

## *Hamlet* as Fable: Reconstructing a Lost Code of Meaning

ANTHONY DIMATTEO

What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have?

(*Hamlet* 2.2.553-56)<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

One reply to Hamlet's self-questionings in the passage I use as an epigraph is that the actor would do exactly what Hamlet is doing. The degree to which the play engages classical figures and the significance of why it would in the first place continue to reward analysis. As the many notes of Anthony Brian Taylor demonstrate, there remain unexplored mythographic patterns within the language and structure of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>2</sup> Classical subtexts arguably comprise an intentional pattern of allusions functioning to advise a contemporary humanist audience through a symbolic code drawn chiefly from Ovidian myth.

Shakespeare, in other words, is not innocent of "undermeanings," to use D. C. Allen's term for how Aristotelian "dianoia" functions in the creation of plot and narrative in Renaissance poetry through a kind of undersong signalled by myth allusion. As Jean Starobinski has described the use of classical fable as it develops in the late Renaissance and after, "we are dealing with a semiological code for expressing 'intention' in a consecrated language" (171). So too Leonard Barkan speaking of how the remains of antiquity in the Renaissance often crystallize into a coded "visual" language deployed as part of a work's inventive processes: "Images of transformation in the sixteenth century often stand as

concentrated miniatures speaking their own language and epitomizing whole metamorphic stories" (189). In *Hamlet*, scattered references to antique story through vivid images or analogies (King Hamlet as Hyperion, Claudius as satyr, 1.2.140; Gertrude "like Niobe, all tears," 1.2.149; "Pyrrhus' bleeding sword," 2.2.487) must be considered as ornament as well as iconic sign of a fabled history or experience from time immemorial that influences perception of present deeds.

As Jonathan Bate shows, a "key" to Shakespeare's use of myth is how the dramatist deploys Ovid's ancient tales of change as conceptual metaphors with complex "psychological" meanings as well as literal and physical ones (28). These myths as metaphors have dramatic and cognitive power, forwarding plot and also meditating upon it, revealing perception and feeling as murkily transformative in their relations to the world beyond and within individual characters. Hence, myth allusion often says more than the characters may mean by it, introducing a semantic burden in excess of what the immediate dialogue requires and thereby suggesting the dramatist's "secret" comment.

*Hamlet*, as I hope to show, through "terms, images, incidents" richly makes use of the Venus and Adonis myth as told by Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>3</sup> What Orpheus sings of the gods' mortal lovers and how their elegiac fables shed light on Orpheus' own story connect with the dramatic rendering of Hamlet's experiences and self-perceptions. The nexus of Hamlet, Adonis, and Orpheus links with another analogy between fable and history that involves an unsettling convergence of spirits. Aeneas' encountering the ghosts of Anchises and Dido in Hades provides a lively background by way of comparison to Hamlet's "greeting" his father's ghost and the dead Ophelia at her burial site. The critical task is not a mere matter of "translating" the influence of these myths upon the writing of *Hamlet* into symbolic expressions of personal sentiment that Hamlet and Ophelia "feel." Nor does it concern only identifying the juxtapositions of different mythological figures as various foils against which the play's characters are seen. Such networks of analogies pit different treatments of myths, Virgil's versus Ovid's for example, against each other, as I will later argue.

Now I want to stress the myths' cognitive potential, understood as they were in the Renaissance, to have great speculative power, the reason

why, for example, Boccaccio advises orators and poets to “mix fable with discourse”: “Quid enim pulchrius in colluctionibus hominum quam nonnunquam imiscuisse fabellas sententiis?” (111”). This referential power of myths gravid with meaning is enlisted but also deeply called into question by *Hamlet*. Allusion to myth serves to comment upon the action of the play, as Boccaccio and Natale Conti understood the function of such technique, acting as a kind of internalized *hyponoia*, and yet it is also, like the nobility of Denmark, made subject to a tragic and final silencing or scrambling. Myth speaks in the drama only to grow mute. It forms a pattern no sooner articulated than skewed or anamorphosed. Not coincidentally, lines of allegorical reading and genealogical lines of nobility are both cancelled out in the tragic course of action.

## II. “Antiqui dicunt”: Three Ghosts of Hamlet

In Renaissance mythography, Hamlet’s forerunners or classical models, Orpheus, Adonis, Aeneas, are figures of ancient heroes understood to have transcended nature’s mortal coil. Adonis attains a kind of vegetative perpetuity, Aeneas everlasting fame, and Orpheus spiritual or vatic immortality. Aeneas and Orpheus conspicuously are exceptions to Hamlet’s sense of death as an absolute limit, “The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.79- 80). Hamlet, paragon of man, soldier, and scholar, the model of princes, in the course of the play is compared to and disengaged from these classical models of human transcendence over utter decay and change. The stench of rot and incest, troubling encounters with his dead but not dead father, a walker of the night not clearly of any world, and Hamlet’s riddling “vatic” witticisms all express the doomed condition of his fate. The course of the play invokes and subverts legends of man’s triumph over mutability, like so much statuary crumbled into dust before our eyes.

