

***Hamlet* – A Never-Ending Story**

Dieter Fuchs

Abstract

This article fuses a survey of the play's most important standard interpretations with those aspects which may be considered particularly fascinating about this text: the conflict of England's catholic past with the rise of protestant culture in the early modern period; the meta-dramatic dimension of the play; the theatricality of Renaissance court life; the play's reflection of the emerging modern subject triggered off by the rise of reformation discourse. To elucidate some aspects which tend to be overlooked in the scholarly discussion of *Hamlet*, the article will bring two important topics into focus: the courtly discovery of perspective and the dying Hamlet's request to tell his story to the afterworld at the end of the play.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, revenge, modern subject, reformation discourse, meta-drama, manipulation of perspective, never-ending narrative loop

In this article, I am going to present my thoughts on *Hamlet* from a twofold vantage point: I intend to fuse a survey of the play's most important standard interpretations with those aspects which may be considered particularly fascinating, innovative and thrilling about this text. In the case of *Hamlet*, these fascinations include the conflict of England's catholic past with the rise of protestant culture in the early modern period; the meta-dramatic dimension of the play; the theatricality of Renaissance court life documented in this text; and last but not least the play's reflection of the emerging modern subject triggered off by the rise of reformation discourse. As I shall argue, all these aspects present a set of heterogeneous voices that articulate a national identity crisis Elizabethan England had to face at the time when *Hamlet* was written. And it is this polyphonic multiplicity of voices that makes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a most fascinating drama. To elucidate some aspects which tend to be overlooked in the scholarly discussion of *Hamlet*, I will bring two important topics into focus: first, the courtly discovery of perspective and its manipulative management which I will call 'observed observation'; second, the dying Hamlet's request that his confidante Horatio tells his story to the afterworld at the end of the play. This final request does not only transform the drama into a narrative, but first of all into a never-ending story: as the tale to be told after its end concludes with Hamlet's request to tell his story, each end triggers off a new beginning in a cyclical – i.e. infinite, self-repetitive, procrastinating – narrative loop of Derridean *différance*. But let us begin with some standard background information.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600 and 1601. Whereas the 1590s, following the victory over Spain in 1588, were the boom years of Elizabethan England as a nascent nation state, the turn of the seventeenth century may be considered a time of collective crisis. Everyone knew that the reign of Elizabeth I was drawing towards an end in the near future owing to the fact that the Queen was approaching the age of 70 at that time. As the Virgin Queen had no children, there was no lineal successor, and the House of Tudor would die out as soon as the aged Queen would pass away. As Elizabeth refused to name an heir to the throne, nobody knew what the future would bring.

To secure the ownership of *Hamlet* for Shakespeare's theatre troupe, the Danish play was entered into the Stationer's Register in 1602. As far as the editorial history of the play (cf. Schülting 533–4) is concerned, the earliest textual variants are a quarto edition from 1603 (Q1), a more recent quarto from 1604/5 (Q2) and the folio-edition of Shakespeare's collected works from 1623 (F). As the first quarto is only half as long as a modern text edition would be, scholars considered it a rather faulty pirated copy reconstructed from *Hamlet* as it was performed in the playhouse. In its brevity, however, this allegedly 'bad' quarto also has its assets: it gives us an idea about early modern theatre practice. Whereas we tend to enact

textual monuments and attend performances of plays that last up to three or four hours, the Elizabethans were not so patient. They wanted to hear a concise and thrilling story in a performance that should not exceed a maximum of about two and a half hours (cf. Castrop 107).

As the second quarto was considered more reliable than the first one – and as it contains about 230 lines that are not to be found in the folio text – traditional editorial policy tended to conflate it with the folio. More recent editions such as *The Arden Shakespeare* edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor in 2006, however, acknowledge these textual variants as various stages of the play as a dynamic text – stages that respond to the political and socio-cultural climate of their respective times of performance by way of topical allusion.

The second quarto, for instance, was printed one or two years after Queen Elizabeth's death and may respond to her successor James I, who – with a grain of salt – may be considered a real-life counterpart of Hamlet: when James was a young man, his mother, Mary Queen of Scots had a lover who murdered her husband in 1567. When the murderer and the widowed Queen married soon after, the young James was left in the Hamlet-like situation of the dispossessed son and prince (cf. Schwanitz 2006: 16).

Having very briefly considered the textual history of the Danish play, I will now proceed to the source material of the Hamlet-plot used by Shakespeare (cf. Schülting 534–5). Although *Hamlet* has an exceptional reputation among Shakespeare's works, its plot is far from original. Shakespeare is not an original playwright as far as the invention of plots is concerned. Very often Shakespeare bases his plots on pre-existing stories. The originality of his art lies in the way he re-writes, re-contextualizes and recombines his source material; and this is also the case in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*-plot is based on three major sources.

The first one is the *Historica Danica* – a late twelfth century Danish chronicle written by a scholar who called himself Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo tells us about the Danish Prince Amleth who takes revenge on his uncle. Amleth's uncle killed his elder brother the King of Denmark in order to become king himself; and to disinherit the murdered king's son and heir Amleth, the uncle marries his brother's widow, which medieval and early modern culture considered an incestuous and thus unnatural match. And this constellation of the challenged family triad of father, mother and son constitutes the Hamlet-plot in a nutshell. In contrast to Shakespeare's Hamlet, the medieval Prince Amleth does not hesitate to kill his uncle by way of revenge and becomes the new King of Denmark. Revenge is presented as a legitimate means to restore justice.

When we compare Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the medieval source material from Saxo Grammaticus, we not only discover that the Bard, too, presents the constellation of the disturbed family triad as the structural backbone of his play.

