Connotations
Vol. 11.2-3 (2001/2002)

Tragic Closure in *Hamlet*

LAURY MAGNUS

"A was a man, take him for all in all: / I shall not look upon his like again" (1.2.187-88).[1] Hamlet's thoughts about his departed father may well be recalled by many in the audience upon hearing Horatio's "Good night, sweet Prince." In taking our leave both of the prince and of the play, we are likely to feel that Shakespeare has broken all the molds, forging, in W. H. Auden's words, a "new style of architecture" in the tragic genre.[2] In our age, where most productions are constrained to considerably shorter playing time than *Hamlet's* almost four hours, the play stands as an enduring challenge. The powerful emotional impact of 5.2, its closing scene, is prepared for with sustained and consummate artistry, its final resolution building up over many earlier scenes.

With *Hamlet's* complex action, Shakespeare pushes to the limit an ambivalence toward closure inherent in classical tragedy's peripeteia and recognition, both of which have strong retrospective elements. In addition, classical forms of the genre frequently manifest an anti-closural recursiveness inherent in any sacrifice/revenge cycle.[3] However, though peripeteia and recognition are crucial to tragedy's formal architecture, they are ultimately re-stabilizing forces. For the tragic outcome always returns us to our beginnings with a difference in knowledge and insight—with seeing restored—and the symmetries we as audience invoke in returning to points of origin are crucial to our sense of tragic resolution.

However, in Shakespearean tragedy—and especially in the great tragedies—a new, more jagged documentary style developed as part of the Elizabethan evolution of the genre. This uneven new style vies

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debmagnus01123.htm>

equally with the implied symmetries and homecomings of ritual design in classical tragedy, and it has important implications for both motivated action and resolution. As Clifford Leech reminds us,

> Because of its closer approximation to the everyday appearance of things, there seems to be a greater degree of free will in Elizabethan than in Greek tragedy: it seems as if Hamlet could deflect the course of the action at almost any point if he wished [...] while clearly Orestes and Oedipus are bound to an established pattern. (16)

Nowhere is this documentary openness more evident than in *Hamlet* (even supposing that a definitive text of the play might ever emerge from its problematically divergent incarnations).[4] It may be that in swerving from the Aristotelian mimetic mode, with its privileging of action over character, Shakespeare necessarily allows the fuzzier internal momentum of character dynamics to overwhelm the clearer forces of plot design in bringing the play to resolution, a swerve that goes far in explaining the play's sense of modernity. Indeed, much recent critical attention has fastened on the intricate character development of Hamlet as key to the play's structure, as exemplified in Harold Bloom's approach and adumbrated in such critical overviews as that of Jenkins (xii.157-59) and Kerrigan (1-32). This focus persists despite the idiosyncrasy of *Hamlet* noted by Granville-Barker that the prince disappears for some forty minutes prior to the play's final action (136). But the emphasis on Hamlet's character is not misplaced: Shakespeare absents him only to bring him back into the play with an astonishing sea change, a renewed vigor of complication that his newly heightened presence adds to both the plot design and the problem of closure.

Related to this encroachment of complexly-developed character upon plot dynamics is the play's persistent verbal mode of questioning and uncertainty, which in turn creates even further complexities of "doubling, oxymoron, and antithesis," as Harry Levin (among others) has cogently argued (51). Rather than balancing the play's inherent contradictions, the omnipresent interrogatives instead multiply

uncertainty not only about cosmology but even about simple causality and outcomes.

As if the closural questions raised by the documentary Elizabethan style of Shakespearean tragedy, the protagonist's complexities, and the unceasing interrogatives of *Hamlet* were not difficult enough, there are also multiple plots deriving from diverse sources with their diverse elements and often contradictory origins and motivations.[5] These conflicts in turn resonate in realms that are personal, national, international, and cosmic.

Such complexities and multiple perspectives, along with the play's sheer length, create the need for a supreme closural design. On the face of it, it would seem impossible to address all the questions about being, seeming, and action that the play raises. But as any credible performance of the play makes clear, the final scene is a study in masterful artistic closure. Its powerful tragic irony inheres in its two crucial events: Hamlet's killing of Claudius and his own death in fulfilling his mission of revenge. If those two intertwined actions are the ones most crucial to the play's closure, they are surrounded by many other resolutions of varying magnitude that certainly invoke pity, terror, and an overwhelming sense of tragic grandeur. The intricate closural design of 5.2 resolves conflicts that have resonated long before they are brought to a head in the final scene, conflicts discernable for over a full act prior to this scene.

