contemplated or entertained in the mind; hence, intention, purpose, design; esp. an imperfect or half-formed intention; with negative expressed or implied = not the least intention or notion of doing something” (OED, 4d). Similarly, the past neutral sense of “ Remembrance, mind’” (OED, 5e) is countered by the negative anticipatory connotation of: “ Anxiety or distress of mind; solicitude; grief, sorrow, trouble, care, vexation” (OED, 5a). This current of duality is important to keep in mind as we explore its ramifications in Hamlet, one of Shakespeare’s most ambiguous texts.

Hamlet’s troubles lie within the gulf that separates God from Man, or at least in what is godly from what is beastly in man. His distaste for the “ swinish” (I. iv. 19) disposition of man is obvious in his denunciation of all things corporeal and elevation of the divine. His self-destructive impulses are verbalized in the first lines of his first soliloquy: “ O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (I. ii. 129-130). Harold Jenkins, in the Arden Hamlet, proposes that “ to become dew is to die” (187), but dew, with its seemingly magical overnight birth and lack of history,

embodies the negation of the past for which Hamlet is so desperate. While some editors choose “ solid” over “ sullied,” either word is applicable, emphasizing Hamlet’s debasement of the palpable or dirty body with the Elizabethan convention of the reduplication of “ too,” which here suggests the many doubles of the body limbs, eyes, etc. and prefigures the duality to come in the next two lines: “ Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d / His canon gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!” (I. iv. 132) While Hamlet invokes the name of God here as a cry for Providential reason, the juxtaposition with the human body sets the stage for later elaboration on man’s obligation to utilize his potentiality: “ What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. / Sure he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and godlike reason to fust in us unus’d” (IV. iv. 35-39). The word “ discourse” is not idly chosen; the notion of flowing is what runs Hamlet’s mind and dams his action. This nearly perfectly echoes his lament in his first soliloquy over his mother’s speedy remarriage: “ O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourn’d longer” (I. ii. 150-151). The roots of this bipolar vision can be traced to Hamlet’s paternal doubles, his Sun-god (the Sun also being the Royal emblem) biological father and animalistic stepfather: “ So excellent a king, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr” (I. ii. 139-140).

Hamlet creates metaphors of infinitude to further his God/man separation, but Shakespeare plants them as subtle hints at Hamlet’s own efforts to attain abstraction but ending up in solipsism. Witness Hamlet’s string of laudatory phrases: “ What a piece of work is a man, / How noble in reason,

how infinite in faculties” (II. ii. 303-304); “ His virtues else, be they as pure as grace, / As infinite as man may undergo” (I. iv. 33-34); “ O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count / myself a king of infinite space” (II. ii. 254-255). The final quote, alluding to the cosmos, also brings Hamlet into the scientific realm. When the play was written at the turn of the 17th-century, the relatively new Copernican heliocentric system from De Revolutionibus was still contested (Harvard continued teaching the obsolete Ptolemaic geocentric system for several years after it opened in 1638) by intellectuals and laymen alike. The theory seized the imagination of the metaphysical poets, namely John Donne, who added the poetic layer of macrocosm to the preexisting microcosm and geocosm. Marjorie Nicolson, in “ The Breaking of the Circle,” argues that the new cosmology failed to win over the Elizabethans, and she cites King Lear as an example of Shakespeare’s fascination with astrology over astronomy. However, I believe that there is ample evidence in Hamlet that indicates Shakespeare’s admission of the possibility of a heliocentric universe, and that one could, in fact, make a claim that the entire play is an extended metaphor for the spatial confusion that afflicted the Western world between De Revolutionibus and Galileo’s visual proofs in Sidereus Nuncius.

Without derailing too much from our train of thought, I will simply bring up two examples of this cosmological crisis. The first is in Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia, which requires little explication: “ Doubt thou the stars are fire, / Doubt that the sun doth move” (II. ii. 115-116). The second instance relies on a triple pun as Hamlet bids adieu to the Ghost: “ Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe” (I. v. 95-

97). The globe as head, earth, and theater merges Hamlet’s chaos of microcosm, geocosm, and macrocosm (the theater as an imaginative universe) and his inability to seat his thoughts in only one realm. But while Hamlet’s position is unclear, there remains a schism between his illimitable thought and earthbound soul, prompted by the Ghost’s visit which “ shake[s] our disposition / With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls” (I. iv. 55-56). Hamlet’s thoughts are never in concert with any other part of his being; what he prizes most about man, his mental range, not only outshines the mundaneness of the body, but is elevated beyond even the height of the soul, supposedly the only infinite and eternal vestige of man in Platonic philosophy. In plainer terms, Hamlet is too smart for his own good. But even with his vast reserves of lyricism, intellectuality, and curiosity, he is hampered by his princely duties and the rigid mindset they dictate.