We also discover that Shakespeare deviates from the medieval chronicle when he debates revenge as a problematic issue. Whereas the Amleth-figure from the *Historica Danica* is more than ready to take revenge, and becomes king to sanction his semi-anarchic deed, Shakespeare's Hamlet suffers under the ethical problem of private justice and procrastinates his retaliation as long as possible. To atone for the fact that the code of honour requires him to kill the avuncular murderer Claudius to requite his father's unnatural death, Hamlet dies after he has accomplished his revenge. Thus the ethical debate of private justice may be considered one of the most important aspects of the Shakespearean rewriting of the medieval Amleth-tale. So what does this ethical dilemma look like?

If the state apparatus fails to restore justice by way of law and order, the only way to do so is via private revenge. If we restore justice in this way and requite a crime against our family with the same deed, however, we become involved in criminal action ourselves: if we kill the person who murdered a member of our family we become killers ourselves. Is there a way to cope with the semi-anarchic paradox that we have to engage in the crime of homicide in order to avenge a murder and restore justice? And what about the matter of sin? On the one hand, the Old Testament of the Bible recommends to take "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and so on (Exodus 21; 24); this would mean that to requite murder with homicide may be considered an appropriate way to restore justice. On the other hand, the New Testamentarian Jesus renounces this archaic code and commands us to love and forgive our neighbours: "[...] whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt 5; 39). So what's to be done to cope with this aporia? And what about the Biblical passage: "[v]engeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12; 19)? This is one of the unresolved questions that interest Shakespeare most when he rewrites the medieval Amleth-case. But let us let us return to the documentation of Shakespeare's source material.

The second version of the Hamlet-story relevant for our context is a collection of French Romance tales: Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* from 1570. Whereas the medieval Prince Amleth from Saxo Grammaticus survives and becomes king to legitimize his vindictive restoration of justice, Belleforest's early modern Hamlet-figure dies like his Shakespearean counterpart after he has accomplished his revenge.

The third source for Shakespeare's play is the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* from ca. 1589. This is a Hamlet-drama whose text has not survived, and we may speculate about its content and authorship only. A German adaptation of the *Ur-Hamlet* from 1710, however, still exists, and this variant gives us some clue what the lost play may have looked like. The German adaptation is entitled *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*. The authorship of the *Ur-Hamlet* is usually attributed to Thomas Kyd, who founded the Elizabethan genre of revenge tragedy, and we will see that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is deeply imbued with the aesthetics and conventions of

revenge drama – the sub-genre which debates the ethical problem of private justice mentioned above.

As the foundational text of the *Ur-Hamlet* is lost, we have to look at another prototype of revenge tragedy in order to find out more about the generic conventions at work in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) as the earliest surviving source of Elizabethan revenge drama. The generic features presented in this play include the appearance of ghosts, the play within the play, the revenger's feigned madness and his deferral of revenge up to the very end. Revenge tragedy applies these aspects as a means of an ethical debate which may not only be attributed to the Biblical background mentioned above. It may also be attributed to the classical tradition represented by the Stoic philosopher and playwright Seneca. As a playwright, Seneca wrote eight drawing room tragedies dealing with the excessive violence resulting from uncontained passion as a vicious circle of revenge and counter-revenge; as a Stoic philosopher, by contrast, Seneca suggests self-moderation and self-control as a way to contain the dilemma of private justice represented in his plays.

Having considered the source material of the Hamlet-plot and the generic context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in terms of revenge tragedy, let us now take a look at the play as such.

The play opens with the newly-wed couple of Hamlet's widowed mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius. Hamlet's father has recently died under suspicious circumstances, and his younger brother Claudius has succeeded the Danish throne by way of marriage policy. Although Prince Hamlet would have been the lineal successor as his royal father's son and heir, he was dispossessed of his father's crown by the uncle. As Denmark is an elective rather than hereditary kingdom, Claudius has succeeded in gaining the support and the votes of the royal court. And as a clever politician, Claudius treats Hamlet like a beloved son in order to get the young man's support to fashion himself as the allegedly legitimate successor to the throne.

Yet there is something fishy about all that, and this makes Hamlet suspicious and gloomy: his father's all too unexpected and sudden death is followed by an all too sudden marriage of the late king's widow with her late husband's younger brother – an aspect which may not only be considered a sacrilege owing to the already noted circumstance that early modern culture regarded the match of a widow with her brother-in-law incestuous; the sacrilege lies also in the fact that the widow skipped the obligatory mourning year: rather than spending at least one year mourning for her late husband in prayer and chastity, Hamlet's mother Gertrude remarried only two months after the funeral, or as the Shakespearean text puts it:

[...] The funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (1.2.179-80)

And rather than pray and fast, the widow and the late husband's brother drink, feast and have sex: the funeral is followed by a never-ending orgy of lust, gluttony and lechery. In addition to this posthumous profanation of his father's honour, Hamlet will soon have to find out that his father was murdered by none other than Claudius. To restore justice, Hamlet feels obliged to take revenge on Claudius, but he procrastinates his revenge over and over again. This delay may be considered one of the generic features of revenge tragedy mentioned above. Whereas other revenge plays present rather flat characters and apply the delay of action as a cliff-hanger to build up tension, however, this is not the case in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In contrast to the standard pattern of revenge tragedy, *Hamlet* presents a highly individualized main character whose philosophical scepticism makes him delay his revenge over and over again.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Freudian scholar Ernest Jones (1910) attributed Hamlet's deferral of vindictive action to the Oedipus complex. According to Freud, every son loves his mother. Being the first woman he meets, the son feels sexually attracted to her. Rather than making love to the son, however, the mother makes love to the son's father and this fills the son with jealousy; mortal jealousy that results in filial fantasies of patricide. According to Freud, every son dreams of killing his father and making love with his mother. Seen from such an Oedipal vantage point, Ernest Jones argues that Hamlet hesitates to take revenge on his uncle, since Claudius committed the very deed the young prince dreamt of in his own Oedipal fantasies: to kill his father. Rather than overthrowing his father himself, the uncle has already done that and that's why Hamlet subconsciously sympathizes with Claudius. So far so good.