The critical scene in which we begin to descry the falling action is 3.4, where Shakespeare starts his preclosural work, disposing of or redirecting several important plot complications, including Polonius's death, Gertrude's reformation, the redirection of Fortinbras's political and martial ambitions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths, and Ophelia's death. The death of Polonius and the foreshadowed defeat and death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are all outcomes of 3.4, a scene that also sets in motion the dynamics of Ophelia's madness and death and prepares us for Hamlet's vision of Fortinbras and his armies moving toward Poland. This vision and, in 5.1, the shock of Ophelia's death, are the necessary prelude to Hamlet's growing abil-

ity to perceive his "readiness" for whatever fate has in store for him, an ability crucial, in turn, to his taking up arms against a sea of troubles with heroic vigor in his final moments in the play.

After Polonius's death near the beginning of the scene, the queen becomes a horrified but contrite and determined ally who explicitly voices her new allegiance to her son. From this point on, the changes in the queen create great opportunities for performance, reaching a climax just before she dies in her attempt to expose her husband and save her son from poison. Thus, the extremity of Hamlet's behavior toward his mother in 3.4 is technically faithful to the ghost's second commandment—that Hamlet "Leave her to heaven, / and to the thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86-88). First, Gertrude has been the initiator, and Hamlet comes in answer to her summons; second, his intent in coming to "speak daggers" rather than use them is precisely in order "to turn [her] eyes into [her] very soul." This is ultimately an activity of inner conscience, however externally provoked. Kerrigan reminds us, in a whole chapter devoted to the often repeated words "good night," that the scene's closing lines of blessing and farewell convey the exorcism of her guilt (Kerrigan 35). Gertrude's pledge to him to keep Claudius in the dark, maintaining a vigil of silence and abstinence toward him, releases Hamlet from any lingering preoccupation with the ghost's second implied "commandment," so that only the first remains to be fulfilled.

As for Polonius, that meddlesome and hapless counselor, the problematic preclosure involved in his death is evident in the violent clashes of diction in Hamlet's final lines in the scene: the flagrant colloquialism of "this man shall set me packing" and "lug the guts" (3.4.213-14) jar violently against the sacramental overtones of Hamlet's further "good night" blessings (3.4.215; 219). Though seemingly outrageous in the extreme, Hamlet's callous punning and behavior toward Polonius—dragging out his body (and the related practical joke of subsequently hiding something rotten in the state of Denmark) — are nevertheless mixed with a strongly articulated sense of the full weight of his deed.[7]

This consciousness is not merely chagrin at having killed the wrong person who—we must agree with his rueful comment—now finds that "to be too busy is some danger" (3.4.33). Though at the end of the scene he may wryly blame Polonius for his own death, earlier he has voiced the recognition that the life he has taken will somehow be answerable only at the price of his own life. This recognition is set against one of several repetitions of "good night" to his mother:

> Once more, good night,
> And when you are desirous to be blest,
> I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord
> I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
> To punish me with this and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister.
> I will bestow him, and will answer well
> The death I gave him. So, again, good night. (3.4.172-79)

It can be argued that these lines simply show Hamlet's awareness of responsibility for Polonius's death, yet "answer well" conveys a clear sense that he means "requite with my life," especially when coupled with his lament about being the scourge and minister of heaven. Even more significantly, he uses the figure of chiasmus in "punished me with this and this with me" upon discovering the murdered corpse's identity, implying his awareness that his miscarried revenge mission will exact its payment. Indeed, this verbal figure of chiasmus prefigures his crossing of swords with Laertes in the protracted duel of 5.2.

Hamlet's closing speech in 3.4 starts out as a prediction of the undoing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and voices an important closural motif of 5.2. As he reminds Gertrude, these friends are about to accompany him to England, but, he informs her, he will trust them only as he would trust "adders fang'd." Nevertheless, he entertains no doubts about his ability to outsmart them:

> For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
> Hoist with his own petard, and't shall go hard
> But I will delve one yard below their mines
> And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet. (3.4.208-12)

Hamlet clearly recognizes his friends as "engineers" of a treacherous breach that threatens both himself and the kingdom, as the word "petard" implies. Actually, a petard is an explosive device used to blow through castle gates in an assault, so the metaphor carries with it the threat to Denmark. Hamlet confidently predicts the inevitable defeat of those who plot against others, whatever the instrumentality of that plotting or "craft." Ironically, as a result of this confident foresight, the subsequent lines in this scene suggest a certain dismissiveness as to Polonius's fate as well as to the fate that likely awaits him for having dispatched Polonius:

> This man shall set me packing.
> I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
> Mother, good night indeed. This counsellor
> Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
> Who was in life a foolish prating knave. (3.4.213-17)

The closing sardonic epitaph blames Polonius's own meddle- someness, again invoking the logic of the "engineer hoist with his own petard" and placing the counselor in the same league with Hamlet's viperous friends. As in 1.5 when the Ghost informs him of Claudius's fratricide, he has seen confirmation of the intuitive gifts of his "prophetic soul."

