The Skull Beneath The Skin: Truth And Death In *Hamlet*

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Hamlet famously begins with the question "Who's there?" (1.1.1)[1] and has prompted many more questions, especially concerning the title character: Why does Hamlet delay his revenge? Is Hamlet really crazy? Why does Hamlet see the ghost when Gertrude does not? Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius when he is praying? Why does Hamlet show so little remorse for the deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz or Guildenstern? Why is Hamlet so different in Act 5?

Where can one begin to find answers to these questions? Nigel Alexander suggests that

> the first act of the play is designed to admit the spectator into Hamlet's mind and that the rest of the play exhibits the full range and quality of his consciousness. . . . The mind of Hamlet has been designed by Shakespeare as a precision instrument through which the audience may view the events of the play.[2]

In addition, Dover Wilson states that our answers to all the questions "must hang together if *Hamlet* was an artistic unity at all."[3] In this paper, I propose to subject Alexander's methodology to Wilson's standard of unity, explaining many of Hamlet's actions by first understanding one important aspect of his state of mind.

If, as Alexander suggests, we look at Hamlet's mind in the first act, we find that the royal couple is concerned with his thoughts as well. Both Claudius and Gertrude tell Hamlet that he is excessively mourning his father's death. If the "precision instrument" Shakespeare designed for us to view the events of the play is clouded with grieving, our vision may be affected in many ways. In "Whispers of Immortality," T.S. Eliot describes one such effect:

> Webster was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin;
> And breastless creatures under ground
> Leaned backward with a lipless grin.[4]

Evidently, mourning is not just about how Webster remembers the dead, but also how he perceives the living. He cannot look at their lips without seeing their eventual absence due to decay; he feels compelled to see the inevitable skull that lurks underneath the beautiful, temporal skin. This skull is the inescapable truth of each person's inevitable death. Similarly, truth and death dominate Hamlet's thoughts. A close reading reveals that these two ideas provide the artistic unity for the play, culminating with the well-known gravedigger scene, where the skulls make explicit that death is certain, truth is scarce, and that such boundaries must be accepted.

While truth and death are separately mentioned many times in the play, the first intersection between these two important ideas comes when Gertrude suggests to Hamlet that he thinks too much about death, while his reply suggests that what is on his mind is truth. In trying to convince Hamlet that such a lengthy mourning period is excessive, Gertrude gets Hamlet to acknowledge that death is a common occurrence. She then asks him why his father's death seems to affect him so particularly, as if it were unusual (1.2.74-78). Hamlet does not react to the sense of his mother's argument, but rather he singles out one of her words, "seems," and takes issue with the implication he hears in that word, which is that his mourning is some sort of pretense: "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'" (1.2.79). There are three key ideas in Hamlet's overreaction: "Seems" represents how mournful Hamlet appears to others; "is" represents the actual level of his sadness regarding his father's death; and the third, unnamed idea is the implied distance between "seems" and "is" that Hamlet has heard in his mother's question. This perceived discrepancy between appearance and reality is abhorrent to Hamlet, who believes "seems" and "is" should be the same. "In the sense used by Hamlet," writes Alexancer, "'seem'. . . has the implication of deceit or 'false-seeming.'" [5] To Hamlet, Gertrude's hasty marriage to Claudius indicates that her mourning of her husband was a lie. For someone with this "false-seeming" to accuse Hamlet of pretense is infuriating. This conversation, our first glimpse of the title character, introduces as a subject the discrepancy between actions and intent. The most debated question of the play is about just such a discrepancy: Why does Hamlet promise to revenge his father's murder and then not do it?

Shakespeare uses the third scene to make us aware of still another discrepancy between words and action: advice. First, Laertes advises Ophelia that while Hamlet may promise his love, he might not be able to deliver on that promise because of his rank and its obligations:

> . . . if he says he loves you,
> It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
> As he in his particular act and place
> May give his saying deed. (1.3.29-31)

In other words, a discrepancy exists between what Hamlet says and what he can do, so Ophelia should not base her actions (especially the yielding of her "chaste treasure" [1.3.35]) on his words. This advice Ophelia accepts and then turns upon Laertes, reminding him to be sexually responsible as well:

> Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
> Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
> Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine,
> Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads (1.3.51-54).

As Ophelia points out, a hypocrite is one whose own actions do not match the actions he advises others to take.

The scene continues with Polonius giving Laertes advice on behavior that is so complicated,

> Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
> Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
> Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
> But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
> Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. (1.3.67-70)

ideal ("Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice" [1.3.74]), and contradictory

> Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
> But not expressed in fancy (rich, not gaudy),
> For the apparel oft proclaims the man. (1.3.76-78)

that no ordinary person could match his actions to those words. After giving at least sixteen separate pieces of advice on how Laertes should behave, Polonius contradicts all his previous advice with his summation: "This above all: to thine own self be true" (1.3.84-86).