If I Henry IV is a play about the making of a king, as Marjorie Garber asserts, then Hamlet is about the unmaking of a prince, the exposure of Hamlet’s vulnerabilities which stifle his kingship. Indeed, there is no mention of the political process which allowed Claudius to take over the throne in favor of the prince; we are to assume Hamlet’s impotence in the matter. The name of Hamlet’s double, Fortinbras (French for “ strength-in-arm”), reverberates in Claudius’s remonstrations with Hamlet to end his melancholia: “ It shows a will most incorrect to heaven, / A heart unfortified…And we beseech you bend you to remain / Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye…/ This gentle and unforc’d accord of Hamlet / Sits smiling to my heart” (I. ii. 95-6, 115-116, 123-124) (italics mine). It is this lack of strength and will, the “ unforc’d accord,” that plagues Hamlet, and Claudius does not hesitate to pinpoint the

problem: “…to persever / In obstinate condolement…/ …’tis unmanly grief” (I. ii. 92, 94). Without labeling Hamlet womanly, the suave politician humiliates the prince with the negation of castration, and it is this gender gap that crushes Hamlet’s self-esteem and spirals him into his soliloquies.

The ingredients of Hamlet’s “ thinking too precisely on th’event” (IV. iv. 41) are described as follows: “ A thought which, quarter’d, hath but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward” (IV. iv. 42-43). Aside from the idea of particularization mirrored in Hamlet’s own compartmentalization of the modes of thought” quarter’d” takes on various meanings which confirm Hamlet’s views of Claudius as a double-crosser” the body of a person, esp. of a traitor or criminal” (OED, 1b) and as a royal rapist: “ To place or bear (charges or coats of arms) quarterly upon a shield; to add (another’s coat) to one’s hereditary arms; to place in alternate quarters with” (OED, 3a). The soldierly implications, especially those of lodging, presage Hamlet’s “ shame” at seeing “ The imminent death of twenty thousand men” who “ Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot / Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause” (IV. iv. 59-60, 62-63). Despite his problems, Hamlet can still return to his warm castle and he invariably does, in his thoughts. A soliloquy that begins with the intensely solipsistic “ How all occasions do inform against me” (IV. iv. 32) and quickly moves to the abstract meditations on thought, then to his reflections on the soldiers but only insofar as it affords him another opportunity to bemoan his own fate. This is the general trope of his soliloquies, from an outright bitter lament to philosophical musings and back to an irresolute conclusion. What seems like an ending of conviction in this monologue is yet another of Shakespeare’s clever uses of “ thought”: “

O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (IV. iv. 65-66). Thoughts, bloody as they are, are still only thoughts” and” is more appropriate here than “ or.”

The double placement of “ be” also continues the motif of the passive verb tense, most famously used (again, doubly so, and with the conjunctive “ or”) in Hamlet’s “ To be or not to be” soliloquy, which concerns itself less with the benefits and drawbacks of existence than the smashing of the heroic ideal. Hamlet prefaces the question with “ Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer” (III. i. 56-57), pairing his twin obsessions of nobility and mentality with his Buddhistic “ life is suffering” beliefs (I do not, for a moment, claim that Hamlet carries any hidden Buddhist message, especially since Hamlet finally triumphs through vengeance, not detachment). As Jenkins points out, the following oft-quoted lines are just as often misinterpreted: “ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them” (III. i. 58-60). Jenkins states that the utter impossibility of defeating the awesome natural power of the sea calls into question Hamlet’s motives: “ The absurd futility of the contest is what Shakespeare’s much-abused metaphor of taking arms against a sea very vividly suggests…It is precisely because the heroic gesture is necessarily disastrous that argument becomes possible about whether it is noble” (490-491). My only amendment to Jenkins’s comments is that he bases much of his reading on the debated word “ slings,” which he admits could have originally been “ stings” (278). In this case, “ stings” turns the reading of “ To be or not to be” into an apian pun and furthers the thread of passivity through the image of being beaten, whether by stingers, slings, or arrows.

Hamlet concludes, as he usually does, with an iteration of his original idea: “ Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” (III. i. 83-85). Shakespeare tweaks the meaning of “ thought” beyond colorlessness to representation as a half-formed intent via the shape-making sense of “ cast”: “ Casting metal, etc.; mould; model” (OED, 1. IX).