There is a rub, though, to his confidence in his gifts. Even as Polonius's death rids both the plot and Hamlet of the counselor's intrigues with Claudius, it sets in motion a heightened consciousness that there will be a price to pay for this murder, however unintentional. It also creates the further complication of placing Hamlet himself in the double role of avenger and murderer, with Laertes as avenging dramatic foil.[8]

Ophelia's death, like her father's, closes certain conflicts at the same time that it opens others, though if Polonius's death is clearly Hamlet's nemesis, Ophelia's could almost be seen as gratuitous. With the bitter dissolution of their love, no further development in their love relationship has seemed possible since 3.1, with Hamlet's challenge to her ("Where's your father?"), the utter cowardice of her reaction, and

his violent, definitive rejection of her. Her subsequent suffering may be pitiable in the extreme, but from the point of view of action, the ending of their love in a sense of betrayal is definitive midway through the play. Later on, this breach will add considerably to Hamlet's consternation and retrospective sense of loss as he belatedly takes in the enormity of her madness and death. However, in 4.5, Laertes's reckless and defiant response to Polonius's death is so extreme that he is willing to commit regicide there and then and is primed for Claudius's manipulations. There is no need for the additional goad of Ophelia's madness and drowning.

Though structurally gratuitous, however, the death and madness of Ophelia become major elements necessary for the further character changes Hamlet undergoes preparatory to undertaking the final challenges of action in 5.2. The other crucial element is his meditation on Fortinbras's maneuvers in 4.4 ("How all occasions do inform against me"). These character changes, in turn, are crucial to understanding the closure of the play's long and complex final scene, since they ready Hamlet to relinquish the claims of ego and revenge for higher claims of love and justice.

Paradoxically, these changes do not seem to be visible until after the tragic protagonist has been physically absent from the stage for several long scenes in Act 4 (4.2 and 4.5) as Shakespeare focuses on Ophelia's madness, Laertes's violent challenge to the throne of Denmark, Claudius's manipulation of Laertes and their plots against Hamlet, and Ophelia's death. But unlike the other preclosural elements in 3.4, Ophelia's death takes place outside of Hamlet's knowledge. Thus, the temporarily invisible Hamlet's changes in character are newly manifested as Act 5 opens by his meditations on the two invisible dramatic foils: Fortinbras, whose ambitions and fortunes have been the subject of Hamlet's meditations as he departs for England, and Ophelia, who, when he returns, has invisibly moved beyond all known frameworks. These exchanges between visible and invisible presences mediate the striking final changes in Hamlet's character prior to the duel scene.

As 4.4 opens, Fortinbras is moving his armies through Denmark to Poland, for which safe conduct has been promised by Claudius. Though Hamlet himself neither sees nor hears Fortinbras, the audience is finally able to size up the prince's Norwegian dramatic foil directly. Fortinbras's short speech conveys a character at dramatic variance with Horatio's portrait of him as a lawless, opportunistic hothead in 1.1. In a few lines, Fortinbras dispatches his Captain to greet the Danish King and obtain "the conveyance of a promised march / over his kingdom" (4.4.3-4). Fortinbras's rhetoric stresses his conformity with the agreement reached by Norway with Claudius, as he continues to instruct the Captain: "If that his Majesty would aught with us, / We shall express our duty in his eye; / And let him know so" (4.4.5-7). The audience thus revises its earlier opinion of Fortinbras from the direct evidence of his present language and behavior. Even before we encounter the reckless, politically ill-advised internal rebellion of Laertes in the subsequent scene, we are already likely to concur with the important conclusion Hamlet draws in Q2 from his exchange with the sea captain, that Fortinbras is a

> [...] delicate and tender prince,
> Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,
> Makes mouths at the invisible event,
> Exposing what is moral and unsure
> To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
> Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honour's at the stake. (4.4.48-56)

The outcome of action might be but "a little patch of ground"; the *contemptus mundi* theme may receive an ever-increasing emphasis in Hamlet's reflections. But, as the repetition of "great," "greatly," "great" within a three-line span indicates, for once in all the action of *Hamlet*, the prince has found a paradigm for action that is corrupted neither by its genesis in suspect circumstances nor by its pollution from the something rotten in Denmark. In these lines of Hamlet's so-

liloquy comparing himself to Fortinbras, he seizes on Fortinbras's readiness to "make mouths at the invisible event." This contrasts profoundly with Hamlet's earlier soliloquy in which thought about "what's unsure" makes great enterprises "lose the name of action." Clearly, Shakespeare is preparing us for a nobler Fortinbras who will enter the visible stage and state again only after Hamlet has departed it forever; the playwright accomplishes this via an endorsement which is drawn from a more measured source within Hamlet's psyche.

