UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

Death and the End of Testimony: Trauma Theory in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Lorna Mellon
University of California at Los Angelos

Although Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* long before modern literary theories, the themes and structure of the play promote a reading in light of such theories, particularly that of trauma theory. Notoriously, Hamlet, the character, has been all too frequently made a modern man by reference to psychoanalytic processes which, as many critics argue, are abstracted from the essence of the play's concerns. Instead, I would suggest that trauma theory can be used to view the text, rather than the characters—that is, to focus on the underlying themes of the efficacy of language, rather than the psyche of the protagonist battling his personal traumas within the play. To achieve such a reading necessarily calls for an analysis of the play in a way that is not involved with Shakespeare's immediate concerns, but rather with the larger theoretical concerns of language and representation throughout the history of literature.

Cathy Caruth's discussion of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience* is essential to my argument because she provides a preliminary basis for defining and remedying trauma. The origin of trauma, for Caruth, is prompted by "an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known."[1] Caruth also suggests that trauma is "always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality of truth that is not otherwise available."[2] The wound or traumatic scar thus repeatedly calls out and requires the presence of an "other" through which to be heard. Caruth's ultimate solution to ending the perpetuation of such trauma comes in language itself—she claims that through testimony and listening to another's wound, we can overcome the repetitious calamity of traumatic denial to remedy the past with the present. However, to claim that testimony can be redemptive of past traumas is to suggest that an inherently traumatic system, language, is the solution to trauma—essentially prescribing in the antidote

the very thing that shaped the original disease. Language is traumatic due to the fact that it tries to impart a truth that will never be fully recognized—every time we try to represent reality, we are only creating and indeed depending on a void that enables non-truths to perpetuate the trauma of misrepresentation. Because language is traumatic in its failure to create completely truthful representations of reality, not only is it hard to fully believe that it can solve any trauma, but furthermore, through testimony one is only repeating and recreating the traumatic event in words, the sense of which cannot be policed. This essentially places testimony in the very place of the wound, calling out repeatedly to be heard, but due to its linguistic articulation, it will never be fully understood.

While Caruth's notion of trauma usefully underscores the ways in which representation itself is a traumatic event, I am unsatisfied with her solution. If the inability of language to represent reality is traumatic, then testimonial language cannot purport to solve its own trauma. Jacques Derrida assesses this problem in *The Gift of Death*, where he finds issue in the relationship between responsibility, faith, and gift-giving. Derrida suggests that the redemptive desire for language is nullified only when guilt and trauma cannot exist. However, the solution of giving the gift of death would result in the "verdict of non-historicity itself," which seems inherently unethical.[3] Thus, the gift that language tries to bestow through truthful representation can be ethical and without guilt only if the act of giving destroys itself, thus wholly negating the mystery. This moment of self-destruction must be committed in the instant: to meditate beforehand is to reckon linguistically and rationally with the action. Awareness of the consequences of the act shows a motive of revealing the whole truth; yet the whole truth will never be available if the gift-giver is aware of his self and the potential payback he could receive. Derrida sees a need to get outside the economic system of representation to resolve this trauma; however, he suggests that the only non-representative act is to evade representation through death. The paradox, in other words, lies in the need to act ethically through an unethical deed—this is where I feel Derrida and Shakespeare converge.

Hamlet the play and Hamlet the character are faced with a political/ethical dilemma: how can one redeem the past without perpetuation of that trauma? Hamlet needs to kill Claudius without becoming him—to confront his desires would essentially mean becoming the wound and source of the original trauma. Ultimately, the answer lies in death, but this death can only occur ethically once killing becomes a non-redemptive reflex against testimony and representation. To act in a redemptive manner by using language

and testimony would only propagate the wounds of history. Ultimately, Hamlet's revenge must come when he is no longer invested in the outcome: At the end of the play he is virtually dead himself and will not succeed as the king of Denmark; thus, he is no longer invested in the repetitious economic structure because he can no longer benefit from his actions. However, while the desire to act without motive and eliminate the trauma seems paramount, the ending of the play is problematic for two reasons: the survival of Horatio as the living testament to the story and the presence of Fortinbras in Denmark. Nevertheless, if one is to look at *Hamlet* (the play) in light of Derrida's writings on trauma and language, the action of the play suggests that a successful ending would consist in the death of language to ultimately produce a world in which the trauma of history no longer possesses the potential of repetition or the metaphysical drive of redemption. In this world, no prior knowledge would exist unconditionally, and therefore no need for revenge. If language ceases to exist, however, there can be no progress, and the play itself would be rendered void of meaning.

