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Ideals and Instances: Bacon's *Essays* and Themes in *Hamlet*

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Abstract of the Thesis

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What we mean when we say “the spirit of the age” is often simply those ideas and opinions that are shared by the leading writers of the age. These reflections on the many affinities and few oppositions existing between the *Essays* and *Hamlet* attempt to show how their authors -- writing in the same era, in the same land, and in the same language -- happened very often to be of the same mind. This close reading of Shakespeare and Bacon is thus also a reading of the spirit of their age.

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England's greatest poet and her best essayist were of the same mind, not because they were of the same class or school or kind, but because they were of the same time. The concordance of thought and affinity of feeling to be found in Shakespeare and Bacon has engendered four centuries of comparisons, including not a few efforts to root out similarities in wording for the sake of showing that, of the two men, only one was a writer, and he was the Lord and not the player, a glover's son from Stratford. Such fables are promoted by those who still ascribe to the Great Chain of Being, the hierarchical worldview that held sway in England until the late eighteenth century, and which placed God at the top, animate nature at the base, and the aristocrats closer to The Almighty than the actors (Lovejoy 59). Sons of struggling artisans were expected to be mediocre not meteoric. (To my knowledge no one has ever claimed that Shakespeare wrote the essays of Bacon, though that seems to me the more credible theory.)

Scholars of the Renaissance reject the idea that Bacon ghostwrote Shakespeare, not because they believe that he was too honorable to try to put one over on the theatre-going public and on history, but because Shakespeare's plays seem the product of a mind fashioned by long contact with nature and with the occupations and entertainments of the countryside and small town. Shakespeare writes about the flora of the country meadow, for instance, while Bacon's flowers are those encountered the formal garden. And where they do part ways and express very different opinions, these appear to be difference rooted in class. Their works express many similarities not because they were written by the same man, but because they were written by men writing at the same time and place; and when they are thinking the same thoughts it is because they was thought like Englishmen of the Renaissance. Thus, I have chosen to read the *Essays* side-by-side

with *Hamlet* so as to reveal in the work of the age's best minds the best of the mind of the age.

Adversity

Bacon quotes Seneca in "Of Adversity" and like the Stoics expresses the view that human virtue shines brightest upon a darkened field. Free of hardship and by some exercise of moderation, we may accomplish much that is desirable, yet to bear up under heavy affliction and despite it act is a more arduous, more admirable enterprise. Thus are our travails the right proving ground of our courage, according to Bacon: "The virtue of prosperity is temperance, the virtue of adversity is fortitude," he advises, with the latter being the "more heroical" (Bacon 9).

To enact rebellion against enslavement to an ill-fortune is to seek freedom for our best selves, for "adversity doth best discover virtue" (10). Indeed, adversity is "a blessing" which "carrieth the greater benediction," says Bacon: opposing of troubles puts the mettle into our acts which makes for the strength in goodness which pleases God (9). Therefore, afflictions should be met ably and never shunned, as they are part of the divine plan to try and test us, the severe terrain whereupon we learn both to please God and most fully realize our selves.

Troubles are subdued by tenacity. In battling adversity, fortitude is utmost, and steadfastness a better servant of our ends than any art or cunning. Whether writing of Hercules' labors, of Job's trials, or of "Christian resolution" (9), Bacon suggests that adversity is the forge wherein the mettle in our character is annealed and cast. "Of

Adversity” reveals a thinker in the temper of Seneca on the matter of suffering alloyed with a Christian conception of suffering for the sake of redemption.

Hamlet is as serious as Bacon, but he is not a Stoic. When he finds his fate bitter and unbearable, he says so. The notion that adversity is evidence of God’s favor would be to Hamlet a rank absurdity, the vain, empty “prattling” of men like Polonius. Great adversity does not build character but rather is a force to destroy it, like a “sea of troubles” (3.1.59) storming over fragile human habitations on shore. The “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” are overwhelming and annihilating, and leave behind a “sterile promontory” whereupon hope and sanity are swept from the landscape (3.1.58; 2.2.310).

Unlike Bacon, Hamlet finds no proving ground in adversity. Confronted with the cruelty of his fate, Hamlet expresses an all-too-human longing to end the fray by ending it all. A “dread of something after death” alone keeps him in the world (3.1.78). Ophelia, even less prepared to “take arms against...troubles” (3.1.59), loses her sanity after losing her world. Though we cannot know for certain what Shakespeare thought about his characters’ reactions in the face of mind-boggling adversity, their responses seem very plausible and recognizable to us four centuries later. While Bacon, the essayist, often works to explicate and recommend an ideal, the playwright almost always seeks to portray what is simply human.