Once Hamlet departs for England, the final preclosural issue is raised and resolved: the madness and death of Ophelia. Oddly enough, it is the bodily absence of the hero that is crucial to bringing about this change of Hamlet's consciousness; a striking dramatic irony results from the discrepancy between the hero's ignorance and the audience's consciousness of Ophelia's death during the gravediggers' clowning. Their banter bridges the dramatic hiatus between the end of Act 4, the queen's narration of Ophelia's dissolve into the watery element, and the opening of Act 5, her imminent burial in the earth they are digging.

Ophelia's transmigration is mimed by an intricate parallelism between things visible and invisible in 4.4 and 5.1. It is as though Ophelia now stands in to fill the void left by the ghost's disappearance from the play after 4.3. In 5.1, the invisible Ophelia presides over a newly present Hamlet, who is about to receive the spectacular, metaphysical knock-out punch that the playwright has in store for him.

As Act 5 opens, we hear the clowns quibble about the nature of Ophelia's final resting place. They question its appropriateness for a suicide and split hairs on questions of her sanity, speculating in their earthy terms about the relationship of action to reason and will. When the newly-returned Hamlet edges closer to that unknown disputed ground, he adds his own gallows humor and speculations upon the nature of ambition, death, and decay, with no idea that his foot rests at the door of his lady's chamber. He may still be suffering the grief of having lost his father—a "common" theme of human generation—yet he has not as yet

truly conceived of death as a personal matter that, having claimed his lady and contemporary, will necessarily come to him.

In fact, Hamlet's meditations on mortality earlier in the play have been spoken in generalizing terms (even in the famous soliloquy), or they have proclaimed the mortality of others. Before being sent away in 4.3, Hamlet has used the calculus of decay to throw Claudius's corruption back in his teeth. After having demonstrated to Claudius that Polonius is "at supper" by illuminating the progress of a king through the guts of a beggar, Hamlet says "Farewell dear mother" to Claudius because "man and wife is one flesh." He is intimating that Claudius's incestuous marriage, which has corrupted the flesh of his mother, has eliminated not only the dignity of hierarchical degree, but even the first differentiation of nature, gender differentiation. Hamlet himself equates this decay with Claudius's corruption and has removed himself from the fleshly mergers of "marriages." He thus distances himself from the universal fate of decomposition in store for Claudius by his ironic contempt for his already-corrupt interlocutor. When next we see Hamlet discoursing on this theme with the gravedigger, he remarks on the clown's literal-mindedness in denying gender to the unidentified corpse of "one who *was* a woman," as though he is surprised by a logic of universal decomposition that he himself has traced to its extreme end.

Yet, not having identified the person intended for the grave on which his foot rests, he continues to bandy jokes, circling back to the subject in his catechism of the gravedigger, perhaps needing to give that earth a more local habitation and a name, which the gravedigger then partially delivers by identifying Yorick. From the assault of this identification, Hamlet seems to take refuge in abstraction again, using Alexander of Macedon as the paradigm of earthy accomplishment. It is as though, like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, he would hit upon the proper syllogism to drive home a personal comprehension of death's depersonalization. But this is still not enough, for from this declension upon Alexander's fate, Hamlet proceeds immediately to devise a quatrain upon the fate of Imperious Caesar, dwelling obsessively on what is

still the mere *thought* of death's obliteration—of distinction, of degree, of gender—of form of any kind. The verse is a climax to his grim, long-winded, obsessive but stubbornly abstract calculus, tracing Caesar's clay to that "earth" which "kept the world in awe" but which now is being used to "patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw" (5.1.209-10). The verbal "patch" of the infinitive phrase recalls the "patch of ground"—the noun phrase the Captain has mentioned as the ambition of Fortinbras's maneuvers against Poland.