The primary motivator for much of the play's action lies in the eerie scene where the ghost recalls Claudius's rancorous actions against him and orders Hamlet to avenge his father's murder by killing Claudius. The rest of the play is invested not only in Hamlet's remembrance of his father's words, but also in the history preceding the ghost's testimony. Caruth's discussion of trauma is very pertinent when it comes to the ghost—ultimately the ghost will speak only to Hamlet and will continue to roam the castle's walls until his testimony is heard. When Hamlet encounters the ghost he exclaims, "Speak, I am bound to hear," and the ghost replies, "So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear."[4] This testimony does not provide an immediate solution; instead it calls for redemption through Hamlet. Furthermore, all of Hamlet's following actions are motivated by the past—the ghost's testimony perpetuates, rather than eliminates, the trauma of past actions. For Hamlet to avenge his father's murder, he must also become a murderer, and so forth. Caruth's notion of testimony cannot fully apply here because the ghost's testimony calls for further action rather than providing solution in itself. The ghost's last words are, "Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me" (1.5.91). Testimony thus requires memory and the recreation of past events. This act of reconstruction is essentially traumatic as it requires a linguistic and consequently unsatisfactory recollection of the past that will continue to haunt Hamlet and the play until the end. As Hamlet later says to Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern, "A dream itself is but a shadow" (2.2.260)—it is in the shadows of dreams and language that trauma resides.

After his fateful meeting with his father, Hamlet requires Horatio and Marcellus to swear upon his sword that they will not speak of what they have seen. He and the ghost repeatedly call for them to swear silence as Marcellus claims, "We have sworn, my lord, already" (1.5.148). The verbal staging of repetition following the testimonial scene echoes the call for redemption and revenge through repetition of the past murdering of the king. Ultimately though, this scene is problematic as Hamlet requires of his friends one thing: a spoken vow not to speak. The irony of speaking aloud a vow not to speak shows the problem Hamlet faces of trying to end the perpetual traumatic incursion of the past by ending language, but needing, nevertheless, a linguistic version of the events to ensure the symmetry between the binding force of the vow and the authenticity of the report of the events.

If the ghost's testimony is the agent for Hamlet's subsequent actions, then the soliloquies act contrary to the forward motion of the play. In his many speeches we can see Hamlet struggle with the task ahead of him—he grapples with the problem of ending the trauma of his father's murder through revenge, while he also tries to avoid falling into the same pattern of repeating Claudius's actions. Hamlet sees himself as a coward, "unpregnant" of his cause, resorting to words rather than actions to revenge his father's murder (2.2.568). Before constructing the mousetrap, Hamlet is distraught when he claims,

> This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murthered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
> A stallion. (2.2.582-87)

Unable to redeem the past without falling into the very trauma that caused the ghost's testimony, Hamlet feels inadequate in his use of words to remedy the problem, knowing well that to achieve his goal, a more dire action is required of him. It is in these moments of soliloquy that Hamlet's revenge is halted, reckoned with linguistically, and slowed down. The famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy presents Hamlet's musings on death and suicide as he wonders whether trauma can be reconciled only through death, or by actions (3.1.55-89). Hamlet imagines that in death, perhaps, trauma ceases to exist, but then he realizes that even in death, there are dreams and, ultimately, trauma's afterlife. Hamlet's

soliloquy thus is a pendulum swinging between action and non-action, ultimately to "lose the name of action" and postpone the success of his revenge (3.1.87). His musings on how to kill without becoming a killer, how to act without acting, lead only to the conclusion that he must no longer have a conscience, the very thing which "makes cowards of us all" (3.1.82). In his powerful soliloquy after running into Fortinbras's troops on the way to England, he concludes with the commanding statement, "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4.66).