First, as for terms, Ophelia’s elegiac praise of Hamlet as “the glass of fashion and the mould of form” (3.1.155-56), “that unmatch’d form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy,” are nearly quotations of the traditional mythographic reading of the Ovidian Adonis as the paragon of man too soon destroyed by nature. As Abraham Fraunce

elaborates the Ovidian tale, Adonis is "Dame Natur's dearling, hev'ns joy, worlds woonder" (43'), his blasted life changed into an anemone symbolic of how "flowre fades, eye dazeleth, face wrinkleth, bewty decayeth" (45'). Georgius Sabinus comments that Adonis' tragic death "warns us that nothing is less lasting than beauty and form" ("*admoneamur nihil esse minus diuturnum pulchritudine et forma,*" 364). "Frailty, thy name is man," Ophelia implies. We need to hear these mythological undertones, the meanings if not the names, of Ophelia's mournful encomium. They suggest how Hamlet and Ophelia's broken identities and frustrated love manifest inescapable universal patterns of the natural and human world. In the play, Venus' curse of love prompted by Adonis' death proves only too true:

Sith in his prime, Death doth my love destroy,  
They that love best, their loves shall not enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

Hamlet and Ophelia act out this doom, both participating in the cosmic pattern established out of grief and revenge by Venus over her dead Adonis.

Recognizing Ophelia in this double way, as an obvious Venus-figure mourning her ruined Adonis and also as one like Adonis and Hamlet doomed to early death, reveals her "perfecting" role in the drama. In her double plight to lament and die, she brings to completion a central patterning of the play's mythological allusions, making it identifiable. The more we unravel this complex mythological analogy, so generative of the play's multiple meanings, the more we begin to understand what Harold Jenkins calls one of the play's "perennial questions. . . . Why is Hamlet so cruel to Ophelia?" (125). Briefly, my response here would be hunting the boar (associated with Diana) or loving Venus (the soft hunt) are mutually exclusive pathways. When Hamlet repeatedly tells Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.121), prompting her lament regarding "the mould of form" (155), the play reveals an unbridgeable divide between a range of conflicting values, between *amor* and *majestas*, to use Ovidian terms, or, to use philosophical and religious, between the domains of matter and spirit. As Hamlet says, "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it," (3.1.117), that is,

pleasure will not reconcile with virtue, thereby overturning a favorite neo-Platonic ideality of the Renaissance, as in Achille Bocchi's emblem "Cum virtute alma consentit vera voluptas" (25).

These moral and cosmic conflicts occur not just between Ophelia and Hamlet but within both characters as the course of the play unfolds. Their fate spells out human limitations writ large in the cosmos. In the Renaissance, Adonis was the epitome of life-giving form, indeed "the Father of all formes they call" in Spenser's famous "Gardin of Adonis" description in *The Faerie Queene* (3.6.47). However, even in his magical *locus amoenus*, Adonis must be hidden away by Venus "from the world, and from the skill / Of Stygian Gods, which doe her love envy" (3.6.46). Likewise, he is a touchstone of physiognomic proportion in George Sandys' commentary on Ovid (366), and yet this perfect man is also doomed to tragic death like the sun by the "boar of winter" and mourned by that paradigm of all lovers Venus; in short an emblem of the frailty and vulnerability of even ideal human form and beauty.<sup>5</sup> This commonplace reading of the Adonis figure makes obvious connections with Shakespeare's "Renaissance Hamlet," another mirror of princely perfection doomed to short life and frustrated love.

In this line of mythographic reading that I am attempting to open, we also need to acknowledge for its bearing on *Hamlet* the narrative context of the Adonis myth in Ovid, of how the fate of Orpheus who speaks the tale proves like that of Adonis, the poet's tragic death followed by his becoming a mortal-made-immortal by the intervention of the gods. Ovid's implication is that change is a process that all times and realms, human and divine, undergo, as Orpheus who sings of metamorphosis also becomes the object of it. An all-embracing metamorphic dynamic is also let loose in the multiple worlds of *Hamlet* where suffering, death and transformation are so greedily at work in the three worlds that the action of the play scans: the world beyond with its ghost "doom'd for a certain time to walk the night," the present human world of "unweeded gardens," and the world of the past (the jawbone of Cain).

Besides the terminology that couples ideal form and mutability, there are numerous plot similarities between the Ovidian myth of Adonis and the play that give rise to thought in puzzling ways: the incestuous

relations of father and daughter in the myth and uncle and mother in the play (the latter relations considered incest at least in the Tudor canon law of prohibited degrees); love frustrated by martial demands made upon the male (the harsh treatment of Venus by Adonis set on hunting the boar, that of Ophelia by Hamlet intent on killing the "adulterate beast" Claudius); death of prince Adonis by the boar's goring and subsequent "eternalization" as a flower, that of prince Hamlet by an envenomed sword and the implied creation of at least a humanist legend as the scholar Horatio vows to tell his lay of woe "to th'yet unknowing world" (5.2.384). Also, the fact that Orpheus, the singer of Adonis as well as of other youths beloved of the gods ("dilectos superis") in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, undergoes tragic death and immortal translation has a further, more specific analogical relevance to Hamlet than the one stated above regarding both the narrator and the tale undergoing metamorphosis: like Hamlet's story, that of Orpheus shows how the civilizing figure, the righter of wrongs or tamer of the barbarous, finally succumbs to the very forces he had attempted to overcome. Orpheus is destroyed by an excess of the very Dionysiac rituals he had taught or refined; Hamlet is murdered in the course of the same fencing competition through which he obtains his triumph of "revenge," a twisted plot that Horatio describes as "fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (5.2.390).

This last mythographic parallel would have proved especially disturbing to the play's humanist audience. Orpheus in the Renaissance was, in Thomas Cain's findings (11-4), the very paradigm of eloquence for the humanists, the primordial Word-bearer of civilization, finally overcome in the end by his own desire for perfection (the double loss of Eurydice understood as the loss of a once achieved "good harmony" or proper mode of speaking or music ironically brought about by Orpheus' excessive love of the harmonious or just). Like that of Orpheus, Hamlet's story turns civilization's gaze upon itself, revealing a fearful underside, the brutal, wild, mutable "Hobbesian" world of the natural and the barbarous where strife finally overwhelms the lover of justice who would change things for the better. Uncannily, in myth and play, love itself has deeply ambiguous motivations and results.