Then Polonius gives his attention to Ophelia, who tells her father that Hamlet has often tendered his affection to her. Polonius asks her,

> Do you believe his 'tenders,' as you call them?
> ...Think yourself a baby
> That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
> Which are not sterling. (1.3.112-116)

Polonius does not believe Hamlet's words or actions. His advice to Ophelia is for her to act as if she does not like Hamlet, even if she actually does.

While the Polonius family scene seems to delay Hamlet's meeting with the ghost, and some productions even leave it out, it has everything to do with enlarging our definition of that which is not true. In a play where the biggest question is why the main character does not do what he promises, this scene shows that other sorts of discrepancies creep between words and actions, and that such discrepancies are common in Elsinore.

Another scene involving Polonius, this time with Reynaldo, emphasizes how easily some accept and adapt to those discrepancies. Polonius wishes to know what his son, Laertes, is doing in Paris. Does he ask Laertes? Does he ask Reynaldo to ask Laertes? Those approaches would be too direct for Polonius. He tells Reynaldo to inquire "what Danskers are in Paris" (2.1.8), find someone who is acquainted with Laertes,

> And there put on him
> What forgeries you please—marry, none so rank
> As may dishonor him, take heed of that,
> But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
> As are companions noted and most known
> To youth and liberty. (2.1.21-6)

Thus, Reynaldo's "bait of falsehood" (2.1.70) will take "this carp of truth" (2.1.70). Polonius assumes a tremendous discrepancy between surface and reality, and he acts accordingly. Like any good fisherman, he knows the fish he wants, the truth, is beneath the surface. Later he assures his king and queen that he "will find/ Where truth is hid, though it were hid, indeed,/ Within the center" (2.2.169-71). Polonius doesn't believe the surface and the truth are ever the same. The discrepancies that surprise and appall Hamlet are quite natural to Polonius. If Polonius were a person, his attitudes would not be justification for his death, but as a character standing in the hero's way during his quest for truth, Polonius' death is thematically justified.

Insincerity is also a discrepancy between one's words and one's true feelings. For example, Claudius prays, but worries that his prayer will not be answered because "my words fly up, my thoughts remain below;/ Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.4.102-3). Insincerity seems to be Claudius' expertise, as he later goads Laertes by accusing him of not really caring about his father's death: "... was your father dear to you/ Or are you like the painting of a sorrow/ A face without a heart?" (4.7.122-4).

Flattery is a specific form of insincerity directed at one who is more powerful. Rosencrantz reminds Claudius of his importance:

> The cess of majesty
> Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
> What's near it with it; or it is a massy wheel
> Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose (huge) spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortised and adjoined...
>
> ...Never alone
> Did the king sigh, but (with) a general groan. (3.3.16-24)

Polonius also flatters the king and queen when he tells them that he told Ophelia, "Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star./ This must not be" (2.2.150-1). What he actually said to Ophelia was:

> These blazes, daughter,
> Giving more light than heat, extinct in both
> Even in their promise as it is a-making,
> You must not take for fire. (1.3.126-9)

Polonius later flatters Hamlet by pretending to agree with the strange cloud descriptions (3.2.406-412) Hamlet makes up just to show how far Polonius will go to be agreeable. Hamlet plays the same game with Osric:

> *Hamlet.* (Put) your bonnet to his right use: 'tis for the head.
> *Orsic.* I thank your lordship; it is very hot.
> *Hamlet.* No, believe me, 'tis very cold; the wind is northerly.
> *Orsic.* It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.
> *Hamlet.* But yet methinks it is very (sultry) and hot (for) my complexion.
> *Orsic.* Exceedingly, my lord; it is very sultry, as 'twere—I cannot tell how (5.2.105-114).

The flatterer's statements are not true to his perception of reality; rather, his words depend on the rank of the person being addressed.

A discrepancy such as this, between what one says and what one means, horrifies Hamlet. As he tells the players, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.18-9). His reaction to the news of his father's murder by his uncle is not just that Claudius is evil and villainous, but that Claudius' ability to appear otherwise is also abhorrent: "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" (1.5.113). Hamlet damns his villainy and the discrepancy equally; in fact, he emphasizes the discrepancy by asking rhetorically for his school tablet to write the lesson down "that one may smile and smile and be a villain" (1.5.115).