Hamlet's temporary solution to his quest to act ethically lies primarily in the creation of the mousetrap, a play within a play wherein the characters are not immediately invested in the outcome, but—precisely in being so divested—could possibly reveal a truth which is not instantly available. Hamlet suggests that he will hold the play "as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22). In doing so, Hamlet hopes that Claudius's guilt will become apparent and that he can validate the ghost's words: "If his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech, / It is a damned ghost that we have seen" (3.2.80-83). However, the problem here is Hamlet's use of an imaginary recreation to reveal true culpability. In using the metaphor of a mirror, it is evident that the mousetrap is nothing more than an imperfect reflection of reality, an imaginary recreation that ultimately will hold only incomplete or partial truths. In his attempt to create verifiable knowledge through the imaginary recreation of the past, Hamlet ultimately repeats past actions and only furthers the repetition of trauma by providing a platform for the murder of Polonius and Laertes' motive for revenge.

Polonius's death has many fascinating aspects, one of which is the impulsive and irreverent mode of Hamlet's actions. It seems that Hamlet acts without thinking of anyone—it is irrelevant whether he thinks Claudius or Polonius is behind the curtain, and he himself does not care about the consequences. He merely cries out, "How now? A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!" (3.4.23) The near lack of language, reason, and planning—the sheer accidental nature of the deed—shows Hamlet's attempt for original action. The murder is so unlike Claudius's of his father that it seems he might have succeeded in his task if it had been Claudius behind the arras. Hamlet's action, therefore, can happen only when he is acting without direct purpose and planning. By accidentally killing Polonius, Hamlet is able to establish Claudius's identity without fully becoming him. However, in relation to the play at large, Hamlet is the very same to Laertes as Claudius, and he unsurprisingly feels the need to avenge Polonius's murder. The death of one creates a machine of

death for another, just as the verbal acts of the mousetrap operate as a theatrical machine within the play to further the repetition of the original traumas.

Polonius's death is also important in its engineering of Laertes' revenge as well as Ophelia's madness and probable suicide. The succession of events after Hamlet stabs Polonius further supports the idea that language cannot stop perpetuating trauma. Hamlet's mistake—killing Polonius—alters the prospective outcome: instead of killing Claudius ethically, Hamlet's actions ultimately fall into the category of the actions of a mere murderer. Consequently, Laertes becomes bound to revenge just as Hamlet was in hearing the ghost's testimony when he claims, "Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd / Most thoroughly for my father" (4.5.136-37). It is this vow to revenge which ultimately destroys Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius. Laertes' linguistic reckoning with his bondage to revenge is in this sense redundant: it simply provides further evidence of the traumatic patterning of language as a propagator of misrepresentation.

Only in Ophelia's case do we begin to see the efficacy of language unravel. In Ophelia's madness lies the end of language and reason. She spatters off nonsensical words and song, emphasizing that in madness, reason and language cease to exist. Her ambiguously suicidal death marks the first occurrence of a genuinely new action within the play. Because she is mad, there appears to be no reasoning and no clear motive behind her actions; rather, she appears to act on pure impulse. The problem here lies in the way in which others try to reckon with her death. Gertrude's recollection of the suicide scene is problematic in the very fact that she speaks reasonably as if she were at the scene, when no textual evidence supports such a view. Her recollection undermines the uniqueness of Ophelia's actions by rendering her story in terms that do not fit together coherently. As suicide, her actions mark the death of language, but the aftermath of her suicide only perpetuates history's wounds through language. The problem of her burial remains indebted to the protocols in reason and language, but her actions issue from madness and produce song, not propositions. The problem, therefore, should not be whether or not she committed suicide because in Ophelia's lyrical escape into madness, such notions do not, and cannot, apply.