### III. Reading the Code Historically

We must not, however, read an Adonis or Orpheus subtext in isolation from other classical points of contact. A symbolic coding and an implied range of meanings are at stake, not one to one identifications. These node-like signs drawn from myth and the polysemous meaning attributed them date Shakespeare's work, that is, place it in a relationship to a specific audience or readership trained in academic recital and exegesis of Ovid and Virgil, as T. W. Baldwin describes the typical Elizabethan Latin curriculum. The interplay of drama and myth evolves out of the learning practices and belief-structures of the late Renaissance, not because of archetypes that eternally recur, but because of acquired ways of understanding how things mean.

As noted above, chief among these heavily valued "antique" signs and acquired meanings were stories of classical heroes who had journeyed to and returned from the world beyond, transcending the limits of the known world by coming into contact with "the dead, ancestors, divinities," in Carlo Ginzburg's anthropological sense of what such a mythological voyage would have meant in terms of archaic European belief-structures that demonstrably persisted into early modern society (Ginzburg 262).<sup>6</sup> Despite spectacular attempts to persecute or edify their would-be believers, the gods and classical heroes obtained a well-documented afterlife in the literature and art of the Renaissance, as thoroughly explored, for instance, by Erwin Panofsky, Jean Seznec, Ernst Gombrich, and D. C. Allen. The high Medieval tradition of reading *sub integumento*, the way Bernard Silvestris read Virgil, and the associated flexibility of reading rhetorically *in bono et malo* that develops along with it, as in Petrarch's friend Pierre Bersuire's reading of Ovid, had allowed Orpheus and Adonis to be praised as Christ-like figures or vilified as corrupt *daimones* who could seduce the Christian soul.<sup>7</sup> The fable of Orpheus, for example, could be read *in bono* as a shadowy, ultimately inadequate figure for Christ who suffers embodiment and death (journeys to Hades) in order to rescue the soul (Eurydice) from damnation, or *in malo*, as Boethius does in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (Metrum 12), as a figure for the sinner overcome on the brink of salvation by the unruly law of love.<sup>8</sup> Augustine, as Sir John Harington knew in his search for

the stamp of Christian orthodoxy upon his Virgilian commentary, had acknowledged the heuristic double potential of pagan gods in his reading of Adam's idolatry in the garden: "Created gods are gods not in their own true nature but by their participation in the true God" (573). It is through this participation that "the devil hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape" (2.2.595), to give the orthodox theological reading of Hamlet's analysis of what the ghost might be.

These hermeneutical traditions as they had come to evolve in the late Renaissance require us to read myth allusions in *Hamlet* not archetypically but stenographically, following Sir Thomas Browne's advice for the symbolic reading of myth that, admittedly in a baroque way, expands upon Augustine's transformative reading of pagan myth as a covering over of the oblique traces of the true light revealed only when myth is construed from the perspective of Sacred Writ. These footsteps or marks of Providence Augustine describes as "vestigia Trinitatis."<sup>9</sup> We have already identified some "shorthanded" and ambiguous figures in *Hamlet* drawn from myth that mark the unfolding of the drama as a dubiously spiritual voyage beyond the world known to reason. The question that the play repeatedly raises is, toward what place or dimension of the sacred is Hamlet journeying? Taking Hamlet as a Renaissance archetype of the civilizer, this query translates into grave doubts about "civilization," to use anachronistically an eighteenth-century concept (Starobinski 7-8). Is it foul revenge or redemption that ultimately characterizes Hamlet's story?

The acquired double potential of myth allowing it to serve simultaneously as examples of human virtue and vice complexly connects in the play with Hamlet's anxiety not only about his father's apparition but also his own thoughts. The antique past and the present day of Denmark are fitfully linked. Just prior to the play within the play wherein he hopes to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.601), Hamlet reveals to Horatio black thoughts:

If his [the King's] occulted guilt  
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost we have seen,  
And my imaginations are as foul  
As Vulcan's stithy. (3.2.80-84)



Again it is precisely this shimmering surface of allusions to myth that indicates deep cultural resonance within the late Renaissance. If he has conjured everything up, then Hamlet's experiences are similar to those of Spenser's Scudamour when he "visits" a not wholly imaginary House of Care, "bent to revenge on blameless Britomart" (4.5.31). A Spenserian excursus is warranted here. Scudamour meets Care, "a blacksmith by trade," a Vulcanic figure alluding to the proverbial jealousy that Vulcan feels for his wanton wife. "Those be unquiet thoughts, that carefull minds invade," Spenser's narrator describes the psychological complex that leads to such imaginings (stanza 35), thus indicating that the journey to Care's House is an allegorical phantom expressive of Scudamour's "overheated" mind. However, as with Hamlet's allusion to the "damned ghost" being the possible cause of his imaginings, the House of Care episode is not only a representation of pure delusion stemming from misguided jealousy and revenge. The antique lineage of Care is a trace, mark or visible manifestation of unhealthy spirits dragging the jealous soul down towards matter. As a daimon, Vulcan was understood as representing a process within the cosmos. He is that "turbulent fire mixed within all things making them prime for generation," that is, to use the spiritual translation of this commonplace of natural philosophy, the darkening of the spirit or "fire" with matter (Natale Conti's reading in DiMatteo 87). This is why Hamlet fears his "imaginings" are not only misperceptions but the results of a moral contamination affecting all things of the created world, including his mind. His quest for justice might be a journey into damnation, towards dead matter, as if the weapons being forged by "Vulcan," including Hamlet's play within the play soon to follow and all his "antic" witticisms, were serving a black purpose, *typhos* and not *logos*. By promoting *typhos*, in ancient Cynicism a kind of miasmatic soot of the mind, Hamlet would morally reverse the labors of Hercules.<sup>10</sup>

