

Connotations of Hamlet's Final Silence*

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I was very grateful to Professors Dieter Mehl and Maurice Charney for showing the short-comings of my paper on the multiplicity of meaning in the last moments of *Hamlet*. I had obscured what I was trying to say by my manner of argument and choice of words; and I failed to show how the wide range of meanings in the single last sentence was related to the whole of the play in performance.

The very phrase "multiplicity of meaning" was a mistake. It suggests that a critic's job is finished when every connotation of the words of a text has been nailed down. Professor Mehl had reason to complain that he "hardly knew what to do with so much meaning" (182). "Wordplay" might have been a happier means of identifying my subject. Hamlet's use of words is like a game—a vitally important one—played with others and with himself; and played, it seems, with language itself, so that he is not always in charge of the game or the play.¹ Neither actor nor audience, nor character, can be coolly conscious of the entire range of meanings that the words suggest at crucial moments in the action.

Hamlet is presented as a person with a boundless energy of mind that is not beaten, diminished, or satisfied at the point of death. He can fool us, even then. This wordplay is not a trivial flourish or quirk of fancy, but an essential quality of his nature and of his role in the play.

*Reference: John Russell Brown, "Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 16-33; Dieter Mehl, "Hamlet's Last Moments: A Note on John Russell Brown," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 182-85; Maurice Charney, "The Rest Is Not Silence: A Reply to John Russell Brown," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 186-89.

Shakespeare had hinted at such a tragedy earlier, in *Romeo and Juliet*. So Romeo exclaims and questions:

Death, lie thou there, by a dead man interr'd . . .
 How oft when men are at the point of death
 Have they been merry! Which their keepers call
 A lightning before death. O how may I
 Call this a lightning? O my love! my wife!

(5.3.87-91)

Mercutio had already demonstrated this succinctly, prefiguring a darker side of Hamlet's consciousness:

Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a *grave* man.

(3.1.94-95)

After death there can be no lightning; but at death wordplay is a sign of imaginative life.

Once Hamlet knows he is dying, his mind is occupied with the varying possibilities of words, all the way to the end; "strict . . . arrest . . . o'erercrows . . . lights . . . dying voice . . . occurrents . . . solicited . . . rest . . . silence." With him we snatch hopefully at understanding, as speech attempts to make meanings and also outsoars comprehension; and as the fact of death becomes unambiguously and factually apparent.

I did not mean to imply that either Shakespeare or Hamlet was teasing the theatre audience by the use of recondite puns in order to withhold knowledge, but a further difficulty seems to have occurred by my use of the word "secret" to describe what remains unsaid behind the multiplying meanings. I had meant something that remains unknown or unspeakable; not a message that the speaker chooses not to communicate. Never for a moment did I wish to suggest, as I did for Professor Charney, that

there is another esoteric play behind the public play that will reveal itself only to the initiated (187),

or that, for Shakespeare,

at certain crucial moments the dramatic character can't be trusted with enunciating points that have an important autobiographical clang (188).

I thought I was saying that Shakespeare's sense of his hero's predicament was not unlike his own position as a writer who dared to live at the very limits of his imagination and of his power over words. For both of them, truth—clarity and fullness of verbal expression—is fugitive not permanent, imminent not actual; a moment's reflection will always reveal limitations in any verbalization. Something remains stubbornly unsaid, *as if* it were a secret not yet identified. When an author thinks too much about the limitation of words, he or she will never write very much; but occasionally, the very experience of a disbelief in words can become part of the subject which engages a writer. I believe that this happened when Shakespeare wrote the brilliant, almost obsessively inventive, text of *Hamlet*.

