CORE TEXTS IN CONVERSATION

Edited by

Jane Kelley Rodeheffer
David Sokolowski
J. Scott Lee

Association for Core Texts and Courses
and
University Press of America, ® Inc.
Lanham • New York • Oxford

of Emilia in *Othello*, who, having finally comprehended what her husband Iago has done, answers his order that she remain silent by saying, "Tis proper I obey him, but not now" (5.2.203).

Thus, erotic or romantic love in these great tragedies yields pride of place to friendship and to loyalties of parent and child. Hamlet and his mother both die tragically, but they die reconciled; Hamlet has succeeded in winning his mother back from the detested uncle. And with Horatio, Hamlet finds a wonderful consolation in friendship. They love to argue with each other; they respect differences; they refuse to allow worldly consideration to interfere with the disinterestedness of their love for each other.

Here, perhaps, is one more way in which Shakespeare's plays can be brought into the context of current critical discourse, with its New Historicist and feminist concerns, and still honor the play as a central part of the core curriculum. Shakespeare can usefully be seen as a central to the entire matrix of what post-modern criticism is all about. Students, readers, and critics need to keep coming back to these texts in order to explore the kind of rich literary layering of meaning that we all cherish as central to the core experience. Shakespeare does not merely survive; he flourishes today, and not because he offers a respite from contemporary criticism but because he is so able to endow it with critical purpose and insight.

CHAPTER 20

Prophecy Eclipsed: *Hamlet* as a Tragedy of Knowledge

William Franke

To define what is distinctive about knowledge in the humanities, by contrast with what has tended to be the dominant paradigm for knowledge in modern culture, namely, science, it is instructive to consider *Hamlet* as a tragedy of knowledge. The play was written probably in 1600 and at any rate at the opening of the 17th Century, the golden age of the rise of modern science. Its language and imagery are tinged with the new vocabulary and embody the new sensibility and outlook together, and in tension with, the old. Thematically, moreover, *Hamlet* wrestles with the incalculably far-reaching meaning of this transition from an older, traditional *epistème* or general framework for knowledge based on revelation, particularly the biblical revelation of the ultimate ends and context of human life as resting upon a metaphysical order of being, to a scientific world-view in which knowledge, now sought preeminently through the physical senses and their direct perceptions, lacks all transcendent foundation. The tragic loss involved in this transition is made palpable and poignant both in the overarching conception and in the imaginative and expressive textures of the play.

Shakespeare inherited and indeed provided some of the most compelling representations of what has been dubbed "the Elizabethan world-picture."

featuring a three-tiered universe reaching both above and below the world accessible to mortal sight into the realms of heaven and hell. This outlook is represented in *Hamlet* as having fallen into crisis and as tragically unable to endure the strain under which it is placed by new perspectives that the emerging culture of the Renaissance is opening, propelled to a considerable degree by the impulses imparted by scientific method and discovery. At issue in *Hamlet,* among other things, is a transition from what we may call the age of prophecy-in which a whole world-order and a future destiny, including an afterlife, were accepted as revealed-to an age of science, where what is true is equated with what can be proved by empirical evidence—'the sensible and true avouch of mine own eyes," as Horatio so vividly puts it.

In the age of prophecy, the most authoritative knowledge was supposed to come from sources higher than the senses. A vision or a spirit could reveal truths that were incapable of being proved by empirical methods. The impetus to the action of revenge, which is the central business of *Hamlet* at the level of plot, comes from just such a prophetic revelation, an apparition from the other world. Hamlet's murdered father comes back from the dead, from the world of eternity, to tell him the truth about how he died and demand from his son that justice be done upon the usurper for his crime. When Hamlet first hears this disclosure he exclaims, "O my prophetic soul!" (1. 5.40). He is evidently saying that he had already inwardly divined the true course of events and their concealed guilt, as if by revelation from a higher source. And in any case, whether as divined or as revealed by the ghost, the kind of knowledge he acquires in connection with his father can aptly be said to be "prophetic' in nature.

And yet this prophetic revelation—his own father come back from the dead to inform him directly of its cause—becomes enmeshed in a web of doubts and eventually even play-acting generated by attempts to test and prove its authenticity. Hamlet is later heard saying, "I'll have grounds more relative than this" (11. 2. 570), which means, of course, even more pertinent circumstantial evidence than he has already. But this statement also ironically says that all the grounds Hamlet is seeking to ascertain can at best be only "relative." By failing to embrace the certainty offered him by the actual presence of the father speaking directly to him as a voice of essentially divine revelation, he condemns himself to having no sufficient but only "relative" grounds no matter how far he carries his investigation. Of course, the uncertainty is deeply rooted in Hamlet's character and even more deeply in the emerging character of the new, Renaissance individual as grounded in an objective, material world and as losing its bearings in a transcendent, spiritual reality. In this way, *Hamlet is* dramatizing far-reaching shifts in the

whole nature and foundation of knowledge that are being experienced in Shakespeare's time.