Beauty

Hamlet finds beauty deeply suspect, links it to deception, and believes it incompatible with chastity. His distrust of beauty stems from his disillusion with

womankind, a disillusion rooted in his distress over his mother's behavior after his father's death. If a man who loved a woman, as he claims his father did his mother, such "[t]hat he might not beteem the winds of heaven/Visit her face too roughly" (1.2.141-42) can be so easily forgotten and indecently replaced, then women are feckless and beast-like. If frailty is woman, woman's beauty becomes vexing in its manifest power over man. Hamlet must gird himself against the force of female beauty lest he be similarly beguiled, only to be later betrayed in memory, or even while alive.

Women's use of cosmetics is proof of their intent to deceive: "God hath given you one face, and you make / yourselves another" (3.2.149-50), he tells Ophelia, berating her as a representative of her gender. Female concern with appearance, usually encouraged and deemed harmless artifice, becomes a metaphor for more sinister affronts to truth when Claudius calls his own deceptions "my most painted word[s]" and likens the disparity between his outward seeming and true self to a "harlot's cheek, beautified with plast'ing art" (3.1.51-53). The less one can rely upon the plain outward appearance of things, the play seems to suggest, the more apt we are to doubt all aspects of our reality and seek other explanations for the events around us. When people are not at all what they appear to be, ghosts seem more real; dreams and prophecies attain new credibility in a world gone rotten with distortions.

Hamlet holds beauty a warrant to wantonness in women. As a woman, Ophelia has a less malign view of female beauty and a better understanding of its relationship to maidenly virtue: beauty, in that it provides women more chances to be unchaste, enhances the value of chastity. "Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce / than with honesty" (3.1.109-10) she asks her former suitor, lately-turned misogynist. He

answers that chastity cannot last long in the face of beauty, because “the power of beauty will / sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd / than the force of honesty can translate beauty into / his likeness” (3.1.111-15). Hamlet now sees female beauty only as a lure towards obscene copulation and deems Ophelia nothing but a potential “breeder of a sinners” (3.1.123).

Bacon also finds beauty problematic. He does not ascribe to it the terrific, disturbing power Hamlet does, yet he does find beauty too often allied with a kind of laziness regarding the development of other virtues, as if nature, intent on achieving felicity in form, overlooked quality in function. Plain men generally have “greater spirit” than beautiful ones, and “dignity of presence” is always much to be preferred to “beauty of aspect” (66). Though beauty does not preclude the possibility of a “high and great spirit” – Augustus Caesar and Edward IV were beautiful men, he says – it is ephemeral and thus prone to decay “as summer fruits, which are easy to corrupt, and cannot last” (67). Yet, Bacon also seems to agree with Ophelia that beauty can, when it favors the right individual, “make virtue shine” (67).

Bacon finds the best beauty not in chiseled regularity, but in the oddly original, in the just a bit out of kilter. “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion” (66) he observes. Imperfection amidst regularity invests a merely geometric perfection with character, offering something more interesting than the mere pleasure of perceiving nature well-ordered: the felicity of the individual and defining detail. Bacon emphasizes as well the merits of what he calls “decent and gracious motion” (66) suggesting that this quality, as it often outlives the youth of a person, may be the deeper essence of his beauty.

It is interesting that neither writer's remarks on beauty much seek to address formal aspects of aesthetics; rather, they focus more on the worldly effects of personal comeliness, Shakespeare on female beauty and Bacon on male. Bacon does mention the art of painting, but speaks of painting only as it depicts the face and only to observe that no rule applied by the artist can assuredly produce the beautiful nor ever outdo the productions of nature. These writers are concerned not with beauty as perfection or immaculate abstraction, but with personal beauty in a social context, with the appeals and influences of beautiful women and men, with the human features of beauty.

Boldness

By boldness Bacon means not bravery but that baser species of daring which is impudence. Boldness, as he defines it, "is the child of ignorance and baseness" (19): the insolent offspring of man's more brutish nature. Boldness impresses fools insofar as it seems to prove rashness more efficient than thinking, and ambushes men of judgment by pre-empting the claims of reason. Bacon likens bold persons in the public realm to quacks, calling them "mountebanks for the body politic" and observes how easily the bold make even the wise their unwitting subjects, "binding hand and foot" the will of their betters (19).