All of this lying, hypocrisy, advice, and insincerity show how false the world of Elsinore looks to the grieving Hamlet. So far, only someone returned from the dead has told the truth, and even

his description of that assassination seems to metaphorically remind us of the lies of the living. One way to describe a lie figuratively is to say that it is a poison one pours into someone else's ear. According to the ghost, the poison

> ...doth (posset)
> And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
> The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine,
> And a most instant tetter barked about,
> Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
> All my smooth body. (1.5.75-80)

In short, his body rotted from the inside out. Perhaps what is being described is the effect of a lie on the unsuspecting. Maybe that is what Shakespeare meant when Marcellus says only a few lines before, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.100). The kingdom is rotting, from the inside out, due to the lies poured in its ear.

The only truth in Hamlet's world has come from the dead. As Hamlet says, "It is an honest ghost" (1.5.154). The ghost is so much a symbol of honesty that Hamlet has Horatio and Marcellus swear upon it, not once, but three times, as its voice appears from three different parts of the stage, with them following it as if they were in a storm and the ghost's voice were magnetic north. Only death guarantees truth in this play; the living Denmark is filled with lies.

The falseness Hamlet sees in Elsinore complicates his vow to the ghost. He feels that he must move Elsinore closer to the truth and bring Claudius' "seems" in line with his "is." Paul Jorgenson says that

> Hamlet's task is not so simple as killing the king. His, rather, is the most profound kind of revenge (if one can justly call it that) imposed upon any hero. His task is to set the times right, to purge the court of Elsinore.[6]

This also explains why Hamlet does not kill Claudius while he is praying (3.3). Killing the king at prayer would make Claudius "seem" a holy and good man. Instead, Claudius' death must reveal his truth. If Claudius had been hiding in Gertrude's room instead of Polonius, that would have been the perfect death for Claudius: caught doing something furtive. Hamlet thought (or hoped) it was Claudius ("I took thee for thy better" [3.4.39]), and that is why he killed Polonius.

In contrast with his dead father who told the truth, Hamlet sees a world full of characters who lie,who in the words of Norman N. Holland, too easily believe lies, or who expect others to lie.

> In incident after incident, we see the characters questioning, probing, testing, spying. We see Polonius set his man Reynaldo to spy on his son's behavior in Paris. We see Polonius, as he so quaintly puts it, "loose" his daughter to Hamlet, and the King, no less, hide behind a curtain to spy on them. We see Polonius spy on Hamlet's interview with his mother. We see the King and Gertrude setting Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. And we see Hamlet spy on the King at prayers. We see him lure Claudius with the play-within-the-play to a fatal revelation.[7]

Many people have commented on all the bodies lying on the stage at the end of this play, but the play is filled with lying bodies of another sort, and they all lie to Hamlet. Claudius claims to have a fatherly love for him ("my cousin Hamlet, and my son" [1.2.66]). Polonius spies on him and pretends to agree with whatever silliness he says:

> *Hamlet.* Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
> *Polonius.* By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.
> *Hamlet.* Methinks it is like a weasel.
> *Polonius.* It is backed like a weasel.
> *Hamlet.* Or like a whale.
> *Polonius.* Very like a whale. (3.2.406-412)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy on him and lie to his face, even when he has discerned their lie and confronted them with it ("Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me" [2.2.295-298]). But Hamlet does not have much luck in being dealt with justly. Even Ophelia, who represents those who are ignorant of the lying ways of the world, fails Hamlet by becoming a dupe of those who do lie when she engages him in conversation so her father and Claudius can listen. Then, out of fear and obedience of her father, she compounds this false action with a direct lie to a direct question:

> *Hamlet.* Where's your father?
> *Ophelia.* At home, my lord. (3.1.141-2)

When Hamlet characterizes Ophelia as another lying woman moments later ("God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" [3.1.155-6]), we can clearly see that he is thinking not just of her, but also of how false his mother has been to the memory of his father. Hamlet sees a false face on nearly everyone, regardless of gender. As he says to Polonius, "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (2.2. 194-5). Hamlet's world is filled with people like

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who lie as easily as one blows upon that simplest of instruments, the recorder. According to Hamlet, Guildenstern should be able to play a recorder because it is "as easy as lying" (3.2.387). Just as the earlier poison metaphor showed how lethal a lie is, this recorder simile makes us realize the liar's intent is to manipulate or "play upon me" (3.2.394), as Hamlet says.