With the Vulcan myth activated in small letters, different and disturbing analogies with long-lived interpretive histories flare into awareness. Whereas Ophelia, as argued, appears a grieving Venus, now Gertrude emerges through the Vulcan allusion also like a Venus figure. The goddess' legendary doubleness as heavenly or wanton love perfectly expresses Hamlet's doubts about his mother's identity and his own moral

situation. Furthermore, the dead King Hamlet can be analogized as Vulcan (a daimon) forging his son (or a soul) into an agent of evil. Perhaps most to the point, Hamlet himself is like Vulcan forging a "net," as in Homer's fable in the *Iliad*, when the "Sun" spies the cheating gods and informs Vulcan. On this last fable, Arthur Golding observes, "The snares of Mars and Venus shew that tyme will bring too lyght / The secret sinnes that folk commit in corners or by nyght" (3). Or does Hamlet fear that his own "imagination" (and the word as used in the passage exactly parallels the status of Spenserian allegorical events, half-real, half-imaginary, with clear boundaries nowhere) have taken on a life of their own and enthralled him? The excessively "generative" impulse that he had earlier accused his mother of ("As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on," 1.2.144-45), even before his knowledge of the ghost, here for a moment appears as a disturbing potential of his own mind, the fire of the spirit itself breeding things of darkness. Furthermore, in Fulgentius' commentary upon the fable of Homer, in which the adulterous and incestuous siblings Venus and Mars are brought to the light of judgment, Mars is understood as corrupting the virtue of the marriage bed, "virtus corrupta libidine" (Whitbread 72), obviously, in Hamlet's world, applicable to Claudius but, if the ghost be a devil, to Hamlet himself whose private imaginings have sullied Gertrude. From this vantage point of a Venus and Mars analogy with Gertrude and Claudius, the ghost's words to Hamlet flare with unexpected iconography:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be  
A couch for luxury and damned incest. (1.5.82-83)

Venus as *Luxuria* on her couch is too familiar an icon for the goddess not to flash to mind here. Of course, the ghost tells Hamlet to "leave her to heaven" (1.5.86), but the image of his mother as an adulterate *Vanitas* has been indelibly etched. A vivid image, as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* maintains, that involves a similitude of words and things, has staying power in the tablets of one's memory.

Such analogies breeding quick among themselves indicate how *Hamlet* in plot, terms and phrases lingers over a whole range of ancient concerns

through which late Renaissance culture both couched and covered over its own ambition and fears.

Let us return to another of Venus' lovers, the "suppressed" or unstated side of the Vulcan analogy. Comparing Hamlet to Adonis, on the basis of the similarities and connections already noted, we can see how the conflict between love and strife or war (figured by the "hard" or fatal hunt in both play and myth) appears to define the universal or natural or even vegetative conditions of being embodied as a human, male and female. Hamlet and Ophelia seem to act out what Shakespeare had represented in *Venus and Adonis* as the curse of Venus, a sacred or eternal dimension of the human condition. Yet becoming an Adonis or Venus for Hamlet and Ophelia is a journey towards a deadly fate, becoming transformed into the more or other than human, their personal identity eradicated by the "destined" role they come to play that leads directly to their death. In this sense, Hamlet as Adonis shows how a soul can journey towards blackest hell, towards *hyle* or the unweeded garden of the material world and away from *nous* or from spirit and the longed-for release from nature's endless cycle of corruption and generation. Hamlet is obsessed with the possibilities of pagan antecedents or feelings for their potential and ambiguous relationship to his own plight.

We can also see Hamlet's strong mental participation in ancient things most clearly in the play when from memory he speaks as Aeneas for fourteen lines in the players scene (2.2.446-57). "Aeneas' tale to Dido" requested of the actors by Hamlet out of his love for it directs attention to the whole matter of Troy. His recall doubtless is prodded by his own peculiar dilemma that has for one of its classical antecedents Aeneas' meeting his father's *umbra* or *manes* in Elysium in *Aeneid* 6, a divinely sanctioned encounter that legitimizes the subsequent bloodshed and war upon the Lavinian shores and redeems the loss of Troy. This providential pattern is not under the sway of what the first player in Hamlet terms "strumpet Fortune" (2.2.489). Hamlet, however, agonizes over the legitimacy of the ghost, as scenes 1.4 and 3.2 reveal, and in another stark contrast to Aeneas' destiny, killing Claudius will involve his own death and prove the end of his own patriarchal line. "The hellish Pyrrhus / Old grandsire Priam seeks" (2.2.459-60) is an image of Claudius murdering King Hamlet and of Hamlet's black conceits about

his uncle Claudius. "Pyrrhus' bleeding sword" (487) that falls on the king in Aeneas' speech will eerily appear to levitate in Hamlet's hand in the prayer scene when he stands over the kneeling Claudius, commanding, "Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent" (3.3.88).<sup>11</sup> As we ponder the analogical options, Gertrude ambivalently seems both Hecuba and Dame Fortune, Ophelia both Creusa and Dido. By activating Aeneas' tale in the context of a speech "doubly performed" (the actor playing Hamlet plays Aeneas), we are alerted to the possibility of Hamlet's story being as much possessed by as reminiscent of ancient deeds, shadowy presences that haunt the present as well as *res gestae* whose prudent recollection can inform right action. From this strange perspective of the felt animation of the immemorial past, the resources of historical memory seem to endanger "the pales and forts of reason" (1.4.28) rather than support them.