But *Hamlet* is a play and in performance will always have an element which is incontrovertible, in which everything, for the limits of that performance, is implicitly present and accessible: that is the actor's presence on the stage. Something actually does happen on stage which is total. An actor of Hamlet has been stretched and taxed to the uttermost, and by the end of the play he can do only what he can do: his whole being is "on the line." If all goes well, that will be acclaimed, assimilated, and appropriated by the audience. So Hamlet has been alone, has met his father's ghost, has talked, soliloquized, pretended, taken action; he has encountered friends, mother, step-father, a whole court, a company of actors, the young Ophelia, Laertes her brother, a gravedigger, Ophelia's corpse; he has become "scant of breath" and then "incensed" (5.2.279 and 293); he has killed the king he calls "incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane" (317); and then he dies. So far the "bending author hath pursu'd the story" (*Henry V* 5.2, Chorus), and the enacting of all this contributes to the meaning of Hamlet's very presence during his last moments. In each performance it becomes unchangeable; not fully understood or verbally described, but there in flesh and blood, actual. Then after death, beyond all words and actions, the hero becomes an object, a "sight" for Fortinbras to view, a body to be lifted up by four captains. Although every single member of an audience will receive

Hamlet's death according to their own "business and desire" (1.5.130), there will be some degree of common response to the play when it fastens particularly on what Professor Mehl calls "the crude fact of the hero's death." Because of this assurance in performance, "so much meaning" does not confuse our minds; the hero has died at the end of the play, his every resource tested, and we "know" him now, even while we still do *not* know him fully or truly in the words he speaks. The "truth" we sense is in his physical and living presence.

In his last moments, Hamlet himself senses the clash between physical and mental experience: "The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit" (5.2.345). He has registered the physical as simply as he can: "I am dead, Horatio . . . Horatio, I am dead . . . O, I die Horatio!" (5.2.325, 330, 344), and continues to experience it.

Hamlet dies; that is the overwhelming, unambiguous statement of his last moments which I should have acknowledged much more strongly. It colours all other meanings; it is ground or base for every thought that goes on within his mind, and for all those words which give distinction to Hamlet's death and lift it into prominence before all the other deaths on stage and all the other persons who are "mutes or audience to this act."

* * *

In emphasizing the force of Hamlet's physical death, both responses to my article urge me to give more credence to the "O, o, o, o" which in the Folio text follows Hamlet's final speech. This wordless cry is said to focus attention on the fact of death. But I do not think Shakespeare wrote the four O's for Hamlet to utter. I can see no more certain authority for this addition to the text of the "good" second Quarto than that some person has tried to record what happened or might have happened on stage at the Globe Theatre some time in the twenty or so years between the play's first performance and the preparation of copy for the 1623 Folio. I had cited the study by Harold Jenkins of all sixty-five additions in the Folio,² and I still believe that this holds many of the facts needed for an assessment of the issue. Professor Jenkins shows that the four O's are one of several additions which disturb the metre

and repeat obvious small words to intensify a dramatic effect. Some of the full tally of sixty-five could possibly be authorial in origin, but the one in question is among those which inflate what has been already expressed in a manner which goes further in this direction than Shakespeare's custom elsewhere.

I should have argued my case more fully because recent editions have accepted the authenticity of "O, o, o, o." Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, editors of the Complete Oxford Shakespeare (1986), have argued on the strength of type-setting and textual peculiarities that the Folio was set from a copy in Shakespeare's own handwriting; this much now seems certain. But they also argued that this text represents the author's own second and preferred thoughts, expressed in cuts, additions, and alternative readings. So they accepted the four O's and printed them, along with other features of the Folio text which had been banished regularly from modern editions. George Hibbard, whose single-volume edition of *Hamlet* (1987) was also for the Oxford University Press, followed and amplified their arguments. Passages previously part of every person's *Hamlet* are now banished to an Appendix and the new text is based where ever possible on the Folio. Other scholars have accepted much of this, as if every detail of the Folio represents Shakespeare's preferred choice. So Professor Mehl tells me:

The four O's have . . . as much right to stand in the text of *Hamlet* (unless the Folio is completely discarded) as any other addition in this version of the play. (183)

But granting that the printer's copy for the Folio was in Shakespeare's hand, there is still no call to accept all its readings without further thought.