We see that Ophelia has given herself the ultimate gift of death—she acts ethically in a Derridean sense, if not a Christian one, because there is no possible way in which committing suicide can be within one's own self interest. It is in her case that we begin

to see the possibility of conclusion and the end of trauma, at least for her sake. Yet, this option is not feasible for Hamlet. Due to the fact that Hamlet is not mad, but only acting, he cannot commit such an act—Hamlet's actions must be a spawn of a different mother.

The final battle scene and consequent massacre provide the ultimate answer to Hamlet's dilemma: that is, how he can kill Claudius with no mark against his immortal soul. The ethical import for Shakespeare's culture was most definitely based in a Christian—and economic—sense of the afterlife in relation to choices made before death; but if we are to look at the final scene in a Derridean sense, we see Hamlet's challenge: he must act ethically and without self-interest, regardless of the economic payoff or damage that could result from his actions. Hamlet is able to take action and forsake words only because of one fact: poisoned and near death, words are no longer relevant, and action supersedes reasoning. He puts little thought into his slaughter of Claudius, merely exclaiming, "The point envenom'd too! / Then, venom, to thy work" (5.2.321-22).

If the play were to stop here, it would arguably be more effective in the sense that at this point it seems that language, testimony, and therefore the trauma of Denmark's history are abolished. The muddle of near-comical corpses produces a scene which seems nearly void of meaning; the overwhelming presence of death inhibits the genuine feeling of tragedy one feels over Gertrude's or the others' deaths. However, while one might conceivably wish that this were the "real" ending, there remains the troubling presence of Horatio, who has somehow survived the massacre. He acts as a living testimony, but for what purpose?—to carry on the past trauma when Hamlet calls to him,

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity a while,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story. (5.2.346-49)

Thus, while the play suggests a solution in the closure of testimony—after all, every instance where language preceded action has only caused further trauma and repetition—Horatio's presence only solidifies the enduring presence of testimony in the history of the trauma. Hamlet's choice of words, calling Horatio to draw his breath in pain, reflects the furthering of the trauma to cause pain to others still in the world of the living.

Horatio's presence at the end of the play is troubling enough in its reinforcement of future trauma within Denmark, but more

troubling still is the appearance of Fortinbras. The importance of Fortinbras getting in the last words at the conclusion of the play seems to nullify any notion of resolution: Fortinbras's presence and words indicate that such trauma will continue well into the future. As a military figure, Fortinbras represents the reinstatement of the traumatic political structure in which brothers can murder brothers for the throne. His last words, "Go bid the soldiers shoot," buttresses the prolonged presence of violence and death as it makes reference both to the funerals and the inevitable battles to come (5.2.403).

It is certain that Shakespeare was not reading Derrida when he wrote *Hamlet.* But the play nonetheless presents a provocative lens through which to consider the efficacy of language and testimony in relation to trauma theory. Hamlet's disgust with the efficacy of "words, words, words" (2.2.192) reflects the entire play's movement towards an ending in which words are irrelevant. However, the conclusion does not fully abolish testimony and thus suggests that the trauma will only continue to pervade the world of Denmark. This conclusion can be applied to recent studies of the trauma of language according to the logic of the double bind—language is traumatic, but without it, meaning would cease to exist. A full investment in Derrida's ideas on death would, in fact, bring the verdict of non-historicity and, in that case, the destruction of art itself. Literature may produce only a shadow of history, but perhaps that shadow is the best representation of truth available to us. If we are to abolish trauma, there will be no life and no art, in a way. It is the trauma created by misrepresentation that reminds us of what is real and what it means to live—and to die.

Notes

1. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

2. Caruth, 4.

3. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.

4. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. Herschel Baker (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 1.5.6-7. Subsequent in-text line references are to this edition.

I would like to give special thanks to UCLA, especially the Department of English, for a wonderful undergraduate education and to Professor Lowell Gallagher for his mentorship and guidance. Also thanks to Robert Watson and Chris Mott for their support and assistance.