Yet this evidence only denotes Hamlet’s all-around unmanliness (which is not necessarily a shortcoming); where does Coleridge find support for his claim that Hamlet suffers from a preponderance of effeminacy? For that we must look to Hamlet’s relationships with the only women in the play, Ophelia and Gertrude, and his affirmation of a gendered divide in consciousness. When Hamlet facetiously and cruelly retorts to Ophelia that “ nothing” is “ a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs” (III. ii. 117), Jenkins explains that “ nothing” brings numerous sexual puns to the table, namely Ophelia’s virginity and the yonic imagery of the figure O (295). Furthermore, “ thing” may carry a phallic allusion; hence, women’s sexual organs stand as barren, half-formed “ thoughts” that require male rigidity for structure and completeness.

Hamlet’s abusiveness towards Ophelia can be attributed to his misanthropy, in which he includes himself: “ We are arrant knaves all, believe / none of us” (III. i. 129-130). A more salient piece of evidence comes from the Player King’s longest speech, which some critics believe is composed of the “ dozen or sixteen lines” Hamlet inserts into the text. Speaking of the opposition between “ wills and fates” (III. ii. 206), the Player King voices Hamlet’s

contempt for Gertrude’s infidelity: “ Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. / So think thou wilt no second husband wed, / But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead” (III. ii. 208-210). Thought’s intention is separate from action’s outcome and, assuming these are Hamlet’s lines (and even if they aren’t), women especially have a weak hold on carrying out and sticking to plans. This is highly ironic, since Hamlet has the least perseverance and constancy of thought of any of the characters. Thus, his capriciousness with regards to Ophelia is an offshoot of his underlying fickle feminine disposition. This may help further explain how Hamlet’s feigned “ antic disposition” (I. v. 180) is similar to Ophelia’s real madness.

As Polonius remarks of Hamlet’s verbal leaps, “ Though this be madness, yet there is method / in’t” (II. ii. 205-206). Jenkins agrees, citing the sexual current that runs through Hamlet’s seemingly disjunctive comments to the doddering father about Ophelia. If Hamlet has the intuitive ability to mimic so accurately the chaos of insanity, it follows that his normal mental state is likewise fractured. Without turning this into a postmodern critique of Hamlet, I would like now to quote Fredric Jameson’s explanation of Lacanian schizophrenia:

Part of the enduring appeal of Hamlet is the wide spectrum of interpretation Hamlet affords his actor. This is because, at the simplest level, Hamlet himself is an actor (and a playwright, at least of a dozen lines). His instructions to the acting troupe are clearly borne from experience both on and off the stage, and his machinations are only possible through his ability to chameleon his interactions when necessary. An actor, too, for his reliance

on the word on multiple “ Words, words, words” (II. ii. 192) and not on action. To complement Lacan’s rubble, I cite Franco Moretti’s description of polyphony as it applies to Eliot’s The Wasteland and Joyce’s Ulysses:

I propose that Hamlet’s antic disposition is a tamped-down stream-of-consciousness, and his fragments encompass both Lacan’s schizophrenic identity and Moretti’s indecision. Hamlet’s description of his madness from my opening quote is the same condition that afflicts Ophelia: “ Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts” (IV. v. 85-86). The animalistic analogy is clear enough, but the “ pictures,” which Jenkins defines as “ soulless outward forms” (352) seem to me to fit into Moretti’s fragment theory. Just as insanity breeds a disjointed interior narrative, so do paintings rarely string together a coherent narrative as words can. Only with Eisenstein’s theories of juxtaposition and montage do motion pictures “ make sense,” and in Shakespeare’s time, three centuries before the advent of film, the narrational link between pictures was even more tenuous.

But back to words. An onlooker describes Ophelia’s behavior: “[She] speaks things in doubt / That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move the hearers to collection. They aim at it, / And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts” (IV. v. 7-10). The “ unshaped” words again follow one of the definitions of thought as unformed action, but more pertinently serve as fragments of consciousness, just as Hamlet’s willful schizophrenia decimates his personality. Shakespeare capitalizes on the controlled insanity behind stream-of-consciousness when Ophelia

distributes symbolic flowers to the court: “ And there is pansies, that’s for / thoughts” (Iv. v. 174-175). Jenkins notes the French pun on pensées (538), and the effect here is of Ophelia’s linguistic fragmentation, not of mere Shakespearean punning.