Psychologically interesting as such a Freudian analysis may be, one cannot but note the a-historical dimension of such an approach. Historicists argue that Shakespeare's early modern plays must not be viewed from the 'presentist' vantage point of early twentieth-century psychology. Rather than that, one has to acknowledge the Elizabethan approach to the human psyche that Shakespeare was familiar with. According to the Elizabethans, the human body consists of four bodily liquids or humours, and it is the mixture of these humours that regulates man's psychological disposition: the mixture of blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The respective predominance of one of these four liquids constitutes four major character types: the hearty sanguine, the sluggish phlegmatic, the hot-tempered choleric and the gloomy melancholic. Hamlet is a melancholic if not to say the most famous melancholic of world literature.

Melancholics are said to be gloomy intellectuals who cannot cope with practical life. Their intellectual brilliance makes them undecided as they find as many pros and cons when they debate a problem, and this makes them hesitant like Hamlet. Rather than making a clear-cut decision, they think rather than act – and

this thought-tormented disposition brings them to the verge of insanity despite their intellectual genius. Thus it is owing to his melancholic un-decidedness that Hamlet procrastinates his revenge over and over again. Although he reflects on what is to be done, there always remains a feeling of doubt and uncertainty. To stress this disposition, Hamlet's exterior appearance looks like that of a school-book melancholic: he is skinny and pale, dressed in black, has a gloomy facial expression and is presented as a thought-tormented reader of books. Rather than being brought to the brink of madness by fits of depression, however, Hamlet applies the melancholic inclination to insanity as a means of disguise. As he says, Hamlet puts on an "antic disposition" (1.5.173) and plays the madman in order to deceive his antagonist and to find out more about his father's all too sudden death – and it is this fondness for acting and role-play that makes Hamlet a paradigmatic theatre-man like Shakespeare and the *Hamlet*-drama a play about role-playing – role-playing in the theatre and the empirical world alike. We will have to consider this meta-dramatic aspect of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in detail later on.

Having attributed Hamlet's unwillingness to take action, and to procrastinate what is to be done, to his melancholic disposition, we can now move on to Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost as another stock motif of revenge tragedy. The ghost confirms the suspicion that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.67) as far as the late king's enigmatic death and the speedy remarriage of the widow with the younger brother are concerned:

GHOST. I am thy father's spirit,
 Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
 To tell the secrets of my prison-house
 I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
 Thy knotty and combined locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand on end
 Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.
 But this eternal blazon must not be
 To ears of flesh and blood. List, Hamlet, list, O, list!
 If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

HAMLET. O God!

GHOST. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

HAMLET. Murder!

GHOST. Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
 But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

HAMLET. Haste, haste me to know it, that with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge.

GHOST. I find thee apt,
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear.
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.

HAMLET. O my prophetic soul! Mine uncle?

GHOST. Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (1.5.9-46)

There is, however, something suspicious as far as the authority of this ghostly revelation is concerned. On the one hand, the ghost tells Hamlet the pre-history of the murder and commands him to take filial revenge, as the traditional code of honour would have it. On the other hand, Hamlet is asked not to "[t]aint" (1.5.85) or burden his mind. But as already noted, the restoration of justice by way of revenge cannot but produce further guilt and cannot but burden one's conscience. Thus the words of the ghost as an otherworldly messenger turn out to be as paradoxical as the problem of revenge – and this ambivalence brings us to an important aspect: the topic of religion, which is the focus of Stephen Greenblatt's study *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001). To understand the Hamletian relevance of the concept of purgatory mentioned in the title of Greenblatt's book on *Hamlet*, let us reconsider some of the lines quoted above:

GHOST. I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. [...] (1.5.9-13)

The paternal ghost claims to come from purgatory and reminds the son to take revenge on the murderer Claudius so that his poor soul will eventually come to rest. It is, however, not only the shame of his unavenged murder that makes the

ghost of Hamlet's father live in purgatory for some time. As Hamlet's father was poisoned while asleep, he had no chance to confess his sins to a priest in order to prepare for death and the afterworld; rather than being delivered from evil with the help of a priest and immediately proceeding into heaven, the unprepared king's soul has to go to purgatory in order to be cleansed of the un-confessed sins committed on earth. The purgatory as the poor souls' waiting room for heaven is a deeply catholic concept – and this brings us to Greenblatt's reading of *Hamlet* as a play that features an early modern power struggle triggered off by the rise of protestant discourse: the conflicting memory of England's catholic past with the new power and knowledge produced by the reformed religion.

From the protestant vantage point of Hamlet's Denmark and Shakespeare's England alike, the ghost as a representative of the Roman Catholic religion is seen as an agent of evil rather than a poor soul waiting to be delivered of its sins. Protestantism rejects the catholic notion of purgatory as an iconoclastic and simoniac institution. 'Simoniac' is an adjective that refers to the deliverance of sin in exchange of money – a widely spread catholic practice that triggered off the protestant movement at the beginning of the sixteenth century. As the Pope needed huge sums of money to build Saint Peter's Cathedral and the Vatican Palace, the sinners were offered Papal letters of indulgence in exchange of money: rather than to confess and pray, a poor soul could pay her way to heaven; and to make the sinners willing to pay rather than pray, purgatory – or the more suggestive German term 'Fegefeuer' – was invented to make them afraid of a period of hell-like fiery tortures to atone for their un-forgiven (i.e. un-paid) earthly sins, or as the German Simoniac preachers of indulgence famously put it: "When money in the box resounds, the soul then from the fire bounds." And this is, of course, a corrupt and evil practice the protestant reformers tried to abolish with good reason.