In addition to the poison and recorder comparisons, Holland notes that Shakespeare also provides us with a metaphor for truth that demonstrates just how deeply lying is a part of the Elsinore court:

> The word "ear" occurs in this play more than in any other of Shakespeare's, particularly in the sense of words penetrating our ears; words do our ears "violence," "take prisoner" the ear, "cleave" the ear, "split" the ear, "infect" the ear.[8]

What sort of words would attack the ear? Bernardo asks Horatio in the very first scene to "let us once again assail your ears,/ That are so fortified against our story" (1.1.37-8), as if Horatio's ears were a castle and the words were Bernardo's attacking troops. Once the audience has seen the ghost, it knows that Bernardo's words were true and that Horatio's ears do not welcome that particular truth. Some people do not want to see or hear the truth; for them, words of truth attack their ears. When Hamlet goes to confront his mother, he says "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.401). He intends to make his mother see her current marriage as he does. When he makes clear to her the discrepancy he sees between her former and current husbands, when his words paint a picture of "the rank sweat of an enseam'd bed" (3.4.92) she shares with Claudius, her mind recoils from his truth: "O! speak to me no more;/ These words like daggers enter in mine ears" (3.4.93-94). Shakespeare is showing us that foolish ears like Gertrude's are fortified against the truth. The ghost tells Hamlet that the hereafter is a truth that no living person could handle:

> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
> Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
> Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
> And each particular hair to stand on end
> Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (2.5.15-20)

When the ghost describes the ugly reality of his murder, Hamlet listens to every detail. The truth does not frighten Hamlet, nor

does he fortify his ears against it. To Hamlet's idealistic way of thinking, the only way to "attack" an ear is with a lie, and the biggest lie in this play is the elder Hamlet's supposedly accidental death: "So the whole ear of Denmark/ Is by a forged process of my death/ Rankly abus'd" (1.5.36-8).

In the world of Elsinore, lying is so commonplace that Hamlet's every action is contaminated. Even though he seeks the truth, he must put on "an antic disposition" (1.5.192), a pretense of insanity, in order to be safe while he attempts to verify and reveal the truth. But Hamlet is so truthful that even in this lie he says many things that are honest. Polonius remarks that Hamlet's madness has a "method in 't" (2.2.224). The antic disposition allows him to say what is really on his mind, since it will be lost in his whirling words. When Hamlet tells Claudius that he eats the "promise-crammed" (3.2.100) air like a chameleon, it seems silly, until one remembers all the promises Claudius has made to Hamlet that Hamlet knows are as insubstantial as the air. As Polonius says, "How pregnant sometimes his replies are!" (2.2.226-7). Even though Hamlet must act as if he is crazy in order to survive in this world of lies, he will only do so to bring out the truth eventually, and he will tell as much truth in his craziness as he can get away with. In the words of A. C. Bradley,

> "His adoption of the pretense of madness... would enable him to give some utterance to the load that pressed on his heart and brain, and a fear that he would be unable altogether to repress such utterance."[9]

Even this "act" is a kind of truth, because certainly what he has seen would make one crazy.

Claudius' skill at projecting a trustworthy exterior forces Hamlet to resort to a form of lying, drama, to get his first outward proof of Claudius' guilt through his reaction to the modified production of *The Murder of Gonzago*. When Claudius's reaction brings his "is" closer to the surface "seems," Hamlet says to Horatio that he will "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" (3.2.312-13). Gertrude's credulity forces Hamlet to take the unacknowledged difference between her past and present husbands and shove it in her face, until even she must admit that

> Thou turn'st my eyes into my (very) soul,
> And there I see such black and (grained) spots
> As will (not) leave their tinct. (3.4.100-102)

Those black spots are the truth, which the living, sometimes, pretend not to see. That's why Gertrude cannot see the ghost.

Not because the ghost "is the very coinage of your brain" (3.4.157) as she says to Hamlet, but because the ghost is truth, and Gertrude prefers not to see the truth. Maynard Mack believes that "In one sense at least, the ghost is the supreme reality, representative of the hidden ultimate power. . .—witnessing from beyond the grave against this hollow world."[10]

Hamlet's search for truth in this hollow world eventually leads him to a grave scene filled with skulls, followed by a final scene littered with dead bodies. In all this death resides more truth than in any other part of the play. Consider first the ending scene's many tragic deaths. From a tragedian's point of view, Hamlet must die, and from everyone's point of view Claudius must die. But why must Gertrude (whom the ghost specifically warned Hamlet not to punish) die? Why must the other wronged son in the play, Laertes, die? If we have swordplay, why isn't being stabbed sufficient for death? Why must characters be poisoned as well? This final scene's many deaths and many questions are meant as a final reminder of just what is rotten in Denmark: lies. The poison the king puts in the drink and with which Laertes anoints his foil are to remind us of the metaphorical poison poured into Hamlet's father's (and Denmark's) ear. Dover Wilson states,

> All the forces of evil against which he has been pitted from the beginning seem to find consummation in the triple treachery of naked point, envenomed steel, and poisoned chalice.[11]

Each character's manner of death is also meaningful. Laertes is stabbed by his own lie, the foil he secretly sharpened and poisoned: "I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (5.2.337). Laertes's mistake lies in pretending, along with Claudius, that this is a friendly duel. A virtuous revenge must consist of an honest and open act.