Shakespeare further examines the transformation of thought to words under less crazed conditions. Polonius warns Laertes to “ Give thy thoughts no tongue / Nor any unproportion’d thought his act” (I. iii. 59-60). The balance he urges him to strike is epitomized in Claudius’s opening speech, a model of political phrasings that flaunts his equanimity through contradictions that mark him less as Janus-faced but more as able, unlike Hamlet, to reconcile opposing emotions (though they are false, in his case): “ With an auspicious and a dropping eye, / With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, / In equal scale weighing delight and dole” (I. ii. 11-13). The contrasting imagery of “ auspicious” and “ dropping” is refined by the transposition of “ mirth” and “ dirge” with “ funeral” and “ marriage”; even the internal slant rhyme of “ mirth” and “ dirge” and the simple alliteration of “ delight and dole” harmonize Denmark’s emotional atonality, thrice tuned in the three lines by Claudius’s unifying “ and.” Subtle repetition also aids Claudius’s schemes, such as referring to Gertrude as “ Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state” (I. ii. 9) and then assessing the “ state to be disjoint and out of frame” (I. ii. 19), implying that under his new leadership it will once again flourish.

Hamlet’s articulation process is more complicated since, though given to lyrical turns that caused Helen Vendler to name Hamlet the greatest poem of the millennium, he deplores the deception of words. He is either overly

modest or ashamed at his own verbal expertise, as he writes to Ophelia: “ I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to / reckon my groans” (II. ii. 119-120). When Gertrude labels his vision of the Ghost as “ the very coinage of your brain. / This bodiless creation ecstasy / Is very cunning in” (III. iv. 139-141) or thought as bodying forth the fictive Hamlet defends himself by proclaiming the insignificance and interchangeability of words: “ It is not madness / That I have utter’d/ Bring me to the test, / And I the matter will re-word, which madness / Would gambol from” (III. iv. 143-146). It matters not where his thoughts end up, but where they spring from that Hamlet deems important. Even Claudius recognizes the crucial divide between the two at the end of his prayer: “ My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (III. iii. 97-98).

Despite the impotence of words, Hamlet still manages to “ speak daggers” (III. ii. 387) to Gertrude, telling her that either heaven or the earth (the text is ambiguous) is “ thought-sick at the act” (III. iv. 51) of her remarriage. “ Thought-sick” is a poetic expansion on thought as distress, but more trenchant in Hamlet’s rant is his repetition of “ act” (III. iv. 40), echoed by Gertrude with “ what act” (III. iv. 51), and of the word “ deed” (III. iv. 45) after Gertrude calls his murder of Polonius “ a rash and bloody deed” (III. iv. 27) and Hamlet agrees by iteration (III. iv. 28).

Six instances of “ act” or “ deed” within twenty-six lines, four uttered by Hamlet. This is the crux of his problem, and he seems to have compensated for his mother’s quickness of exploit with a procrastination habit that would rival any modern college student’s. Unlike Laertes, whose “ thoughts and

wishes bend again toward France” (I. ii. 55) a simple pairing which unify the positive definitions of imagination, futurity, and action Hamlet’s thoughts are marred by anxiety. While he begins his vengeance in earnest, his beseeching the Ghost to tell him without delay of his murder smacks of an irony that will be developed throughout the play: “ Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge” (I. v. 29-31). Instead, Hamlet is continually oppressed by “ the dread of something after death” (III. i. 78). Yet he is also restricted by the memory of his father. It is odd, then, that Hamlet forms half of the play-within-the play’s character Lucianus, “ nephew to the King” (III. ii. 239), with Claudius still symbolizing the other half, as Jenkins notes (508), since with “ Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing” (III. ii. 249), Lucianus thoughts are directly linked to action and temporal stability. In Claudius’s prayer scene, the most opportune time to avenge his father’s death, Hamlet again bails out: “ But in our circumstance and course of thought / Tis heavy with him. And am I then reveng’d, / To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season’d for his passage? / No” (III. iii. 83-87). At the moment of climax Hamlet is still bound by earthly vision (“ our circumstance”) and with gradual processes (“ course” and “ purging”) when he needs, for once, to forsake logic and jump to a conclusion. The sudden and short reversal of “ No” is another reminder of the way Hamlet’s mind does jump? back and forth in an indecisive dance, and never leapfrogging to resolution.

Hamlet reminds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the influence perspective has in determining reality: “…for there is nothing / either good or bad but

thinking makes it so” (II. ii. 249-250). As Jenkins notes, this was a common reflection of the times already committed to ink by writers as diverse as Montaigne and Donne (467). It seems that even the greatest of creative geniuses sometimes must steal thoughts from others. It seems, too, that this universality is why Hamlet remains the most performed and critiqued piece of literature in the world. But seeming and reality, as Shakespeare always demonstrates, are two very things, and it is very possible that someday the legendary cultural baggage that accompanies Hamlet will be lost, and future generations may wish to judge the play on its dramatic merits and not on its required-reading position. If that is the case, they may very well “ make” the play “ bad” through their different perspective, one which we cannot yet appreciate, and Hamlet, already four centuries old, may disappear from our cultural consciousness. As the prince himself might say, perish the thought.

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