The eclipse of prophetic vision ushers in an age of skepticism represented from the play's outset especially by Horatio, who is unbelieving with regard to "this thing," the "apparition" of the dead king Hamlet reported by Bernardo and Marcellus, holding it for nothing more than their "fantasy" (1. 1.23ff). Horatio's rational suspicion of superstition is but one expression of a crisis of traditional belief in all sectors, not only religious but also political. The general cultural predicament is one of a defunct moral and spiritual order. On a political plain, it translates into the crisis of state noted at the outset as following upon the death of the king, indeed in Denmark and in Norway alike. The deceased kings Hamlet and Fortinbras are chivalric figures who had engaged in a noble duel "by a sealed compact / Well ratified by law and heraldry" (1.1). They are succeeded respectively by the usurper scorned by Hamlet as "[a] king of shreds and patches" (111.4.104) and by the "young Fortinbras" who has "Sharked up a list of lawless resolutes" (1. 1.98). Against the former generation of kings' lawful and valiant warring, the present marshal maneuvers are described rather as an unruly mob's marauding. These are the earliest signals of the general moral degeneration that upsets Hamlet and provokes his scathing eloquence.

Hierarchies of value in the traditional medieval world-view depended upon a supreme and divine good, namely, God, and an animate universe of angelically guided spheres, and without this the whole structure of the moral order and of the social world, no less than of the physical cosmos, collapses. 'The world is out of joint." "It is the times." "The times now give it proof." *Hamlet* shows extreme sensitivity to its own time as a time of crisis. Formerly this world, both natural and social, fit into and was supported by a cosmic order. Hamlet evokes this old world-picture, become, however, stale and tacky like discarded theatre scenery, in describing his sense of the rottenness and corruption of life as he experiences it in the present:

> this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave oerhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me ... (49.2.287-97).

Man here is no longer 'crowned with glory and honor," as in Psalm 8. Although conceived as an endlessly wondrous creation, precisely as in the biblical vision, yet he is reducible to his material substance, and that itself to mere ashes. The 'goodly frame of earth" and 'excellent canopy" of the air are likewise reducible to mere inert elements. The majesty of the creation has fled. Its material reduction has undermined the spiritual vision of transcendent values as inscribed everywhere in the visible universe. The excellence of God's name is no longer manifest in all the earth. Hamlet frames his discourse within the old order of earth and sky and man, with his place of special prominence in the hierarchy, but all the magic of it is gone. It depended upon a transcendental order that conferred a radiance from above. When taken in and for themselves rather than as a manifestation of divinity, the physical phenomena of the heavens are just a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, just as man without any relation to immortal being, no longer in God's image, is but "this quintessence of dust."

Of course, Hamlet still has one foot in the former, nobler world of theological and chivalric tradition as his very insufferance of the present evil age indicates. He is possessed by the vision of the prophetic past which haunts him in the shape of his father's ghost. That this sensibility is no longer commensurate to the corrupt and wider world in which he lives determines his demise. Such a nature as his cannot survive, neither psychically nor physically, in the Denmark Hamlet himself describes, and bitterly denounces. Thus, although Hamlet has a spiritual revelation (a direct disclosure from a spirit), and to this extent remains in touch with the older epistemological order, he is not able to sustain belief in it. He too is complicit in the degenerate new order, as his unsparing self-deprecation acknowledges, for example, in the soliloquy beginning "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (11.2.516). The immediate presence of his father's spirit fades to a spectrous appearance of a ghost, for Hamlet, eminently representing the skeptical consciousness of the new age, almost ceases to believe in all but material reality. Correspondingly, all his nobler values are shaken. He falls tragically into a world of sheer materiality, brute fact, rough manners, and political Machiavellianism. He does still express an ideal vision of love, for example, in his statement that his father was "so loving to my mother, / That he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly" (1.2.140-42). But even this very tender tone of filial reverence eventually sinks, in the course of the crisis that he is represented as undergoing, to the level of raw sexual innuendo concerning "c(o)untry matters" (3.2.105).

In the harsh, disenchanted new perspective, everything that was able once to give clear purpose to life turns obscure. Even the overwhelming presence of the father, at first observed by all together on the watch, and giving Hamlet

irresistible resolve and purpose, becomes dubious and apocryphal. Hamlet lives essentially in a region of doubt, where clear, unambiguous revelations are a thing that can only be imagined as having existed in the past or that are staged precisely in their process of disappearance. The presence of the father internally in Hamlet's spirit is fundamentally troubled and vulnerable to being declared illusion. He has to *write down* the command enunciated by the ghost of his father, thus giving it the form of an external, material entity ("My tables—meet it is I set it down"—1.4.107). This substitutes for the immediate spiritual presence of the father a concrete empirical object, a positive existence he can be sure of but one which is no longer the bearer of unequivocal testimony, no longer the immediate presence of the father's spirit but truly only a 'sheeted" ghost, a blatant artifice. The problems of doubt and delay are in this way shown to derive from epistemological conditions enacted in the opening scenes giving the impulse to the action and setting up the plot of the play.