But even though he has looked into the eye-sockets of the long-dead Yorick, until Laertes's words suddenly identify the grave's tenant as Ophelia, the tracing of obliteration to its logical end in the existential shock of threatened personal annihilation and corruption has taken place only in an imagined time. When Laertes actually identifies the corpse as his sister, we get our first glimpse of a courageous Hamlet who, paradoxically, begins to build new meaning, indeed, new selfhood upon the patch of ground wherein all human ambitions are laid with the sexton's spade. Before our witnessing eyes, Hamlet's firm new sense of identity is rooted in the very bunghole to which he has just physically traced the grinning humor of Yorick, the actions and ambitions of men such as Alexander and Fortinbras, and—now in the flesh as well as in theory—the beauty of Ophelia. And with this realization, perhaps as a counterweight to the shock of personal annihilation, Hamlet emerges from his post of secret observation to proclaim his new personal identity—tied to the specific name of a specific ground: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." Moreover, naming himself in response to the naming of the annihilated Ophelia, he is also preparing himself to name Fortinbras as his successor—Fortinbras whose earthly ambitions he has both admired and connected to all human limitation. Hamlet is now almost ready to meet the Great Adversary.

With all the divisiveness of critical opinion in *Hamlet* scholarship, there is one assessment that is universal: the profound change Hamlet undergoes in this long scene both as he absorbs Ophelia's death and as he readies himself, with Horatio's aid, for whatever fate awaits him. Hamlet's revelation to Horatio of the king's intrigues shows us a

prince who is at once resigned and decisive. Instead of taking thoughtless action as epitomized by his killing of Polonius and Laertes' rebellion, in place of taking overstudied action, as epitomized by its failure in the prayer scene, Hamlet, as David Bevington so perfectly sums it up,

> puts himself wholly at the disposal of providence [...] beyond the revulsion and doubt that express so eloquently, among other matters, the fearful response of Shakespeare's own generation to a seeming breakdown of established political, theological, and cosmological beliefs. Hamlet finally perceives that "if it be not now, yet it will come," and that "the readiness is all." (1073)

With this new readiness, with Shakespeare's elimination of some of the play's loose ends and his assembly of hovering spiritual presences, the playwright has finally done all the preparatory work for the duel scene that closes the play.

Given the enormous complexity of conflicts as adumbrated above, it would seem that *Hamlet*'s final scene rises to the occasion of its own complexity. To be sure, a certain jaggedness and interrogation remain, as in all great tragedies. The repentant queen, attempting to save her son's life, dies hideously, and the autonomy of the Danish kingdom, which has been cleansed of its corrupt monarch, is ceded to Norwegian rule. And yet the mirror symmetries within the text of 5.2 are astonishing in their abundance and finality. Their poetic justice repeatedly hammers home the completion of all long-delayed actions and undecided outcomes in the play, such as Hamlet's poisoning the already poison-stabbed Claudius with lethal drink. Apart from this act of revenge, a crucial generational chiasmus that moves Hamlet like a crab, both forward into completion and backward into self-immolation, some 400 lines and dozens of actions offer a dazzling potential for final closure. Four important symmetries of 5.2 achieve the sense of tragic closure so carefully prepared for:

1. The exterior framing motif of soldiering

The play opens with the question of "Who's there?" asked in the context of a frightening soldiers' watch when international and cosmic war is threatened, and it ends with the tribute to one honorable "soldier" by another: Fortinbras gives the command that Hamlet's passage be honored by a military salute. This is, of course, an immeasurably sad tribute. The very attempt to do honor to the fallen Prince of Denmark reveals Fortinbras as a man of quite limited understanding compared to the man whose crown he will now wear. In the same way, Fortinbras's observation that "The soldiers' music and the rite of war / Speak loudly for him" (5.2.404-05) heightens the pathos and the sense of tragic waste implicit in his attempt to pay what he considers a fitting tribute to the fallen warrior. Yet it is, after all, a tribute that affirms the value of Hamlet's final struggles.

2. The playing out of the Engineer-hoist-with-his-own-petard motif

This motif symbolically presides over the entire scene, though embodied in different but equally lethal instruments: the envenomed sword poised over every move of the duel-cum-wager—with the poisoned chalice as back-up. It is also embodied in the chiasmus of the crucial stage direction that after scuffling, the two dramatic foils will exchange foils, arming an unwitting Hamlet with the poisoned sword.

Before it kills Claudius, the poisoned sword will also fatally wound Laertes—who is yet another of the king's "instruments." However, the second instrument designed to kill Hamlet, the cup, will instead kill Gertrude, the object of Claudius's professed love, through Claudius's failure to prevent her from drinking. (Claudius's inaction—a final failure of will—is a diabolical mirror-image of Hamlet's prevention of Horatio from drinking.) Thus, Claudius will appropri-

ately be slain both by the sword and by the cup, as Hamlet taunts him for his murder of Gertrude: "Is thy union here? Follow my mother!"