If Venus-Adonis and Aeneas-Dido (Ophelia's "accidental" suicide makes the latter classical subtext partially apparent) provide fearsome analogies for Hamlet and Ophelia, Orpheus and Eurydice offer an even more telling if more muted parallel, again with a prime qualifying factor for inclusion within this network the fact that Orpheus is a journeyer back from the beyond, a legendary traveller who did return from what Hamlet calls "the undiscover'd country" (3.1.79). In Ophelia's description of Hamlet to her father, Hamlet looks like such a voyager, understandably so given what has just transpired, his encounter with the "perturbed spirit":

And with a look so piteous in purport  
As if he had been loosed out of hell  
To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.82-84)

After the silent "perusal" of her face and a series of strange gesticulations and a sigh, Ophelia continues,

He seem'd to find his way without his eyes,  
For out o' doors he went without their helps,  
And to the last bended their light on me. (2.1.98-100)

While the detail of Orpheus' gazing back is too famous to indicate any one source, the *locus classicus* that seems most to echo in this scene told

by Ophelia from memory is that of Virgil's *Georgics* 4, where Proteus recollects the fate of Orpheus to Aristaeus.<sup>12</sup> The legendary poet, who has just encountered the shades of Dis that his song has startled and that are now following after him, is suddenly struck by madness, "subita dementia," Virgil calls it (4.498), when he violates the law of Proserpina, looking back upon Eurydice, now lost twice and forever. Like Hamlet before Ophelia, Orpheus is rendered speechless (4.505): "What tears move the dead, what voice the gods?" Tightening the analogical knot is the fact that Orpheus enters *The Georgics* as an avenging spirit that must be propitiated by Aristaeus, the would-be rapist of Eurydice. Proteus reveals to Aristaeus,

No other than an angry god pursues thee,  
Great the offence to appease. (4.454-55)

Thus, Hamlet's sudden "antic" behavior towards Ophelia, prompted by his transformation into an avenger heeding the call to remember the avenging spirit of his father, together with the backward glance toward his lost beloved, make the closet scene resonate with mythical associations. In case these are missed here, the next time Hamlet invades a private, secretive, solitary space that belongs properly to Ophelia, "Orphic" undertones are more directly spelled out.<sup>13</sup> In the graveyard scene, Laertes and Hamlet struggle over the dead Ophelia, with at least Laertes actually standing in the space of her grave. They exchange "classical" insults, Laertes' "old Pelion" (5.1.246) rebuffed by Hamlet's "Ossa like a wart" (278). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.155) provides appropriate gloss on how Jove, defeating the Giants, "hurled Pelion down from underlying Ossa," yet we should also recall that Orpheus, as Georgius Sabinus tells us on the first page of his commentary on Ovid, sang of the "beginnings and creation of the world" ("initia et fabricacionem mundi"), of which the Gigantomachia is so important a part.

Hamlet's "dram of evil" speech to Horatio (1.4.13-38), just prior to Hamlet's lonely entrance into the eerie world of the ghost, also has oblique "Orphic" connections. The idea of "some vicious mole of nature" (1.4.24) perhaps ultimately connects with Aristotle's discussion in the *Poetics* of *hubris* as the flaw (*hamartia*) of Oedipus, but the myth of

Orpheus was also heavily glossed as a mighty instance of a great man, "His virtues else, be they as pure as grace" (1.4.33), suffering a lapse into "general censure" or at least the semblance of vice. Here is Badius Ascensius' standard allegorical account of the vicious mote symbolized by the wayward gaze of Orpheus: For if we would have understood Eurydice as the rational soul, then it follows that she be married to Orpheus, that is, to the flesh, and pursued by Aristaeus, that is, by reason, into the grass, that is, into delights, where she is slain by a serpent or slain by sins, whereupon by the songs and tears of her contrite spouse, Eurydice or the soul is returned to the upper world, that is, a state of grace, upon the law that Orpheus not look back, that is, the flesh not fall back into sin because then would the new sins be worse than the original. These affairs especially pertain to us Christians who still refuse the moral life, fully knowing that when our soul is married to the flesh, it is allured by it into vice and withdrawn from reason's sway (*Opera Virgilii*, fol.140). Hamlet's "vicious mole of nature" or "dram of evil" is like the sting of the serpent or the enticements of the flesh that in Badius' allegory of the Orpheus-Eurydice fable destroys the "noble substance" of the soul, indeed a "scandal" especially among Christians. I am arguing for a latent influence of the exegesis of the myth upon the way that Hamlet interprets the corruption of virtue, even great virtue, by a modicum of sin. Extending and more forcefully exhibiting the Orphic undertones of the "dram of evil" speech is the sequence of represented events following it. When the ghost appears directly after Hamlet's meditation and beckons him to follow, Hamlet like a modern Orpheus has discourse with a shade and then, like Orpheus too, will go on to vow vengeance upon a man whose criminal actions have brought about the death of a loved one by poison (both Eurydice and King Hamlet are killed through venom and then appear as ghosts to their avengers). In the scene following Hamlet's ghostly encounter, Hamlet will indeed look like an Orpheus to Ophelia, describing Hamlet, "As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (2.1.83-84). Then, in the next scene, Hamlet's poem to Ophelia recited by Polonius resonates with the "soul-married-to-the-flesh" allegory spelled out by the humanists Christophoro Landino and Ascensius, Eurydice as "humana anima" or "anima rationalis" and Orpheus as "caro" or

"corpus" (*Opera* fol.140<sup>v</sup>). The poem addresses itself "To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia" (2.2.109), and closes, "Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him" (122), a conceit that specifies Ophelia as the animating being of his life. Also, Ophelia's death like Eurydice's appears accidental and takes place within a water-meadow (*Georgics* 4.459), where perhaps the "long purples" or "dead men's fingers" (4.7.170) that Ophelia includes in her garland are a transmutation of the "monstrous serpent" destroying Eurydice.