Hamlet's world as a whole is turned to irreality by its being out of joint with the metaphysical order that alone was able to guarantee and found moral ideals. Hamlet's heart is disposed to believe in these noble values, but his intellect has become skeptical, like that of his fellow-student, Horatio. This disunity within him and the disintegration of the moral universe to which he ideally belongs engender a split that becomes virtually, whether literally or not, madness. Given the constraints of a corrupt social world, only in madness can the dictates of the heart and the truth perceived by the soul be expressed. It is the "prophetic soul" within him and its incompatibility with the world around him that at least incipiently drive Hamlet mad (though at least sometimes he is in control of it, as when he says that he is mad but "north northwest" and again "mad but in craft").

Despite his innate idealism, Hamlet is deeply submerged in a material vision of the world, as is the modem age that is here seen in its birth. Among the many casual, apparently innocuous indications of his falling under the influence of the new, mechanistic, scientific outlook replacing the spiritual vision of the Middle Ages is the dosing formula of his letter to Ophelia: 'Thine ever-more, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him" (49.2.22-23). The machine metaphor shows itself here as coming into vogue to describe what formerly were sacrosanct mysteries of divine creation. Another telling sign, this time specifically of Hamlet's infection by the moral relativism that follows the collapse of the metaphysical world-order, is his remark, 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (49.2.243-44). The emphasis on the times, on the changing fashions of London theatre, for example, also indirectly indexes the demise of stable, hallowed values as a

newer, crasser logic of commerce and expediency, devoid of morality, usurps their place.

Hamlet still embodies the values of the medieval world, but now in a new age of skepticism these values are in crisis. Young Hamlet has studied in Wittenberg, learned certainly about the latest scientific discoveries and been exposed to new cultural currents. He is a youth and as such represents the future. But the play concerns his relation to the past, embodied in the form of his father-or rather, not quite embodied, since his father has become a ghost. Hamlet, however, is not sure he believes in his father. He loses touch with the transcendental ground of his existence and with the noble past communicated through tradition.

These remarks are meant to indicate the lines of interpretation that would guide a comprehensive interpretation of *Hamlet* as a humanities text so as to illustrate the distinctive kind of knowledge that can be aquired through this type of study. They suggest that *Hamlet* itself begins recording the story of how in the modern age, beginning with the Renaissance, humanistic knowledge is endangered in ways relating to the rise of science as the dominant paradigm of knowledge. This is true today especially in the university where humanities and science share the liberal arts curriculum and are studied together, despite their, in some respects, radically different methods and goals. A text like *Hamlet* demands to be taught in such a way as to emphasize the relational, contextual nature of knowledge—which is traditionally projected as relation to an other world and which literature is perhaps best equipped to exemplify and render intelligible to students in a culture increasingly geared to the processing of knowledge as information. Hamlet demonstrates in an eminent manner the risk of loss of traditional, unscientific forms of knowledge and the tragedy that this entails. Core courses have a responsibility to resist this result by historically circumscribing scientific knowledge and rendering evident its limits and by proposing traditional alternative models for human awareness and inquiry.

Note

1. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: MacMillan, 1944). See also Arthur 0. Lovejoy, *7he Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York,: Harper & Row, 1960); William James lecture at Harvard, 1936). Quotations of *Hamlet* are from the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Cyrus Hoy (New York, 1963), with consultation of the text in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, text ed. G. Blackmore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974).

CHAPTER 21

Speech in Dumbness: Female Eloquence and Male Authority in *The Winter's Tale*

Ellen Belton

The notion of women's verbal incontinence is proverbial in English Renaissance drama (Jardine 1983, 103-140; Woodbridge 1984, 189-207). In Shakespeare, however, it is often deployed ironically, as in the scene in which Hotspur uses women's reputed inability to keep a secret as his excuse for not telling his wife where he is going *(Henry the Fourth,* 1.2.3.). (It is Hotspur who cannot control his tongue, not Lady Percy.) But though injunctions to women to be silent are common in Shakespeare, so are exhortations to speak. Such exhortations encourage women to use language but in a manner clearly circumscribed by masculine restrictions and inscribed with the signs of masculine hegemony (Belsey 1985, 149-191; Callaghan 1989, 74-89). One of the most notable and absolute silences in Shakespeare, however, is the silence of Hermione that begins in Act 3 of The *Winter's Tale* and extends almost to the end of Act 5. Harvey Rovine says that this silence at first represents Hermione's "tragic separation from Leontes," later her desire to "entice" him, and finally her joy at "being reconciled with Leontes and ending her sixteen years of silent