Gertrude, who has willingly swallowed Claudius' many lies, eagerly swallows the drink he has poisoned along with one last lie from Claudius, committed when he fails to insist she not drink, showing that his desire to seem innocent outweighs his love for Gertrude. Even in her last words the uncomprehending queen, while acknowledging "I am poison'd" (5.2.341), does not seem to be aware of the identity of her poisoner. Gertrude's willing belief in Claudius's lies (contrasted with her inability to see the truthful ghost) has robbed her of her rightful husband, the regard of her son, and her life.

Claudius, who is the source of the rottenness in Denmark, must be both stabbed with poison and have it shoved down his

throat, and he must die uttering one last lie: "I am but hurt" (5.2.355).

Hamlet's crime in this play is not his delay, but rather his decision to fight Claudius' lies with a lie of his own: the antic disposition. This pretense was meant to buy time but has actually lost his soul. In trying to bring "seems" and "is" closer together, he has actually forced them further apart. As Maynard Mack describes Hamlet's plight,

> To get at the world of seeming one sometimes has to use its weapons. He himself, before he finishes, has become a player, has put an antic disposition on, has killed a man—the wrong man—has helped drive Ophelia mad, and has sent two friends of his youth to death. . . . He had never meant to dirty himself with these things, but from the moment of the ghost's challenge to act, this dirtying was inevitable.[12]

Like Laertes, Hamlet was soiled by his own treachery. For too long in this play he was not what he seemed. Metaphorically, "the potent poison" (5.2.390) of lying "quite o'ercrows my spirit" (5.2.390).

As perfectly as this ending brings truth and death together in one bloody scene, the gravedigger scene that precedes it is more important. This scene allows Hamlet to reflect aloud on all that this ordeal has taught him about truth and death. The gravedigger has to disinter several skeletal remains to make room for Ophelia's contested, Christian burial. Hamlet, not yet knowing of Ophelia's death, uses the many skulls unceremoniously chucked out of the grave to reflect on death in the abstract. His very first comment is "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once" (5.1.77-8). What do the imagined tongues in these actual skulls say to Hamlet?

Hamlet first refers to a "politician" (5.1.80) and to "Cain's jawbone" (5.1.79). Add together those two ideas, "politician" plus fratricide, and the resulting sum is Claudius. Therefore, the skull reminds Hamlet of his father's murderer. But he then immediately imagines that the skull might be that of a "courtier, which could say 'Good morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, sweet lord?'" (5.1.84-5). In other words, a flatterer, one whose words are insincere: "This might by my Lord Such-a-one that praised my/ Lord Such-a-one's horse when he went to beg it,/ might it not? (5.1.86-8). When the gravedigger sets out more skulls, Hamlet speculates that one might be that of a lawyer. Now that the lawyer is dead, the clever words that he used to obscure the truth will be of no use anymore: "Where be his quiddities now, his quillities,

his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?" (5.1.101-2). Together, this hypothetical, overly-clever lawyer; the imagined, insincere courtier; and the murderous, Cain-like politician depict a society, like Elsinore, which is filled with misrepresentation.

Shakespeare next offers us the gravedigger's and Hamlet's hilarious contest of wits based on the word 'lie.'

Hamlet. Whose grave's this, sirrah?
[Gravedigger]. Mine, sir. . . .
Hamlet. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in 't.
[Gravedigger]. You lie out on 't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours.
For my part, I do not lie in 't, yet it is mine.
Hamlet. Thou dost lie in 't, to be in 't and say it is thine.
'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou
liest.
[Gravedigger]. 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you. (5.1.120-131)

Not only does the audience hear the word "lie" five times in the space of twelve lines, but Hamlet, who thinks of himself as truthful, finds he is not so truthful as one who is completely literal:

Hamlet. What man dost thou dig it for?
[Gravedigger]. For no man, sir.
Hamlet. What woman then?
[Gravedigger]. For none, neither.
Hamlet. Who is to be buried in 't?
[Gravedigger]. One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead. (5.1. 133-9)

Hamlet's comment on this exchange is "How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" (5.1.140-1). Indeed, equivocation undoes nearly everyone in this play, and Hamlet is reminded of that by someone who speaks the truth, not because he is dead, but because he is standing in a grave. Into this same grave Hamlet will jump a few moments later to proclaim the truth of his love for the dead Ophelia. Shakespeare is showing us that the world demands lies, and only the unworldly (the simple gravedigger) or the idealistic and soon-to-be-dead (Hamlet) can speak the truth freely. The connection Shakespeare has made between death and truth in this play is really about the connection between the living and their many lies.