To stress further the ambivalence of the father's ghost with regard to catholic Purgatory, Hamlet is fashioned as a representative of the reformed religion: he studies at the University of Wittenberg where Martin Luther initiated the Protestant movement in 1517. In contrast to the deliverance of sin by catholic rituals of pardon, reformed discourse locates the conflict of good and evil within the isolated individual's conscience. Thus the conscience-struck individual has to cope with his guilt without the assistance of confessions and other penitent rituals such as letters of pardon to be bought with money. Seen from this vantage point, the encounter of the conscience-struck protestant son with the fatherly ghost from the catholic past represents the early modern reformatory conflict in a nutshell. As can be seen from the ghostly appearance of Hamlet's father from purgatory, the old religion and its consolatory rituals forbidden by the protestant state apparatus were not yet dead and lived on in the minds of the Elizabethans – hence the ghost's conflicting identity as a poor soul to be assisted and remembered by the

living via prayer *and* a hellish demon from the pre-reformed past calling for the mortal sin of murder disguised as revenge to lead Hamlet's protestant soul astray.

When the catholic rituals were forbidden by the Elizabethan state, the cultural memory of the pre-reformed past was secularized, stored and re-enacted in the playhouse – an aspect which can be observed not only from the catholic subtext of *Hamlet*, but also from the genre of English Renaissance drama as such. As the English tradition of early modern drama emerged from Catholicism, the Elizabethan plays derived from the pre-reformed morality plays and mystery cycles functioned as a storehouse of the old religion. In fact, there are many facets that show that a dramatic performance in the early modern playhouse may be considered a secularized substitute of the catholic mass – and this brings us to the next topic relevant for our *Hamlet*-analysis: meta-drama.

When the new religion teaches Hamlet to listen to his conscience, the authority of the ghostly voice from the catholic past is challenged by reformed discourse. As the metaphysical sphere has lost its absolute power in this way, it is Hamlet himself who has to find out whether the ghost has told the truth or not. As the ghost might turn out to be a devilish trick to induce him to murder and lead his soul astray if seen from the protestant point of view, Hamlet looks for empirical, or circumstantial evidence to find out the truth about his uncle's putative guilt. And as a means to reveal the truth, Hamlet stages a play within the play to be performed before Claudius and his court. To "hold as 't'were the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22) – or to make visible what otherwise cannot be seen – Hamlet asks the meta-dramatic actors to stage the murder of his father in exactly the way he was told by the ghost. If Claudius is the murderer, he will recognize his deed performed on stage, panic and reveal his guilt by way of psychological evidence. Or as Hamlet puts it "[t]he play's the thing [w]herein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.606-7). Should Claudius be innocent, however, he will consider the performance a mere piece of fiction and remain emotionally untouched. It is owing to this tricky dimension that Hamlet's meta-dramatic play is called 'the mousetrap.' And of course Claudius panics when he sees his murder re-enacted on stage. As a secularized form of white magic or exorcism, the play reveals what cannot be seen (cf. Greenblatt and Schwanitz 2006: 63). The revelatory or confessional function that used to be monopolized by the old religion has now become absorbed by the playhouse. And according to Dietrich Schwanitz (1993 & 2006), this secularized revelatory function may be attributed to the early modern discovery of perspective at work in the mousetrap-scene as a play within the play.

As we will see now, it is owing to Hamlet's management of perspective that it is only he and the audience of the play proper – and not the meta-dramatic audience – who recognize Claudius's panic as a revelation of guilt. When in the inserted play the player king is poisoned while asleep, the audience in the playhouse

and the meta-dramatic audience on stage observe the performance from conflicting points of view. The audience in the playhouse is familiar with Hamlet's vantage point and recognizes the re-enactment of the murder of Hamlet's father by Claudius as it was told by the ghost. The meta-dramatic audience on stage, in contrast, remains ignorant of this aspect: owing to Hamlet's management of perspective, it interprets the scene the other way round, as Hamlet as the stage director calls the meta-dramatic murderer the king's nephew rather than the king's brother (cf. 3.2.232): to foster his revenge strategy as a madman in disguise, Hamlet makes the meta-dramatic audience believe that the staged regicide presents his allegedly mad self as the new king's nephew rather than Claudius as the late king's brother as the murderer. Owing to Hamlet's theatrical management of perspective, the meta-dramatic spectators think that the mad prince stages the play as a barely disguised threat to kill his uncle Claudius in order to usurp the throne and to become king himself. Thus it is only Hamlet and the audience in the playhouse proper who decode Claudius's panic as a circumstantial proof of his guilt, whereas the meta-dramatic audience on stage attributes the king's reaction to his nephew's "antic disposition" (1.5.173) as a madman.

Hamlet's management or manipulation of perspective is not only inextricably tied to meta-drama, which, like Elizabethan drama in general, reveals what cannot be seen by way of the secularized white magic of the catholic past – a development which may be traced back to the already noted fact that early modern English drama emerged from the rite of the catholic mass via the mystery and morality play tradition. Hamlet's management or manipulation of perspective is also inextricably tied to his strictly secular experience as a courtier – and this brings me to the next important aspect: early modern court life, which may be considered a secularized meta-drama in its own right.