Laertes, too, may be an agent who is "justly killed with his own poison," but his death, like the queen's, comes after a manifested penitence that begins when Laertes speaks his aside about hitting Hamlet with the poisoned sword, "And yet it is almost against my conscience" (5.2.300). Still, he is not strong enough at this point to resist the dual taunts of the king and of Hamlet, who calls him back into fatal play: "Come, for the third, Laertes, you but dally. / I pray you pass with your best violence. / I am afeard you make a wanton of me" (5.2.301-03). Laertes' attack on Hamlet follows immediately, as does the scuffle in which they exchange rapiers. Hamlet's subsequent mortal wounding of Laertes with his own sword is followed closely by Gertrude's swooning, all of which bring about Laertes's change of heart and exposure of the King.

That there is a higher justice in Hamlet's long-awaited act of revenge, whatever the theology behind the action, is dramatically driven home. And if there were any further doubt, Hamlet's exclamation makes it clear that though this action completes his revenge, the more immediate call for action is to make sure that Justice has been served: "The point envenom'd too! Then, venom, to thy work" (5.2.327). Though the court may be confused, we understand this as the clearest case of the engineer hoist with his own petard; Hamlet's running through of Claudius must be seen as an act sanctioned by some special Providence which insures an ultimate justice for evildoers.

It would seem that all the play's actions of revenge and intrigue are exhausted with the death of Claudius, since this action requites both King Hamlet's death before the play and the queen's death just minutes before Claudius's own; however, there is one more muted echo of Claudius's villainous intrigues reflected in lines that are spoken not with a bang, but with the whimpered announcement of the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the English Ambassador.

3. The ceding of revenge actions to actions of amity and love

The play's final emphasis upon many aspects and acts of love is no accident, certainly, since the central catalyst of its complex action has been the grossest violation of love: the fratricidal act of Claudius's murder of King Hamlet. In the final scene, Shakespeare creates a structural corrective to the fratricidal pollution at the play's center by placing all the treacheries involving revenge and intrigue at the beginning and middle of the scene and enclosing acts of revenge within the complementary balanced acts of love. Hamlet's final moments are splendidly concentrated on such acts, making him, as he is dying, "the most life-affirming of all Shakespeare's tragic protagonists" (Fly 273).

Whatever treachery Laertes has in mind, there is a fair-speaking in Hamlet that establishes a history of amity toward his "brother": In the graveyard, after their first struggle, Hamlet remonstrates with Laertes: "What is the reason that you use me thus? / I loved you ever [...]" (5.1.284-85). As the two prepare to duel at the opening of 5.2 Hamlet may manifest a certain disingenuousness in offering as apology the claim that his madness killed Polonious, but his attempt to make peace is in marked contrast to Laertes's vicious intentions and hypocritical acceptance of his "brother's love." However, the initial false apology sets up the urgent final exchange of forgiveness under the impress of that fell sergeant, Death.

A second act of love is Horatio's radical self-sacrifice in grabbing at the poisoned cup, an act which Hamlet interprets as one of ultimate fidelity. Hamlet's plea to his friend to forgo the poisoned cup echoes his earlier praise of Horatio as the elect of Hamlet's soul, and he urgently lays claim to Horatio's love: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity awhile" (5.2.351-52). The wording implies that the physically failing Hamlet cannot struggle for the cup and so demands of Horatio a more difficult act of love: remaining behind in this world. "Felicity" also implies a mutuality of love that confidently foresees a reunion after death. Thus, Hamlet's response is in part a counter to the re-"union" with Gertrude he has just thrown in

the teeth of the dying Claudius. Though it has been argued that Hamlet's concern is only for his "wounded name,"[9] it is clear that both personal love and a shared higher love of truth have always united them and are therefore justifiably invoked "by Heaven." This higher warrant that guarantees their love will, Hamlet knows, stay Horatio's hand. Hamlet's dying request prepares the ground, in turn, for his friend's act of friendship, Horatio's final salute to the ascending spirit of Hamlet and his honoring of his friend's last wish.