So many "random" points of contact warrant full consideration for the antique perspective they bring to Hamlet and Ophelia's thoughts and deeds, as if these were a variation upon a legend from time immemorial erasing or at least fearfully shaping what we would call the individual agencies and personal fates of Ophelia and Hamlet.

#### IV. *Hamlet* as Staging a Cultural Crisis

As argued above, there is contemporary motive for the play's echoing or subsuming old tales. The parallel of Hamlet's and Orpheus' stories would have seriously engaged a humanist audience given its belief in the civilizing power of eloquence so powerfully symbolized by Orpheus' taming of wild humanity and his revelation of the natural and civil laws that apply to mankind. Hamlet enacts an Orphic fate when he tragically dies, the fencing match, like the Bacchic rites that Orpheus institutes or refines, the instrument both of his bringing things to justice and of his own death. As for the way in which both heroes die, the cure seems the disease. Arguably then, Shakespeare's play stages the death not only of Hamlet but of the typically Renaissance belief in eloquence as some ultimate civilizing or enlightenment process, a powerful reason why Hamlet is linked to the trio of classical heroes explored above. To these we also add Hercules, thrice alluded to in the play (1.4.83; 2.2.358; 5.1.286) and a standard figure in the Renaissance, notably in Coluccio Salutati's *De Laboribus Herculis*, for virtue's victory over barbarism and vice. Given all the play's shadowy uses of ancient story, the heroes seem the ghosts of Hamlet who are silenced with his death. Unlike the walkers from the beyond, Aeneas and Orpheus who return to the upper air, there

appears no return from the beyond in the play, "the dread of something after death," a phantasmal projection of human thought that muddies the blackness of the grave. And yet, of course, a puzzling and disturbing exception, "the rub," is the ghost that, as in the ancient legends, returns as more than a psychic projection caused by the pain of conscience or the hope of redemption from death. The ghost exists in a between-world as its three appearances in the play indicate, two seen by characters other than Hamlet (1.1 and 1.4), the third and final time notoriously only by Hamlet (3.4). The ghost exists as a strangely palpable, animated, abysmal call by memory to memory, Hamlet to Hamlet, sometimes observable by others and yet answering only to Hamlet. In this divided representation of the ghost, half-seen, half-projected, the play perhaps suggests that the world of the spirit and the possibility of the soul's voyage to it are in the process of becoming only so many remembered words and beliefs with no life beyond their being nominally warehoused in memory, the scattered remains or markers of realities perchance once lived but now visibly fading out, becoming only fable. The decreasing visibility of the ghost and the increasing fear that it may be a projection parallels what happens through allusion to the legends of heroes in the play, the ancient walkers of other worlds whose stories are invoked but in the reduced form of a symbolic code mechanically or compulsorily enlisted as "decorative" background. Any final decipherment of the code is placed under erasure in the play. What, in the end, is Hamlet to Orpheus, Hercules or Hecuba? What Ophelia to Venus and Dido?

The implied cleft between the miraculous possibilities posited in fable and the brute mortality of historical events in Denmark can also be sensed in the play if we consider the contrary influences of Ovid and Virgil upon the myths that the play takes up. Hamlet in fact experiences the Virgilian *raptus* or elevation of the poet as he attempts to heed a voice beyond. The great scene where Hamlet encounters the ghost echoes Aeneas and Anchises' infernal meeting, and Hamlet will go on to recite Aeneas' lines. At the same time, like Orpheus the doomed singer of Adonis in Ovid, heeding a voice from a world beyond makes the hero a mere conduit or instrument of fate. Contact with the netherworld sets in motion a course of events that involve the frustration of erotic love and the hero's destruction. Hamlet appears caught between the Virgilian



sublime and Ovidian mutability, a heroic recipient of an imperial message from the beyond and an utterly mortal figure seen in the fragmenting process of metamorphosis.

The dilemma of Hamlet, seen in the light of the myths, is describable as a conflict between form and flow, that is, between the stereotype, controlling representations of myth and that of history and loss, turbulent dynamics that scramble codes and blur or cancel lines of allegiance. The Virgilian *telos* of governance and the transcendence over time that it demands subordinate individual expression, above all demanding obedience to the will of the *paterfamilias*, like the command "Remember me." Such imperial concern for order and lineage conflicts with the deviance and decay of the cosmos, the erotic thermodynamics of nature that Ovid time after time tells us affect even the gods and that so worry Hamlet with regard to his imaginings and remembrances of the ghost and his mother.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, even the "afterlife" forms of Caesar and Alexander suffer metamorphic insult, according to Hamlet. Even the father's voice from beyond speaks of loss and death: how unlike the shade of Anchises in Book 6 who speaks at length about his son's progeny!

I do not pretend that the play juxtaposes Virgilian and Ovidian elements or historical and mythological "themes"; rather, their influences comprise discernible strands or modes of representation at odds with one another. Historical events in Denmark seem to set myths into motion as well as clash with or disappear into the stories of the heroes represented in bits and pieces throughout the drama. This varied, tangled interrelation of history and myth gives *Hamlet* a profound sense of an "impartial interplay of opposites" described by W. R. Johnson as the central influence of the *Aeneid* upon subsequent and especially Elizabethan literature (47). This opposition sharpens when we consider the contrast between Virgil's and Ovid's *weltanschauungen*. Virgil's permanent order and Ovid's flux seem to vie for influence over the play. Life as prison-house of the soul or as the unweeded garden of the body strikes our attention with the force of incommensurate metaphors.