Whereas medieval culture determined a person's rank in society by the right of birth and lineage, early modern culture invented the court as a new political sphere where the aristocrats had to vie with their peers for their authority in terms of impression management (Goffman 1959). As the monopoly of courtly power is in the hands of the monarch, the courtiers cannot fight for their political position by way of open combat, which would challenge the proto-absolutist power of the king. Rather than that, they have to represent their merit by carefully staged performances of a public image. *Image-propaganda* – or *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* as Stephen Greenblatt (1980) puts it – becomes the new strategy to present oneself as a person of authority to the proto-absolutistic ruler, to appeal to him, to advise him and thus to have a share in the execution of stately power. Like players on the theatrical stage, aristocrats become actors in a political drama performed at court. This dramatization of early modern culture in terms of courtly role-play is not only foregrounded by the ambiguous term 'to act' – which may refer to action

proper, the assumption of a theatrical role, or feigned activity – but, first of all, by the extremely popular early modern metaphor of the ‘world as a stage’ presented in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, for instance:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts [...] (2.7.139-42)

Be it on the stage of the playhouse proper or the stage-like situation of the court, stage-like role-play, or performativity, determined one’s social rank in the early modern period. And this role-play involved the insight that one not only observes others, but that one is simultaneously being observed while observing the others (cf. Schwanitz 1993). It is this experience of the new secular sphere of the early modern court fused with the medieval white magic of the catholic mass, which leads to the discovery of perspective and induces Hamlet to stage his meta-drama as a mirror technique presented from the various vantage points we considered above. Owing to his mastery of theatrical enactment, or Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Hamlet is presented as the champion of the Danish court – as an ideal gentleman schooled in the courtly mirror technique of observed observation:

O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,
Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite down! (3.1.153-57)

Having discussed the rise of court culture and the growing awareness of perspective, let me now complement these observations with two contrasting philosophies of court life: the idealist stance of Neo-Platonic humanism and the strictly realist vantage point of Machiavellianism. When Ophelia calls Hamlet a soldier and scholar in the text passage quoted above, she refers to the Neo-Platonic ideal of the humanist gentleman politician – a concept which may be traced back to an early modern standard work on courtly behaviour: Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* (1528), or *The Courtier* (1561), adapted and translated for Elizabethan England by Sir Thomas Hoby. Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, in contrast, cherishes the counter-approach elucidated in Machiavelli’s *The Prince* ([ca. 1513] 1532). Whereas Hoby propagates the ideal of gentlemanly fairness and ethical integrity, Machiavelli sanctions courtly intrigue and dissimulation as an amoral but highly efficient key to power. Although Machiavelli does not recommend this policy of betrayal for its own sake, he is realistic enough to see that politics is a dirty

business, in which one can only survive by way of intrigue and counter-intrigue as a wit combat of observed observation. To shed light on this Machiavellian ambivalence, Shakespeare's Claudius is, on the one hand, presented as a sinister murderer – a coward, who poisons his brother while asleep rather than challenging him in fair combat. On the other hand, however, the selfish murderer has his positive sides as a pragmatic and effective politician. Whereas the late king waged a meaningless war against Norway, Claudius as a court professional succeeds in solving this conflict by way of diplomacy and thus contains further bloodshed among his people as a civilising process.

Considering all the contexts looked at so far, I would argue that the delay of Hamlet's revenge may be attributed to a whole cluster of unresolved socio-cultural, philosophical and religious tensions at work in the Elizabethan period. As shown by Jonathan Dollimore (1984), these tensions – which I exemplified in the fields of religion, court life and so on – may be considered parts of a large-scale conflict: a conflict between the traditional belief in a world metaphysically ordered by divine justice – E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* ([1942] 1948) – and a set of new, strictly secular and amoral approaches to worldly power such as Machiavelli's political philosophy. It is this conflict of metaphysical and empirical concepts of the world, which may be considered an important context of the turn of the seventeenth century national identity crisis mentioned by way of introduction – a crisis which culminates in the final years of Queen Elizabeth's reign when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was written and performed on stage. Thus Hamlet's delay of action articulates an epistemological crisis – a feeling of ubiquitous doubt, which culminates in the unresolved question what the future will bring when the House of Tudor has died out owing to the childless queen's death in the near future. Should the queen be succeeded by an incompetent ruler, all of the sixteenth century's achievements in the fields of power and knowledge would have been in vain and the nascent English nation state as an emerging global player would be reduced to provincial meaninglessness.

When every claim of truth turns out to be contingent, the only certainty that remains is the radical doubt represented by Prince Hamlet. To overcome his scepticism and to take action, Hamlet must cease to think and substitute his doubt by way of spontaneous un-reflected action. In other words: he must turn off his melancholic brain to be able to act. Hamlet's thought-ridden dilemma culminates in the best-known monologue of world literature – the famous "to be or not to be" speech:

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And, by opposing, end them? [...] (3.1.58-62)

Owing to the fact that the only certainty in life is death as its inescapable end, Hamlet doesn't see any meaning in his revenge project either, and debates suicide as an alternative. Whereas Seneca as the classical model of revenge tragedy considers suicide an honourable means to flee worldly affliction, Hamlet casts doubt not only on the classical but also on the Christian tradition, which considers suicide an unpardonable sin resulting in hellish damnation. Although he doubts the Christian concept of the human soul's afterlife in heaven or hell, Hamlet still cannot be hundred percent certain about the finality of death. It is owing to his "dread of something after death" that he refrains from putting his life to an unnatural end:

[...] Who would these fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought (3.1.78-82)

As Hamlet attributes his resolution to stay alive to "conscience" – which makes "cowards of us all" – his father's ghostly voice from the catholic past is challenged by the protestant rise of the modern self. Although it still affects his thoughts, the authority of the catholic fatherly generation becomes more and more substituted by the reformed son's psyche. As already mentioned, the protestant movement interiorizes the conflict of good and evil within the isolated individual's conscience rather than to exteriorize it as a catholic *theatrum mundi* enacted as a public spectacle of mankind or *Everyman*. Thus the conscience-struck individual has to cope with his guilt without the assistance of priests and penitent rituals, whose morality play-like white magic even succeeds in overcoming the mortal sin of Everyman's rejection of God and his grace. It is owing to this reason that the conscience-struck Hamlet may, up to a certain point, be called the first modern individual.