4. The emphasis in 5.2 upon the exposure of Claudius's evil and the telling of the true story of Hamlet, as assured through the remaining witness of Horatio and as promised by Fortinbras

At first, the telling of the true story is not a sure outcome. This is clear from the logical but still unexpected court outcry of "treason, treason" when Hamlet stabs Claudius. The exclamation displays the Danish court's ignorance of the true story and the courtiers' intuitive disposition to obey an anointed king even when he is exposed as a murderer. Moreover, though Horatio remains in the world, there is much uncertainty attaching to Fortinbras's entry after the death of the queen, the king, Laertes, and Hamlet. Heralded by cannon and drum, Fortinbras's appearance might seem to have its questionable motives, especially since he soon speaks of his "rights of memory in this kingdom." Perhaps Fortinbras's rewriting of Danish history will now replace that of Claudius.

However, Shakespeare is quick to dispel this notion and display Fortinbras's character as a sympathetic man anxious to give ear to the true story. His opening question ("Where is this sight?") obviously follows some report of the slaughter that has taken place. Horatio's response is a challenge that strikes the note of pity and terror: "What is it you would see? / If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search" (5.2.366-67). Fortinbras immediately takes up the challenge:

> This quarry cries on havoc. O proud Death,
> What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
> That thou so many princes at a shot
> So bloodily hast struck? (5.2.369-72)

As a feast of cadavers, the spectacle may very well take in Claudius and Gertrude indifferently with Hamlet himself and threatens to cause the political havoc of uncertain succession. Unknown to Fortinbras, however, that gap in political succession has already been smoothed over by Hamlet's naming of him. Thus Hamlet's act of prevision, both anticipates and ratifies Fortinbras's closural last word on Hamlet.[10] But for the moment, the spectacle of death strikes a much more primal note of pity and horror, and Fortinbras's reaction, like that of the tragic audience, is voiced from the empathic ground of brotherly love in which only death is the great enemy, vanquishing princes as well as commoners, the virtuous and the guilty. There is irony, too, in the metaphor Fortinbras uses. "Havoc," as Harold Jenkins reminds us, "was a battle-cry meaning 'No quarter' and inciting to slaughter and pillage [...]. The peculiarly Shakespearean use of a hunting metaphor [...] by imaging soldiers as hounds, intensifies the savagery" (416, note on line 369). The martial man is for a moment dumbfounded by the slaughter of court intrigue every bit as savage as that of the battlefield.

Horatio responds to Fortinbras's speech of amazement at this penultimate point in the amassing of closural symmetries. He is now the sole reliable witness, a stand-in for Hamlet, whose wounded name under the burden of censured speech and silenced tongue has called for Horatio's speech to set it right. Thus, Horatio now directs Fortinbras's expression of pathos towards its most worthy object amidst the carnage, with the promise that from the chaotic slaughter of "deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause," of "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (5.2.388-90), he (Horatio) can "truly deliver" the just report.

Once again, Fortinbras responds as we would wish him to:

> Let us haste to hear it,
> And call the noblest to the audience.
> For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune. (5.2.391-93)

On this chastened note of sorrow, Fortinbras undergoes a subtle expansion in depth of character, drawing on Hamlet's prior praise of (4.4) and naming of him with his "dying voice." In this way, through a chain of affiliation still maintained by the intercession of the living Horatio, Hamlet empowers Fortinbras not only to rule Denmark but to voice the truth of what has occurred. By means of Fortinbras's audience, the rankly abused ear of Denmark will be healed.

Fortinbras's regal imperative, the play's last word, also takes its cue from Horatio in one last act of brotherhood, since Horatio has pleaded with Fortinbras for swift action. Calling for ceremony—the performative cue to a finale of visual spectacle—Fortinbras gives the last command:

> Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have prov'd most royal; and for his passage,
> The soldier's music and the rite of war
> Speak loudly for him.
> Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
> Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
> Go, bid the soldiers shoot. (5.2.400-08)

Having reassured us, the "mute audience," that Hamlet's tale will be heard, Fortinbras speaks these last words of tribute calling for the loud but the wordless speech of music and of soldiers' ordnance, enacted in compliance with the unspoken stage direction that is the text's final word: "Exeunt marching, [...] after which a peal of ordnance is shot off."

Fortinbras's speech is a fitting close to the magnificent closural design of the play, its parting shot moving its auditors beyond *Hamlet's* relentless plenitude and complication of words, words, words. Through a different kind of speech, it points us past itself and beyond

the "stage" of the play's world where Hamlet's body will be placed—indeed, altogether past the stages of the known world. We move now in passage with the spirit of the departed prince, who has found his wordless rest on another shore.