But death and lies also have something in common. Each one is an ugly skull beneath the beautiful skin. Death is an ugly fact of

life, and lies are an ugly part of living. As much as Hamlet is to be admired for mourning his father and for revering the truth, death and lies are inevitable. The inevitable must be accepted, and that is what the skulls and the grave will next "say" to Hamlet. After Hamlet and the gravedigger have a discussion about how corpses nowadays are sometimes rotten before they ever get to the grave (in other words, people are rotten, or full of lies, and the gravedigger accepts that), the gravedigger tells Hamlet that one of the skulls is that of Yorick, the late king's jester. Hamlet's comments indicate a genuine affection for "poor Yorick" (5.1.190-1). Hamlet says he was "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times" (5.1.191-3). Hamlet's reaction to the death of one whose "jest" seemed "infinite" is "how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it" (5.1.193-4). It does not seem right that someone who was good, and whom Hamlet loved, should die.

But in saying this, Hamlet then asks a deeper question about this skull: "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?" (5.1.204-5) Even the most important and powerful of us, such as "Alexander" or "Imperious Caesar" (5.1.220), may end up as the dust that only stops "a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.221). Hamlet has realized that it doesn't matter whether someone is loved, or important, or powerful; that person will still die. Who in Hamlet's life was most loved, important, and powerful? His father. In this moment, Hamlet accepts what his mother and uncle wanted him to accept in Act 1, Scene 2: his father's death. But no sooner has he uttered the philosophical yet flippant couplet, "O, that the earth which kept the world in awe/ Should patch a wall t' expel the (winter's) flaw" (5.1.222-3), than his philosophy and his flippancy will face the grim reality that this is the grave of his beloved Ophelia.

Here is perhaps the largest discrepancy between words and actions in the play: Hamlet has just accepted mortality in the abstract, but when faced with an actual death, he foolishly follows the deceased into the grave and makes ridiculous vows: "Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum" (5.1.285-7). This inability to accept death reminds us of the soliloquies, especially "To be or not to be" (3.1.64), and

> O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
> thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
> or that the Everlasting had not fixed
> His canon 'gainst (self-slaughter!). (1.2.133-6)

Apparently, Hamlet loved his father so much that part of him wished to follow the king into the grave, as he and Laertes have literally done for Ophelia.

But to follow the dead into the grave is to make the implicit not only explicit, but also ridiculous. No matter how much we love the dead, we do not want to be dead. Once he has done the ridiculous, Hamlet realizes he must accept death, and all the wisdom he derived from the skulls in the earlier part of the scene must now be more than words. He must "suit the action to the word" (3.2.18-9) and be as accepting of Ophelia's death as he was of Yorick's skull, as resigned to his father's death as Alexander must be to his fate as a bunghole stopper.

Only when he has calmed down after the graveyard scene, can Hamlet be philosophical about his own death:

> There is (a)
> special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be
> (now,) 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
> now; if it be not now, yet it (will) come. The
> readiness is all. (5.2.233-7)

This speech, the conversation with the skulls, and the ridiculous leap into the grave, show that Hamlet is finally ready to accept the inevitability and finality of death. Maynard Mack believes that in the final scene Hamlet "has now accepted the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed."[13]

One other boundary of human action the play has demonstrated is the scarcity of truth. The discrepancies between word and deed, surface and reality, promise and action, have been many in Elsinore. If that is how human beings are, then that is a limitation Hamlet should accept, although not as readily as Polonius, nor as blindly as Gertrude, and certainly not as opportunistically as Claudius does. Hamlet's demand for the truth at all costs is admirable, yet not practical. The gravedigger is a small demonstration of how an unreasonable adherence to the truth can lead to a ridiculous inability to comprehend figurative language. If one is in love with the truth, then one will be stuck with the literal.