Bacon tells us that "boldness is ever blind, for it seeth not danger and inconveniences" (19). Bold persons need but trivial spurs to action and are adept at taking liberties because they take no heed of consequences in the long-term. Heedless of hazards, the bold are often quickest to grab an advantage and therefore useful in the conduct of civil business, says Bacon. Yet it is ruinous policy to overly rely on them, for

boldness, though it can be expedient towards a limited goal, is indifferent to grand plans and unguided soon undoes by over-reaching whatever has been gained.

If, as Bacon advises, bold persons make good subjects for satire, the unbold may be best for tragedy. Hamlet has been described as “man thinking,” and arguably he is the antithesis of the bold man. While boldness can traverse any thicket, thinking discovers every root and finds in each a stumbling block. Mindful of the many pitfalls of taking action, Hamlet is generally incapable of rashness, and therefore of boldness. Shakespeare portrays the habit of thinking as a distinctly human handicap, “human” because thinking helps stay Hamlet’s hand when the ghost commands him to violence, and “handicap” when it forces him to follow the dictates of his conscience even when pitted against one who does not.

Like most contemplative persons, Hamlet resists blood-shedding and is tormented by the ghost’s command that he murder, especially upon the word of that shade whose purpose may be, as Horatio warns him, to lead him to death or to “deprive [his] sovereignty of reason / And draw [him] into madness” (1.4.73-74). Hamlet displays boldness only when he slays Polonius, mistaking the meddlesome courtier for Claudius. This “rash and bloody deed” (3.4.27) serves to reinforce Hamlet’s sense of the futility of taking bold action, even against the man who has, as he says, “hath killed [his] king and whored [his] / mother” (5.2.63-64).

Hamlet as “man thinking” needs always to see the present in terms of a comprehensible past and an imaginable future. “Looking before and after” (4.4.37) requires time, provides context for our deeds, tempers fury, and disinclines us to recklessness. Claudius, desperately trying to incite Laertes to murder Hamlet, well

understands how thinking gets the better of doing, when he says “That we would do, / We should do when we would” (4.7.118-19).

Hamlet’s is often considered flawed, faulted for vacillation or faint-heartedness; indeed, he himself finds fault in his emotional passivity and asks, after observing an actor portraying the role of Priam, “What would he do/ Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?” (2.2.586-88) Still, it is possible to see his mental struggles about slaying Claudius in another light, as evidence of a sense of justice too evolved to allow him to take human life on uncertain pretexts and outside the law. The recognized legal procedure in Hamlet’s world would be to present a petition to a just king, an impossibility, of course, when the would-be defendant has usurped the throne and become the law of the land. Indeed, Claudius has not only murdered Hamlet’s father and “[p]opped in between the election and [Hamlet’s] hopes” (5.2.65) he has degraded the body politic.

The behavior of Hamlet and even that of Claudius – who after murdering Old Hamlet relies on cunning, not boldness, to keep the throne -- contrasts sharply with that of Fortinbras and Laertes. Fortinbras, Hamlet’s Norwegian counterpart, is headstrong, young, and “[o]f unimproved mettle hot and full” (1.1.96). He is bent on martial conquest of Denmark, inspired by the lure of lands and glory. When Claudius asks the King of Norway to intercede to prevent war between their nations, Old Norway reins in Fortinbras and sends his forces instead against Poland, where the battle will be “to gain a little patch of ground/ That hath no profit in it but the name” (4.4.18-19). Hamlet is perplexed that men can “[e]xpos[e] what is mortal and unsure / To all that fortune, death, and danger dare, / Even for an eggshell” (4.4.51-53). Yet, despite this level-headed

observation, Hamlet recognizes that the willingness to fight to the death for “an eggshell” is what passes in his world for greatness and, sadly, finds himself envying what he does not find admirable.

Though “[e]xamples gross as earth exhort” (4.4.46) him, Hamlet could never convincingly say, as does Laertes, “To Hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil!/ Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!” (4.5.131-32). This is fortunate, for a bolder Hamlet would have been a man of fewer and more perishable words.