"Quisque suos patimur Manis," Anchises tells Aeneas in Elysium (6.743), "each soul suffers its own fate." And how entirely interconnected and mediated all things in Hamlet's world seem, as if it were the peculiar

or unrepeatable historical circumstances of things coming together that seal the identity and fate of each character forever. Hamlet is most himself when least. He reveals his destined fate only by denying his private or erotic life, his love for Ophelia, as Aeneas must do regarding Dido's love. Such Virgilian associations, however, do not express archetypal verities bridging the great distance between Roman epic and Elizabethan drama; rather, they are only literary shadows left behind in the play's inexorable movement toward death and silence. Hamlet's heroic furor at play's end does not lead like Aeneas' killing of Turnus towards the foundation of empire. It marks the end of a monarchical line as Norwegian Fortinbras comes to the throne, both Hamlets dead, no Ascanius remaining, despite the completion of the hero's "true" destiny sanctioned by an otherworld. Shakespeare also underscores this contrast with Aeneas by deleting the two wives that Hamlet had in the historical account of Belleforest, a main source of the play, thereby also heightening the analogy with Adonis and the role of Ophelia as a Venus figure.

By bringing these parallelisms with figures from epic and fable to bear upon the history of Hamlet, the play acts out the tragic *pathos* that results when history and myth are implicitly revealed to be irreconcilable. It intimates how the uncertainties of history (murderous, drunken Denmark) can motivate as well as conflict with a human longing to see them in the legitimating or naturalizing terms of myth. That Hamlet as an Adonis or even an Aeneas-figure grows cold or "dies" to love in order to fulfill a natural or imperial fate and thereby have his "memorial" story told for all time is a "mythical" description of the play that rings partly true but largely hollow. No one can escape the non-repeatable course of human events frozen in time forever despite the comforting ability of stories to be retold and plays to be reenacted. The conflict of myth and history and of art and life is densely articulated through symbolic shorthand in Hamlet. Recreating this code is one way for us to understand Shakespeare's resources as a poet in indicating the polarities and heavily mediated predicament of his own belated era and cultural legacies.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All references to *Hamlet* are to Harold Jenkins's edition.

<sup>2</sup>See Taylor in Works Cited as well as Jonathan Bate, who provides a convenient bibliography of Taylor's essays.

<sup>3</sup>I cite from Rosemond Tuve (283, note 27) where she speaks of the presence of a subject being there "in the original" as opposed to the isolated "enigmatic image."

<sup>4</sup>I quote Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Riverside edition, 1718. While explicit language of form is absent from Venus' lament, the death of Adonis will give a blasted, ruined form to all future love:

For he being dead, with him is beauty slain,  
And beauty dead, black chaos comes again.

This cosmic curse upon love transforms the "luctus monimenta" of Ovid's Venus (*Metamorphoses* 10.725) into a foundational reality of human society. Also, Shakespeare conflates Orpheus, the singer of the Ovidian tale, and Adonis, the subject of it, when he attributes to Adonis powers traditionally given Orpheus. Venus says of Adonis,

To recreate himself when he hath song,

The tiger would be tame, and gently hear him.

Surely Horace's description in *The Art of Poetry* of the fabled ability of Orpheus, "lenire tigris rabidosque leones," or Virgil's in *The Georgics* (4.510), "mulcentem tigris," had to have been echoing in Shakespeare's mind, indicating critical need to avoid reading figures of myth in isolation but rather in a symbolic economy of similarity and difference.

<sup>5</sup>For a sustained treatment of meanings of Adonis in the late Renaissance, see Hankins. George Sandys, as usual, eloquently summarizes the long-lived tradition of reading Adonis in terms of natural philosophy (366-67). His polysemous reading of Adonis in Ovid seems like a gloss on elements of plot and language in *Hamlet*. Consider Hamlet's "mad" exchange (2.2.181-85) with Polonius in light of Sandys' allegory of Adonis as the sun:

*Ham.* For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

*Pol.* I have, my lord.

*Ham.* Let her not walk i'th'sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to it.

The annual return of the sun (Adonis) of course signals the stirring of the corruptive and generative powers of the earth and its creatures. Jenkins rightly here identifies what I take as a mythological pattern, how this passage links Ophelia to carrion, "and the play will associate her finally with violets" (466). Such symbolic affiliation contrasts her with flowers as well as compares her to them. In Sandys' conventional reading, the "springs" of Venus' tears readorn "the earth with her flowery mantle," whereas in Ophelia's death by water, her garments are, as Gertrude says, "heavy with their drink" and prove the efficient cause of her "muddy death" (4.7.180-82). Natural cycles of annual return and human annihilation in death are mightily juxtaposed through such imagery, which underscores Hamlet's grave doubts about the ghost as either a true shadow of the soul or a damnable "pagan" *manes*, "simulachra corporum defunctorum," as Ascensius describes such beings heeding Orpheus' song in Hades (*Opera Virgilio* 140").

<sup>6</sup>One need only consider Sir John Harington's anxious commentary upon Book 6 of the *Aeneid* (1604), written for the edification of Prince Henry, to see how archaic structures of belief were thought to connect with current social problems regarding witchcraft. Harington repeatedly cites Augustine, especially when he discusses the Cumaean Sybil, assuring readers "no power of witches can hurt a trew Christian" (64).