An indication of Hamlet's acceptance of deception in the world is his treatment of Osric, who represents not only the discrepancy of flattery, but the falseness of this "friendly" duel. Instead of being angered by Osric's fawning manner, as he might have been earlier in the play, he gently rebukes him and brings him to the point: "Why do we wrap the gentleman in our rawer breath?" (5.2.135-136). Horatio and Hamlet both realize something is amiss in this challenge, but Hamlet, who earlier disputed his mother over her use of the word "seems," is not troubled at all by what is obviously some sort of falseness regarding this duel: "It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of (gainsgiving) as would perhaps

trouble a woman" (5.2.229-30). During the rest of the play, he has been appalled by lies and treachery; here he is somewhat amused, as Alexander points out:

> The Gravediggers' sardonic acceptance of death's triumph is paralleled by the courage and good humor with which Hamlet comes to accept the impossible odds offered to him by the King and Laertes.[14]

Falseness is a part of life and must be dealt with, rather than "set right." Trying to change the world is as foolish as following someone into the grave. This is what the skulls of Act 5 teach Hamlet: The scarcity of truth and the inevitability of death must be accepted. At the end of the longest play Shakespeare wrote, when the plot has finally brought the antagonists to a point of confrontation, the story halts for a meditation upon some skulls. They must be important. The wisdom Hamlet finds in these skulls is a final reminder to consider together the two ideas of truth and death.

If we do so, then we can easily solve the play's "problems." Hamlet's delay is understandable, since he is trying to set his world right and kill the king in such a way that truth comes out. Hamlet's words, which seem both crazy and sane, are really the words of an honest man faced with a world so false that a lie seems to be the only safe strategy. Supposedly unimportant scenes with Polonius, Laertes, and Reynaldo actually remind us that we are all guilty of discrepancies between word and action on a daily basis. Since the ghost represents the truth we all face at death, only those who can face the truth will see it. A seemingly bloodthirsty Hamlet, killing at times without remorse, is actually one who is true slaying those who are false. An apparently indecisive Hamlet who makes up a reason not to kill the king at prayer is actually an idealist trying to make sure that in death the king will "seem" to be what he really "is." This play, supposedly about revenge, is really a voyage towards the truth, and therefore emotionally peaks in the third act during the play-within-a-play when Hamlet becomes sure of that truth and that truth is apparent to at least one other person Hamlet trusts. Hamlet's calm in Act 5 represents his acceptance of a world in which death happens too soon and truth happens too seldom.

But it is unlikely Shakespeare connected truth and death artistically to create a puzzle or to help us solve one; it is more likely he did so because he saw such a connection as meaningful. What follows is speculation regarding Shakespeare's motives.

One reason for Shakespeare to connect truth and death is to demonstrate the chaos that results when an idealist fails to accept

the inevitable. Polonius was right: everyone lies. People are insincere and hypocritical. They will flatter and lie. One should not be surprised by behavior that is so prevalent, nor can one change the world that encourages it. If one is appalled by such behavior, then all one can do is to be as truthful as possible. That is what Hamlet was, until he adopted the antic disposition, and that is what he is again in Act 5. As for death, Claudius and Gertrude were right: everyone dies. Acknowledging this fact does not mean we should become Eliot's Webster and see the skull beneath everyone's skin, nor do we have to become like Gertrude, who moves on to another bed a little too quickly, but at some point we do have to move on, as Hamlet does, once again in Act 5.

Another reason to consider truth and death together would be to make explicit one of our unspoken assumptions: everyone lies. People know this, even if only subconsciously. Our world accepts deathbed confessions, because it assumes the nearly dead know that very shortly they will have to account for their lies. The living assume their personal reckoning is far enough away that requirements of the moment seem more pressing. If someone swears on a heavenly (ghostly) Bible, most would consider believing him or her, just as they may believe the person who swears on his mother's grave. These exceptions aside, the living do lie, often and easily, perhaps to hide the skeletons in their closets. When Rosencrantz sarcastically says to Hamlet that the "world's grown honest" (2..2.255-56), Hamlet's ironic thought is "Then doomsday is near" (2.2.257). Doomsday is another connection between truth and death which implies that the living will lie until their last (possible) moment.

A third reason is suggested by Lawrence Danson in his analysis of the Player-King's speech (3.2.209-38). Danson believes that death makes us aware of falsehood by making us conscious of time:

> Even where thought and expression are in tune with each other, the inevitable movement of time ("fate") makes a liar of our "wills." In this world of constant process, "our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own." Inexorably moving time is the discreditor of all purpose and action: it is the primary equivocator, and for the man who despises all seeming it raises hypocrisy to the level of a universal condition.[15]

Perhaps Hamlet sees so much falseness because he has realized that death separates everyone from their intentions. Speaking of the graveyard scene, Danson says that Hamlet believes that a man's death

> is the ultimate change that makes liars of us all. The graveyard, with Yorick's skull, is to Hamlet a most powerful symbol; it is, at least for a time, his proof that all action contains a principle of obsolescence. Alexander's world-conquering gestures are rendered as meaningless by the grave as Yorick's gibes and gambols. Death proves that all our words and deeds are as transient, and thus ultimately false, as a lady's cosmetics.[16]

No wonder Hamlet "delays." To someone aware of death, any action is transient, therefore false.