Hamlet's thoughts about being and non-being are interrupted by the appearance of Ophelia. Hamlet and Ophelia were lovers before the late king was murdered and the young prince is about to break up the match. We can only speculate why Hamlet rejects the woman who truly loves him. Is it to foster his disguise as a madman and not to involve the beloved woman in the crisis of his life, which will not only result in the vindictive killing of Claudius, but also in his own death as a most likely 'collateral' damage? Or has Hamlet become a misogynist owing to his mother's betrayal of her late husband's love? Does he renounce Ophelia because he generalizes his mother's unfaithful fickleness as a characteristic feature of every woman: "[...] frailty, thy name is woman—" (1.2.146)?

It is, however, not only because of her cruel lover – but also because of her equally cruel father – that the young woman will not survive the rejection of her love; Ophelia's father is the king's courtly advisor Polonius who instrumentalizes his daughter to spy on Hamlet on behalf of Claudius. Most likely this is the reason why Hamlet rejects her: being surrounded with court spies, he mistakes Ophelia for a courtly collaborator rather than a forced victim (cf. Schwanitz 2006: 65). And to stress the pimp-like way in which Polonius utilizes his daughter to spy on Hamlet, the young prince treats her like a whore in fact – an aspect which is conveyed by way of linguistic punning and wit. Hamlet's "[g]et thee to a nunnery" (3.1.123), for instance, puns on the fact that 'nunnery' is an Elizabethan slang word for brothel rather than a catholic institution of chastity. This makes Ophelia a victim of phallogocentric misogynist discourse.

As a further facet of the meta-dramatic dimension already looked at, it is not only Ophelia who spies on Hamlet. Her father Polonius, too, tries to find out more about the young prince's uncanny behaviour by way of (un-)ob-served observation. Polonius, however, is presented as a parody of the paradigmatic court Machiavellian. Rather than manipulating others by snaky words as a means of intrigue, he is a man of many but meaningless words: someone who talks without saying anything. In his disguise as a madman, Hamlet shows that the blathering old Polonius is a foolish opportunist who agrees with anything his princely superior says:

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS. By th'mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

HAMLET. Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS. It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET. Or like a whale.

POLONIUS. Very like a whale. (3.2.364-70)

The only friend who remains true and faithful to Hamlet is his confidante Horatio who – like the young prince – studied at Martin Luther's University of

Wittenberg. In contrast to the courtly manipulation of language as an unreliable means of intrigue and deferral of meaning, Martin Luther as the translator of the scriptures insists on the representational stability of the word. As can be seen from the Lutheran maxim “sola scriptura”, the only way to salvation is the study of the eternal truth of God’s word written down in the Bible – hence the protestant rejection of confessional rituals in favour of meditative self-examination. Rather than using the priest as a go-between, the only way to salvation is to study the scriptures and thus enter a private dialogue with God to explore one’s conscience. Thus it is protestant book culture and the written word that guarantees Horatio’s integrity as Hamlet’s only trustworthy friend.

Claudius, in contrast, *tries* to embrace the Biblical word and prays in vain to God to atone for his sin of regicide. As a Machiavellian courtier he fails to meditate the scriptural words and thus reveals his fall from grace as an obdurate sinner:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3.3.97-8)

When Hamlet sees Claudius at prayer without being seen himself, this situation would be the perfect opportunity to perform his revenge as an unobserved observer. But the thought-tormented prince hesitates and refrains from action when he realizes that his enemy tries to communicate with God to confess his capital sin of regicide in order to avoid damnation and hellish pain after death:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
And now I’ll do’t,
 He draws his sword
and so a goes to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
[...]
No!

He sheathes his sword
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hint.
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At gaming, swearing, or about some act

That has no relish of salvation in't,
 Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
 And that his soul may be as damned and black
 As hell, whereto it goes. [...] (3.3.73-95)

Eleanor Prosser (185-9) considers Hamlet's decision not to kill Claudius at prayer a most sinister act. As Hamlet decides to wait in order to slay his uncle in the state of sin and corruption rather than repentance and prayer, Prosser concludes that the young prince wants to send his uncle to hell: that he wishes to kill both body *and* soul of his antagonist. This would be a Machiavellian practice and would denounce Hamlet's integrity as a conscience-stricken prototype of the emerging modern individual. Prosser, however, fails to acknowledge the principle of vindictive equity emphasized by the radical protestant faction of the Puritans: as can be seen from the Old-Testamentarian dictum "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21; 24) cherished by Puritan doctrine, revenge has to requite an act of injustice by way of strictly measured vindictive compensation. Applied to Hamlet's revenge, this means that Claudius has to die in the state of sin owing to the fact that the poisoning prevented Hamlet's father from making his peace with God (cf. Schwanitz 2006: 95-6 & 143). Owing to his sudden death while asleep, Hamlet's father could not prepare for the after-world and confess his sins – hence his already mentioned confinement in Purgatory. By way of dramatic irony, however, Hamlet does not know that the praying Claudius tries in vain to communicate with God and remains in a state of mortal sin.

In the next scene Hamlet enters his mother's closet to confront her with the guilt inherent in the betrayal of her late husband. What Hamlet does not know, however, is the circumstance that he once more becomes an observed observer in a meta-dramatic scene. Even in his mother's most private room, Polonius is hiding behind a curtain to spy on the young prince on behalf of his Machiavellian master Claudius. And, owing to a misunderstanding, the voice of the unseen but talkative Polonius is heard. For Hamlet it is obvious that the only man that might be found in his mother's most private room must be Claudius and he stabs the unseen person through the curtain. As we can see once more, Hamlet's revenge must be spontaneous – an automatic reaction before he has a chance to think. Unfortunately, however, he has killed the wrong man: Ophelia's father. Having already been let down by Hamlet, Ophelia will be driven into madness, despair and suicide by the passing of Polonius.