<sup>7</sup>On the rich history of the concept of the integument in the Middle Ages, see Dronke. In his *Metamorphoseos Moralizatae*, Bersuire is bent on making Ovid "preachable," allowing the fable to serve as a free-floating moral signifier of good or evil pathways in life. In contrast, Golding's "Epistle" to his translation of the *Metamorphoses* dwells on the negative side of Ovid, avoiding the moral perils of double readings. Ovid's tenth book, for example, concerns itself primarily with "Reproving most prodigious lusts of such as have bene bent / Too incest most unnaturall." Even Orpheus' death shows God's revenge upon "incest," that is, upon his pederasty (5).

<sup>8</sup>For the wide influence of this passage in Boethius and numerous commentaries upon it, see Friedman 89-145.

<sup>9</sup>See Edgar Wind for how this Augustinian approach to pagan poetry develops in rather arcane ways in the sixteenth century in the works of Ficino, Pico, Giraldi and others (41-52; 241-55). Sir Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici* elaborates upon the approach (17). For how stenographic representations function in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and elsewhere in Shakespeare, see my article and notes listed below.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Luis Navia (139-40) who shows how the ancient Cynics in serving virtue had Hercules as their cult-hero, his first labor to conquer the Nemean lion, grisly offspring of "Typhon." Curiously, Hamlet identifies himself with this hellish victim of Hercules' first conquest just prior to the appearance of his father's ghost. He refers to "each petty artire in this body / As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve" (1.4.82-83).

<sup>11</sup>Perhaps hovering behind these sword allusions, as Inge Leimberg has suggested to me, is also the blade of Aegisthus who slew Agamemnon "as a man might fell an ox at its manger" (*Odyssey*, 4.536, trans. E. V. Rieu).

<sup>12</sup>Bate also finds Orphic parallels in this scene (201).

<sup>13</sup>My description of the intimate space of Ophelia's closet is indebted to Lisa Jardine, who cites Angel Day's identification of closets in general as "the most secret" chamber in the early modern gentrified household (150-51).

<sup>14</sup>For a similar list of conflicting binaries as these relate to the epic tradition, see Quint (25).

<sup>15</sup>Using a similar approach, Jane Tylus "charts the failure of the myth of invulnerable selfhood shared by Coriolanus, Macbeth and Seneca" (3). She argues that this failure resulted from the general European crisis lasting the hundred years 1550 to 1650 (211-12). Perhaps Shakespeare felt some of these tremors while writing of *Hamlet* partly because of the aging Queen and the fiasco of Essex's attempt at her overthrow. Jeffrey Knapp also has recently described Shakespearean drama as staging a general cultural crisis: *The Tempest* "seems to dramatize the otherworldly conjunction of England, America, and poetry as both a heresy and a failure, a substitution of devilish literary 'spirits' for religious ones . . ." (8).

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, Don C. *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970.
- Augustine. *The City of God*. Trans. H. Bettenson. New York: Penguin, 1972.
- Barkan, Leonard. *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.
- Bate, Jonathan. *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Oxford: OUP, 1993.
- Bersuire, Pierre. *Metamorphosis Ovidiana*. New York: Garland, 1979.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Genealogiae* (Venice, 1494); rpt. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Bocchi, Achille. *Symbolicarum Quaestionum de Universo Genere* (Bologna, 1574); rpt. New York: Garland, 1979.
- Browne, Thomas. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. London: Faber & Faber, 1968.
- Cain, Thomas. *Praise in The Faerie Queene*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1978.
- DiMatteo, Anthony. "'Antiqui dicunt': Classical Aspects of the Witches in *Macbeth*," *N&Q* 239 (1994): 44-47.
- . "'Antiqui dicunt': Myth and Its Critique in *The Winters Tale*," *N&Q* 241 (1996): 165-68.
- . *Natale Conti's Mythologies: A Select Translation*. New York: Garland, 1994.
- . "Spenser's Venus-Virgo: The Poetics and Interpretive History of a Dissembling Figure," *Spenser Studies* 10 (1992): 37-70.
- Dronke, Peter. *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974.
- Fraunce, Abraham. *The Third Part of the Countesse of Pembrokes Ivychurch* (London, 1592); rpt. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Friedman, John Block. *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Golding, Arthur. *The xv Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso Entytuled Metamorphosis*. Ed. W. H. D. Rouse. London, 1904; rpt. Centaur Press, 1961.
- Hankins, John Erskine. *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory: A Study of The Faerie Queene*. Oxford: OUP, 1971.
- Jardine, Lisa. *Reading Shakespeare Historically*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Johnson, W. R. *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.
- Knapp, Jeffrey. *An Empire Nowhere: England, America and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.
- Navia, Luis E. *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Ovid. *The Metamorphoses*. Loeb Classical Library. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968.
- Quint, David. *Epic and Empire*. Princeton: PUP, 1993.
- Sabinus, Georgius. *Metamorphosis seu Fabulae Poeticae* (Frankfurt, 1589); rpt. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Sandys, George. *Ovid's Metamorphoses Englished* (Oxford, 1632); rpt. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Harold Jenkins. New York: Methuen, 1982.

- . *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. Thomas Roche, Jr. New York: Penguin Classics, 1987.
- Starobinski, Jean. *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Taylor, Anthony Brian. "Melting Earth and Leaping Bulls: Shakespeare's Ovid and Arthur Golding," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 192-206.
- Tuve, Rosemond. *Allegorical Imagery: Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966.
- Tylus, Jane. *Writing and Vulnerability in the Late Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.
- Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Loeb Classical Library. Trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1974.
- . *Opera* (Venice, 1544); rpt. New York: Garland, 1976.
- Whitbread, Leslie. *Fulgentius the Mythographer*. Ohio State UP, 1971.
- Wind, Edgar. *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*. New York: Norton, 1958.