A fourth reason for connecting truth and death is less obvious, but perhaps more powerful to those who have experienced the death of someone particularly close to them. Hamlet is overly interested in the truth even before he finds out about Claudius's lies, as witnessed in his first conversation in the play with his mother about "seems" and "is" (1.2.79). While this can be somewhat explained by Hamlet's idealistic nature, another explanation is that he is interested in the truth because he is grieving. When someone dies with whom the person identifies, such as a parent, the survivor sees only too clearly a truth about which he has been lying to himself: everyone dies. It is as if the whole world has been lying to itself, and the survivor is the only one who hears the truth that the dead speak. This perception can make one more aware of the other ways the world is lying and can make the survivor feel as if he is the only one who sees the truth about subjects other than death as well. Perhaps this is a part of the attitude that Hamlet exhibits towards his mother with the "seems" and "is" statement. Someone who has seen the skull beneath the skin can be overly conscious of the many ways appearances differ from realities and may even believe he is the only one who clearly sees this discrepancy and is not guilty of it himself. A character from *Catcher In The Rye* with a similar perception is Holden Caulfield. After his brother's death, he looks around his world and thinks that everyone is phony (even though some are not), not realizing his own falseness. Only one of these characters says, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (1.2.137-8), but it is how both characters feel, and what they have in common is the death of someone they love. Louis Menand, writing on "Holden at Fifty," eplains that

> Holden, after all, isn't unhappy because he sees that people are phonies; he sees that people are phonies because he is unhappy. What makes his view of other people so cutting and his disappointment so unappeasable is the same thing

> that makes Hamlet's feelings so cutting and unappeasable: his grief.[17]

It is important to note that Hamlet expresses his weariness of the world after his father's death but before the ghost has told him an even harsher truth. When he does learn the truth of his father's murder, Hamlet says "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.48), as if his father's death had already made him ready to believe almost any other ugly reality. "Death puts the question, 'What is real?' in its irreducible form, and in the end uncovers all appearances"[18] Other harsh realities suddenly unmasked can produce this change as well. Some divorces produce this reaction in one or both of the participants, as well as their children. On a societal level, governmental scandals from Watergate to Clinton/Lewinsky have resulted in a portion of the electorate who believe that politicians are all liars. Shakespeare subjected Hamlet to two separate, shocking realities: his father's death and his father's murder. No wonder Hamlet despises the "seeming" of the world.

But if Shakespeare wanted us to see the world from the point of view of such a character, why did it need to be a character whose father died? Harold Bloom believes that *Hamlet* "may have received its final revisions after the death of Shakespeare's father, in 1601,"[19] and Richard Wheeler asserts that "if he is not already grieving his father's death when he writes *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is watching that death approach."[20] While nothing is known of the relationship between the famous author and his father, it is hard to imagine that it was completely without significance, especially considering Sigmund Freud's belief that the death of a man's father is "the most important event, the most poignant loss in a man's life."[21] Is it too much to assume that the words of a character/son about the loss of his father indicate the feelings of the writer/son who just lost his father the same year he is writing that play? After the character's father dies, the earth seems to him a "sterile promontory" (2.2.322), and its inhabitants appear 10,000 times more likely to lie than tell the truth (2.2.195). Perhaps this is what the skull beneath the skin spoke to Shakespeare during the year of his father's death. *Shakespeare In Love* may be a movie with no biographical accuracy whatsoever, except for its implied thesis: the man who wrote *Romeo and Juliet* had to have been young and in love at least once. Perhaps the falseness of Elsinore represents how the world seemed to *Shakespeare In Mourning.*

Notes

1. All quotations are from *The New Folger Library Shakespeare*, ed., Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

2. Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play and Duel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 58-59.

3. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens In Hamlet?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 9.

4. T. S. Elliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 45.

5. Alexander, 17.

6. Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 58.

7. Norman N. Holland, *The Shakespearean Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 172.

8. Holland, 177.

9. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1974), 96.

10. Mack, Maynard. "The World of Hamlet." In *Shakespeare The Tragedies* by Algred Harbage, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), 49.

11. Wilson, 288.

12. Mack, 57.

13. Mack, 58.

14. Alexander, 172.

15. Danson, Lawrence. "Tragic Alphabet." In *William Shakespeare's Hamlet,* Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 74.

16. Danson., 77.

17. Louis Menand, "Holden at Fifty," *The New Yorker* October 1, 2001: 84.

18. Mack, 59.

19. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare The Invention Of The Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 400.

20. Richard P. Wheeler, "Deaths in the Family: The Loss of a Son and the Rise of Shakespearean Comedy," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51, no. 2: 152.

21. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), xxvi.