Who knows that an autograph copy in possession of the King's Men was left untouched by other hands during the intervening years before 1623, especially after the author's death in 1616? The Folio cuts are now said to show a care for metre which is evidence for an author's involvement; but patching-up pentametres by running two half-lines together is not so very difficult for anyone to do, especially someone used to hearing (and perhaps speaking) blank verse almost every day

of his life. Besides, an author might be expected to cut regardless of doing so in neat metrical units and to have more care than is shown here for the larger questions of rhythm, pulse of utterance, and rhetorical weight. Rewriting is often the best way to cut a scene, not the simple excision found here. Even if Shakespeare did make the cuts, there is no certainty that he wished to do so. Not infrequently, texts are altered against an author's better judgement because an actor has failed to make certain lines work as they were meant to do. An author setting out to accommodate actors or make a play more acceptable to audiences or management, is not always working at his or her imaginative best. The cuts from the Quarto indicate to me a fairly lax approach to the problem of saving time in performance and simplifying matters; they do not amount to a re-imagining of the play. They achieve nothing that adds to the interest of the text, and some of them leave unresolved problems behind.³

Even if all the cuts were Shakespeare's, that would not mean that every other change must also be accepted. Each should be examined individually. In the case of the four O's, three reasons against their authenticity are found readily in the text itself. First, the repeated cry contradicts several of the most obvious meanings of the preceding words: if Hamlet continues by making four audible noises, the "rest," for him, is not "silence" in any immediate sense. Second, the cry is too vague in effect. It runs the danger of expressing regret or even guilt,⁴ for which I can see no support in the rest of the scene. Or it might suggest that Hamlet's words are obliterated by violence, as mere sound expresses anguish, pain, frustration, madness or any other instinctive response. Professor Hibbard seems to recognize this difficulty, for instead of printing the four O's which he takes to be authorial, he translates them into a stage-direction: "*He gives a long sigh and dies.*" A low exhalation would be less traumatic than other renderings, but the question remains of what *can* four exclamations express, equally or with growing emphasis, so that they add to the conclusion of the play? No clue is provided.

A third reason to believe that the O's are not Shakespeare's is that they contradict a stage-direction implicit in Horatio's very next words: "Now cracks [or "cracke," F] a noble heart." For Shakespeare, as for many of his contemporaries, a breaking heart was a nearly silent death,

not one accompanied with repeated exclamations: King Lear's, where the watchers do not know exactly when he dies (*King Lear* 5.2.311-15), is a clear example.⁵ Elsewhere the breaking of a heart is opposed to utterance of any kind:

My heart is great; but it must break with silence.
(*Richard II* 2.1.228)

The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.
(*Macbeth* 4.3.209-10)

But break my heart for I must hold my tongue.
(*Hamlet* 1.2.159)

. . . this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep.
(*King Lear* 2.4.283-85)

The most famous breaking heart in Jacobean tragedy, in John Ford's *The Broken Heart* (c. 1630), is both silent and to all appearances impressively calm.

Professor Charney argues in favour of the "O-groans" by saying that they "were a fairly conventional emotional gesture" in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, occurring in *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. But four *wordless* exclamations placed extra-metrically after a death-speech are not at all conventional:⁶ no hero dies with so much as one wordless cry in all of Shakespeare's plays. The Folio's ending for Hamlet is without parallel. Of course Shakespeare would have been capable of surprising everyone, but it is hard to see why he did so here to uncertain effect, and leaving at least one unresolved contradiction in the text in consequence.

So long as we do not suppose that the King's Men would have treated Shakespeare's manuscript with scholarly fastidiousness, it is not difficult to see how unauthorized additions such as the four O's and simple cuts could have been added to a manuscript which was sent subsequently to the printer. Shakespeare could have made a fair copy of his own play, including some changes or variations, at his fellow's request, so that

it could be held in the playhouse as a precaution against loss of the original prompt-book—serious losses of this kind had been incurred with the burning down of the Globe in 1612—or because the prompt-book was temporarily unavailable. It may have been convenient to keep an extra clean copy from which to write out parts for actors who were about to take over roles at short notice or in recast revivals. Perhaps it was from this copy, and not the copy behind the earlier good Quarto, that the company's prompt book had been prepared. There are many ways in which it could have come into existence. Once the manuscript had been delivered to the theatre, a book-keeper could have added the four O's to represent what Burbage actually did on stage so that his successor (he died in 1619) could follow closely in his footsteps. (Other additions may be explained in this way.) Or the O's might have been added so that they would be copied into Horatio's "part" to prevent a replacement actor coming in too promptly as he heard the words "The rest is silence." But perhaps Shakespeare's manuscript was not modified until much later when a non-theatrical editor added various stage-directions, off-stage noises, and some exits to make the printed version more accessible and more exciting for a reader.