Moving from the plot-centred to the structural level, Hamlet's killing of Polonius may be again considered in terms of the meta-dramatic mirror technique already mentioned: having caused the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia and insulted

the Polonius family honour, Hamlet induces Polonius's son Laertes to take revenge. Thus the young prince becomes simultaneously the subject *and* object of revenge. Constituting a parallel plot, the issue of revenge and counter-revenge is presented as a vicious cycle of honour that nobody can escape. Like all the meta-dramatic aspects mentioned so far, this doubling technique holds "the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22), as it debates the topic of revenge from conflicting, subject-centred vantage points of fallible, and hence *mixed* characters. To show that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.251-52), even Hamlet as a fairly knowledgeable character makes mistakes, happens to become involved in crime and becomes a villain from Laertes' point of view, whereas Claudius as a stage villain proper has, politically speaking, some positive sides such as his already mentioned diplomatic talent. And, owing to the fact that the topic of revenge functions as the mere tip of an iceberg-like set of much more serious epistemological and socio-cultural tensions, this mirror technique shows that there are no simple answers to the complicated problems Elizabethan society has to face around 1600.

To stress both the complexity and omnipresence of these problems, Shakespeare's play even adds a third revenge plot and thus presents a kaleidoscopic set of reflections and refractions of this issue. This third revenge plot focuses on the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras who seeks to take military revenge for his father's death in a battle against Denmark under the rule of the late king. Whereas the young Hamlet is circumspect and refrains from action, the hot-tempered Fortinbras is ready to act – and it is only owing to Claudius's diplomacy that peace between Denmark and Norway is restored as a civilising process. But let us return to the central plot of Hamlet's revenge on Claudius.

Having been challenged by Hamlet's meta-dramatic Mousetrap-play and Polonius's death to be avenged by his son Laertes, Claudius decides to get rid of his nephew, who proves to be an increasingly uncontainable danger. To get rid of Hamlet, Claudius asks his nephew's schoolfellows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany the prince on a sea-journey to England and to deliver a secret letter to the English monarch. In this letter Claudius asks the English crown to execute Hamlet without a legal trial. By way of coincidence, however, Hamlet finds and reads the epistle and substitutes the names of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his own. During the journey, he thus saves his life and returns to Denmark as a sea-changed person.

The experience of his imminent death changes Hamlet's philosophy of life and makes him less hesitant to act – and this aspect is stressed when he meets the two gravediggers. Being about to prepare Ophelia's funeral, the gravediggers happen to dig up the skull of the court jester Yorick whom Hamlet remembers from his infant days. When Hamlet sees his former friend's skull, he becomes aware of the

vanity of life (which, by the way, is a catholic concept that enters his protestant mind). The only thing that is certain and cannot be avoided in life is death – and it does not really matter whether this happens sooner or later:

[...] There's a special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis
not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it
be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. [...] (5.2.165-68)

It is owing to this insight into the vanity of life that Hamlet faces his uncle's counter-intrigue without fear. As Hamlet challenged his uncle by way of the meta-dramatic Mousetrap performance, Claudius decides to requite this challenge and stages a meta-dramatic duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Of course this alleged sports-event offers Laertes a barely disguised means of killing Hamlet in revenge for Polonius and Ophelia. Should Hamlet survive the duel, Claudius and Laertes have two Machiavellian backup plans: on the one hand, Laertes poisons his rapier so that even a minor wound will lead to the prince's death; on the other hand, Claudius prepares a poisoned cup of wine. Although Claudius's scheme seems watertight, two unexpected things happen: both Hamlet *and* Laertes suffer a minor scratch by the poisoned rapier and Hamlet's mother Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup of wine to the health of her son. As the poison works quickly, Gertrude dies in a trice and Laertes tells Hamlet that they are both doomed to die an equally speedy death by poison. And it is owing to his imminent end that Hamlet is finally able to perform his revenge on Claudius. As there is no more time for thoughtful introspection, he strikes Claudius with the rapier. To take due revenge for his father's death by poison, he forces his murderous uncle to drink the remaining part of the poisoned wine.

Although Horatio offers to embrace the Stoic ideal of suicide to die together with his best friend, Hamlet asks him to stay alive and report his cause to the living – he wants posterity to know the truth hidden behind his vindictive role-play in order to restore his honour and the legitimacy of his revenge: what began as the drama of Hamlet thus ends as a narrative to be told by Horatio. Although the dying Hamlet says that “the rest is silence” (5.2.310), his story lives on by way of Horatio's testimony. As the end of the Hamlet-drama coincides with the request that Horatio tells Hamlet's tale from its beginning once again, the end is simultaneously the beginning, and this makes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a never-ending story that perpetuates itself into eternity (cf. Hawkes 312 & Schwanitz 2006: 147) as a Mobius strip: ∞ .

Having approached the end of my illustrative analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, let me conclude with a few afterthoughts. I approached the Shakespearean text with a special focus on the aspects of its scholarly interpretation that fascinate me most: the afterlife of the catholic past, meta-drama, the early modern discovery of perspective, the theatricality of court life and the emerging condition of the modern subject triggered off by the rise of the protestant religion. I have argued that the topic of revenge in general and all these aspects in particular elucidate the socio-cultural and epistemological tensions that late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Elizabethan England had to face – tensions which may be attributed to the conflicting voices of the ghostly fatherly generation from the catholic past and the new generation of protestant sons such as Hamlet as the focal point of the play.