United States Merchant Marine Academy
Kings Point, NY

NOTES

[1]All quotations and citations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are taken from Jenkins' Arden Edition. Because there is no indisputable single text of *Hamlet*, I have also relied on the ingenious accessibility of Bernice Kliman's variorum website, which reproduces Folio and Quarto versions of the play, an invaluable resource when the play's textual inconsistencies have substantial bearing on an interpretation of a line (as frequently they do).

[2]W. H. Auden's poem "Petition" is an extended prayer addressed to "Sir," asking Him to "look shining at / New styles of architecture, a change of heart."

[3]Mark Taylor forcefully argues this anti-closural element in classical tragedy , stating that "in a sense, no Greek tragedy is ever complete, however many may be dead and mutilated, because what has appeared on the *proskenion* to the spectators is always only part of the action" (123).

[4]The multiple incarnations of the text of the play are themselves proof of the ad hoc manner in which the Elizabethan/Jacobean genres evolved between publication and performance. For the general state of textual scholarship on *Hamlet*, see Ron Rosenbaum.

[5]What we do know about the multiple sources of Hamlet suggests that Shakespeare's wide borrowings and free modifications create clashing motivations that are grist for the mill of the play's ratiocinative style.

[6]Ruth Nevo traces in detail the general amplifications to tragic form that Shakespeare's great tragedies embody, rightly placing special emphasis on what I later refer to as "preclosural" character transformations involving ironic reversals of the protagonist's prior attitudes. These usually occur in Act 4, but in *Hamlet*, as Nevo points out (166-68), the signs of the transformation begin as early as 3.4.

[7]Kerrigan points out that Hamlet can scarcely bring himself to contemplate the man whose life he has just terminated until he has taken his mother fully to task. This would argue against the interpretation that he is leaving her to heaven. Ho-

However, her moral passivity has been such that she has summoned him to her with no sense of her own guilt, as Michael Long convincingly argues.

[8]Jenkins, both in his introduction and notes, forcefully argues Shakespeare's emphasis on this double role of avenger and murderer, but surely it is an unemphatic doubling—one of many doublings in the play. In performance, Claudius's conscious and premeditated evils are so different in nature from Hamlet's responses to treachery that the final act of revenge on Claudius is clearly an act of justice under higher auspices—as opposed to the "accident" of his own death.

[9]Most notably, by Harold Bloom, who cantankerously argues that Hamlet loves no one but himself. According to Bloom, Horatio's suicide attempt is "forestalled by Hamlet only so that his follower can become his memorialist" (392).

[10]I do not agree with the recent view of Hamlet's naming of Fortinbras expressed by Mark Taylor, who finds it "pointless" since "Hamlet knows well that Fortinbras will seize the Danish throne" (117). It may be that in the larger scheme of things the succession of Fortinbras is inevitable, but this is not certain knowledge to the dying Hamlet. In his few minutes as de facto head of state, Hamlet, like his friend Horatio, is anxious to avoid the anarchy that may come when "men's minds are wild." Thus, he expends his dying breath to ensure that an honorable prince (as he has come to see Fortinbras) succeeds him.

WORKS CITED

Auden, W. H. "Petition." University of Santa Fe. 4 Aug. 2002. <http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Poetry/Auden/Petition>.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Fly, Richard. "Accommodating Death." *Studies in English Literature* 24 (1984): 272-74.

Granville-Barker, Harley. *More Prefaces to Shakespeare, From* Henry V *to* Hamlet. Ed. Edward M. Moore. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974.

Hapgood, Robert. *Hamlet: Shakespeare in Production Series*. Cambridge: CUP, 1999.

Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

Kerrigan, William. *Hamlet's Perfection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994.

Leech, Clifford. *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth Century Drama*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1950.

Levin, Harry. *The Question of Hamlet*. New York: Viking-Compass, 1961.

Long, Michael. *The Unnatural Scene: A Study in Shakespearean Tragedy*. New York: Methuen, 1976.

Nevo, Ruth. *Tragic Form in Shakespeare*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.

Rosenbaum, Ron. "Shakespeare in Rewrite." *The New Yorker* 13 May 2002.

Rosenberg, Marvin. *The Masks of Hamlet*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1992.

Shakespeare, William. *The Enfolded Hamlet*. Ed. Bernice W. Kliman. 4 Aug. 2002. <http://www.global-language.com/enfolded.html>.

———*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1997.

———*Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare [Arden 2]. London: Methuen, 1982.

Taylor, Mark. *Shakespeare's Imitations*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002.

Wilson, John Dover. *What Happens in Hamlet*. Cambridge: CUP, 1967.

Witt, Robert W. "The Duel in Hamlet as Play-within." *Hamlet Studies* 20.1-2 (1998): 50-62.