Recent editors have made little of the fact that the four O's in the Folio are printed "O, o, o, o," and not as all the other exclamations with all capital letters, or with "Oh"s. Nor do they pay attention to the fact that "*Dyes*," which is also added on the same line of type, is without the full stop which follows all the other stage-directions added to the Quarto on the same page.⁷ It certainly looks as if "O, o, o, o. *Dyes*" has been squeezed into the space available as some kind of single afterthought, perhaps taken from a separate and identifiable addition to the main text in the manuscript copy. "*They play*," "*Play*," "*In scuffling they change Rapiers*," "*Hurts the King*," "*King dyes*," "*Dyes*," "*and shout [i.e., shot] within*," "*with Drumme, Colours, and Attendants*" are also additions to the Quarto on this page and all of them could have been added to the manuscript by a single annotating hand. It is hard to see why Shakespeare should bother to add this information. With the exception of the exchange of weapons and the off-stage shot all is clear enough to an experienced reader of the text; and these two directions can also be inferred with only a very little thought—there is no other way of

playing the scene so that its words make sense.⁸ Had "Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh!" been part of the text as Shakespeare rewrote it in this manuscript, the compositors would have given it a separate line of type in the Folio, as they did other incomplete verse-lines in consecutive verse; lower-case o's need not have been used against all custom; and "Dyes" could have had its full-stop.

Before new status had been given to the Folio as a text set from a manuscript in Shakespeare's own hand, editors were all but united in rejecting the four O's as a ludicrous and impertinent addition; and I believe they were and are right. The O's inflate the drama in an indiscriminating way, so that the actor is forced to make a further, climactic expression of pain, horror, guilt, regret, hopelessness, grief, fear, or some other emotional response. They make demands on an actor without giving a clue as to what should be done. At best the cries might be sensational and puzzling; at worst they would devalue the effect of Hamlet's words and settle matters in some irrational and, probably, painful way. They could make the ending suddenly violent or, just as suddenly, confused. If they are translated into a comparatively quiet "long sigh," this addition would risk sentimentality and restrict the effect of Hamlet's actual moment of death and his acceptance of it; and it would still obliterate the silence that would otherwise follow "silence." An inarticulate cry can have dramatic value, as most famously in Sophocles' *Oedipus*; but that cry is not preceded with words, and after it come explication, exploration, and further revelation.

Without a last cry to focus attention, Hamlet's physical death will make its own undeniable impact over a considerable period of time, while twenty-six lines of verse are spoken and much is being done. Guided by the words of the text, actor and audience will together discover what are its implications in each performance. His mind, the "discourse" of his reason (1.2.150), will not capitulate but accompany his death, still seeking to grasp the truth of the matter. The alternative is to suppose that the play's last "issue" is the "ultimate failure of language" (the phrase used by Professor Mehl, 183). Or to put this another way, to believe that Shakespeare wished to finish Hamlet off with something that was vacuous in comparison with his many words.

What happens to Hamlet's body in his last moments is part of the drama along with the words which are spoken, as it has been throughout the play. That sounds obvious, but to consider a character's words and then pay attention to his or her actions is a common device of a critic who is determined to keep the experience of reading and studying a play as manageable as possible. I was guilty of just that when I wrote about the multiplicity of meaning in the last moments of *Hamlet*. But this is a posture of mind not easily assumed in the theatre. In performance and in responding to a performance, words and actions are inseparable. The priority, if a disjunction must be granted, should be given to action. Any character has to *be* on stage before speaking; and *how* he or she is present will govern how any verbal message is given and received, and hence influence meaning and effectiveness. Perhaps we should think of a character as being imagined first, as an "airy nothing," and then being given a "local habitation" before he or she is ready for a "name" and the possibility of speech.