As my survey focuses on a historicist reading of *Hamlet* as a play that reflects and articulates the crises of early modern culture, I have omitted some of the more traditional approaches such as the New Criticism which, for instance, focuses on the play's timeless poetic imagery of poison and rottenness; or Jan Kott's (1964) 'presentist' approach that considers Hamlet our contemporary rather than an early modern character. And it would have equally gone beyond the scope of this article to offer a survey on the stage history of *Hamlet* and the numerous rewritings of the play such as Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966). Conversely, a sketch of the afterlife of Ophelia in Romantic and Victorian art and poetry had to be omitted.

What has to be mentioned, however, is the special relevance of *Hamlet* for Germany. Hamlet is not only a character that inspired the art of Goethe and other German imitators of Shakespeare. In the context of German history, Hamlet also becomes a political *persona* who contributed greatly to the making of the German nation as a national identity formation process in the nineteenth century. In the Vormärz-period (1830-1848), Germany was a territory of scattered small states rather than a unified nation and, according to the poet Freiligrath, the Germans failed to succeed in the making of a unified nation state owing to their Hamlet-like thought-tormented disposition, which made them unwilling to act: "Deutschland ist Hamlet" (1844): hence the proverbial self-identification of Germany as a Hamletian country of great thinkers and poets (i.e. 'das Land der Dichter und Denker'). Considering the two world wars that followed the making of the German nation state, however, one must say that it would have been better if Germany had remained in this thought-tormented passivity rather than taken nationalist action. No matter if one affirms or critically rejects the Hamletian identification of Germany, one has to stress the historical relevance of the Hamlet figure as a secular German national saint adopted from England.

Whereas the Germans idolized *Hamlet* as a play to give answers to the question of nineteenth and early twentieth century national identity, my historicist approach focused on the questions the Shakespearean play addressed to Elizabethan

England as a collective identity crisis at the turn of the seventeenth century. And this brings me back to the Oedipal dilemma of the challenged family triad mentioned at the outset in order to bring my remarks full circle.

As already mentioned, a Freudian character analysis constitutes an anachronistic endeavour similar to the celebration of Hamlet as a romantic and post-romantic German national saint. If we generalize Freud's character-centred approach in terms of Jungian archetypes and the collective unconscious, however, the Oedipal dilemma seems to offer some clue to the interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* indeed. From a Jungian point of view, the constellation of the dispossessed son recurs in any family triad. Like the never-ending text of Hamlet re-told by Horatio over and over again, the Oedipal or Hamletian conflict is re-enacted every generation anew. Owing to its timeless cyclicity, the recurrence of the Oedipal dilemma may be thus considered a symptom of both socio-cultural crisis and regeneration: to continue the reproductive circle of death and life, the father figure representing the past generation, old age and sterility has to be overthrown by his filial successor representing the future generation, youth and fertility. The absence of this Oedipal mechanism thus indicates that the regenerative conflict of young and old has come to a standstill and that a community is about to age and die rather than to reproduce and renew itself.

In late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, this standstill is represented by the absence of the conflict of father and son and the omnipresence of the pseudo-mother figure of the ageing but childless Virgin Queen who rejected the family triad by her refusal to marry. If a prince is dispossessed by a fatherly usurper and betrayed by his royal mother, this is a dynastic scandal such as the one experienced by the young Prince James sold out by Mary Queen of Scots in 1567. If there is no son and no father figure at all owing to the queen's virginity, however, there will be a national collapse: the country will be reduced to orphan-like helplessness when the great mother figure of the queen has to die. This is the already noted trauma that paralyses Tudor England around 1600 – and I would argue that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* articulates this unspeakable horror vision as a layer of meaning which tends to be overlooked. Focusing on the struggle of the son-like prince and his pseudo-fatherly uncle resulting in mutual death, we tend to pay too little attention to the passing away of the Danish Queen Gertrude as an unchaste, or all-too human counterpart of the English Virgin Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare's management of perspective directs our gaze at the tragedy of Hamlet as the dispossessed son, but distracts our focus from the death of the royal mother figure Gertrude and thus diverts our attention from the imminent death of the Great Queen enacted on stage before our eyes.

As a possible affirmation of James of Scotland succeeding the English Queen in 1603, the throne falls to the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras after the Danish

dynasty has died out. On the other hand, however, James's agency as the potential successor of the Great Queen is deconstructed by presenting the moribund Hamlet as a counterpart of the young James dispossessed by his actual mother Mary Queen of Scots.

And of course this is a further example of Shakespeare's meta-dramatic art of perspective derived from courtly culture – a cross-eyed art of confusion, which both directs and escapes our eyes by holding “the mirror up to nature” (3.2.22). T.S. Eliot called *Hamlet* “The Mona Lisa of Literature” (144) to express his dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's Danish play, which he considered an artistic failure owing to its radically foregrounded subjectivity; I, in contrast, would argue exactly the other way round. I would claim that – although both pieces of art emerged independently of each other – Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* elucidates Shakespeare's art of the emerging modern subject as an ‘objective correlative’: Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Leonardo's Gioconda-Portrait confuses its observer by its cross-eyed interplay of conflicting subject-centred vantage points.

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Dieter Fuchs
Universität Wien
dieter.fuchs@univie.ac.at



Hamlet: nikoli zaključena zgodba

Članek združuje pregled najpomembnejših sandardnih interpretacij s tistimi vidiki, ki bi lahko bili še posebej fascinantni o tem tekstu: konflikt angleške katoliške preteklosti s protestantsko kulturo v obdobje zgodnje modern, meta-dramatsko dimenzijo igre, teatraličnost renesančnega dvornega življenja, itd.

Ključne besede: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, maščevanje, pripovedna zanka, reformacijski diskurz, meta-drama