Shakespeare has ensured that what happens to Hamlet's body is frequently signalled by his words. Of course he is very aware of his "mind," "brains," "heart," "soul"—his inner consciousness—but he also speaks of his body, "each petty artery," "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," his "sinews" (1.5.82; 3.1.62-63; 1.5.94). His first appearance on stage is notably silent, so that *only* his stage presence speaks for him. "Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt . . ." (1.2.129) are his very first words on being left alone. Seeing his father's ghost, he realises that such sights can make us "shake our disposition / With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (1.4.54-56). His sigh, when he visits Ophelia alone in her chamber, seemed to "shatter all his bulk / And end his being" (2.1.94-96). His memory of Yorrick is of his jests, but also of riding on his back, kissing his lips, and laughing (see 5.1.179-86). Because Hamlet is palpably present to himself, he is the more so to his audience. No cries are necessary to draw attention to his physical suffering at the moment of death; his body has been a pervasive element throughout the drama.

As Hamlet begins to prepare for the end which he senses is upon him, he tells Horatio, rather conventionally, that he, a close friend, would "not think how ill all's here about my heart," but he caps that by

speaking of a particular physical experience—"it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman"—a change quite outside his previous experience. He then proceeds to compare his death to the "fall of a sparrow," an image also based in physical awareness, but referring now to the sudden fact of death as of the end of a flight through the air by a helpless, small creature (5.1.203-12). When he knows that the end does come, he says very simply, three times over, that he dies: indeed the physical fact continues to be in the forefront of his mind, throughout the twenty-six lines of speech that variously accompany his death.

Hamlet will always be what the actor makes of him. He is what has been thought, felt, imagined, done, and experienced by the particular actor before a particular audience. Always a stage reality—a personal presence—co-exists with the words, inspired by them, but also other than them and seeming to give rise to them. The solid flesh, every petty artery and sinew, the disposition of a passionate and distinctive person, all speak with the words, and seem to be beyond the reach of words. Being acutely aware of how this might be, Shakespeare dared to create in Hamlet a character who seems to carry within himself something unspoken and unexpressed; he did this throughout the play, right up until the moment Hamlet dies.

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NOTES

¹I am indebted for the idea of *Hamlet* as a play to a lecture by Robert Whitman, delivered at the University of Bogota, November 1992.

²See "Playhouse Interpolations in the Folio Text of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Bibliography* 13 (1960): 31-47.

³As an example of creative authorial cutting, I would refer to Davies' speech of 8½ lines of type, beginning "Eh? Oh, well, that was . . .," on page 27 of the second (1962, 1967) edition of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. In the first edition (1960), on pages 28-29, the speech had 16 lines and was broken by a "Hymn" from Aston. The cut got rid of a longish excursus on Wembley Stadium and Kennington Oval. But at the same time the author supplied an entirely new short statement: "They

want an Englishman to pour their tea"; this takes the place of "I mean, that's what they're aiming at. That's one thing I know for a fact."

⁴A relevant analogy is *Macbeth* 5.1.48-53:

LADY MACBETH Here's the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!

DOCTOR What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charg'd.

GENTLEWOMAN I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

⁵See also Enobarbus's quiet death after he had said his heart will break in *Antony and Cleopatra* 4.9; those who are watching and listening do not know when he dies. In the same play, Cleopatra also dies calmly in the middle of a sentence, following Charmian's "O, break! O, break!" (5.2.308-11).

⁶E. A. J. Honigmann found nothing similar in a trawl of Jacobean texts for his article, "Re-enter the Stage Direction; Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries," *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976): 121.

⁷I have relied on Helge Kökeritz's facsimile edition (introd. Charles Tyler Prouty [1954; New Haven and London: Yale Up, 1963]) 771.

⁸The "scuffling" might seem an over-colourful word for a book-keeper or editor to add; but it has a slightly deprecating tone which chimes with my sense of a modern stage-manager's or actor's way of describing some piece of complicated stage business which is too difficult to describe in short form. However it could be prompted from the next speech "Part them, they are incens'd"; perhaps the more easily if the person using the word had little or no knowledge of what actually took place on stage. As an explanation it is less helpful than an author could be, and less so than the reporter who provided the text of the "bad" First Quarto was: "*They catch one anothers Rapiers, and both are wounded, . . .*"