Counsel

In an age when immense powers resided in the monarch, the role of the court counselor was a subject of especial interest and devoted study. In his popular 1531 volume on the education of advisors, *The Booke Named the Governour*, Thomas Elyot sets forth the prevailing view of the day regarding governance: “A publik weale is a body lyuyng, compacte or made of sondry astates and degrees of men, whiche is disposed by the ordre of equite and gouerned by the rule and moderation of reason” (Elyot 1). The political order, like the natural order, is seen as God-given and felicitous, a hierarchy ensuring harmony and rationality in the conduct of state affairs. Counselors are integral parts of this order: the king is its crown, or head, and his counselors, the “eies, eares, handes, and legges” of the body politic (16).

Bacon, who surely read *The Governour* and who himself served as a close confidant to Essex, calls the relationship between counselor and counseled, “the greatest trust between man and man” (Bacon 32). He sees counsel as a source of stability and believes that the king who does not consult counselors leaves the state to toss on the

“waves of fortune” and sets the body politic “reeling [like] a drunken man” (32). It entails no “diminution of greatness” for a king to rely on counselors, though all “decrees and final directions” must appear to issue from the sovereign so as not to weaken authority (33). We can safely assume that Bacon agreed with the spirit, if not much of the content, of *The Governour*. Of the advice given by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, he would have detected too much self-serving, yet might have agreed with these words on the importance choosing good counselors: “And the first opinion which one forms of a prince, and of his understanding, is by observing the men he has around him” (Machiavelli 113).

In creating the prattling Polonius and giving him a speech that is the distillation of all conventional wisdom, Shakespeare lampoons the contrast between the appearance and the reality of wisdom in the counselor, and by extension in all the public faces of power. In what seems to be a clear echo of Elyot’s chapter entitled “What Maiestie is” (121), Shakespeare has Polonius begin his explanation of Hamlet’s madness saying “to expostulate / What majesty should be, what duty is...” (2.2.86-87)

Bacon warns against counselors who, while appearing truthful and useful, are forever behind the scenes pulling strings on their own behalf, until in the process they make a snare wherein their king may get entangled. Polonius serves as apt illustration of Bacon’s precept that men who “counsel with an eye to themselves” (33) instead of to the kingdom should not be counselors. Polonius works tirelessly to insinuate himself into Elsinore, but is so busy pursuing his own designs that he does not recognize the regicide in his midst and warn Old Hamlet of the danger. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius hopes to absorb power as a sponge “that soaks up the king’s countenance, / his

rewards, his authorities” (4.2.16-17); unlike his younger counterparts, however, Polonius is more energetic and has had a lifetime to hone his craftiness and develop a brain that “[h]unts... the trail of policy” (2.2.47). If he seems now to create intrigues and imbroglios out of sheer habit rather than any compelling need, as when he sends a spy abroad to circulate rumors about Laertes, he does so because he has entirely bent his nature in the service of his twisting craft.

Being the bearer of welcome news is a tactic that Polonius has perfected to an art and elevated to a calling. Like any good public relations maven, he relishes spinning and is adept at providing his client with what he wants to hear and manages to be in the right time to deliver good news to Claudius:

KING. Thou still hast been the father of good news

POLONIUS. Have I, my lord? I assure my good liege

I hold my duty, as I hold my soul,

Both to my God and to my gracious king (2.2.43-45)

We can be sure that Polonius will spare no effort to avoid telling unpleasant truths to anyone he serves, unless they be such that may be arranged to place him in a flattering light. Be it the disposition of the sky or of the state, this counselor can always be counted upon to agree that things are “like a weasel” or “like a whale” or “like a camel indeed” (3.2.395-99).

Unfortunately for his own safety, Hamlet does not seek counsel nor take advice, preferring instead to hash things out in his mind and his soliloquies. This avoidance of counsel arises from an unusual situation in which he finds himself, from the dark and dooming nature of the ghost’s command. Yet it grows also from Hamlet’s own character,

from his guardedness and the philosophical frame of his mind. It is a mind which appears to equate taking counsel with leaving oneself open to manipulation. He plainly fears being hoodwinked by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he sees less as his friends than as Claudius' eager minions. Hamlet's concern about not being played for a fool, or misled in more dire ways, by these dubious counselors is elegantly expressed in the metaphor of the player and recorder, when he asks, "[D]o you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? / Call me what instrument you will, though you can / fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.387-89).

The metaphor of the player and recorder appears earlier when Hamlet praises Horatio as one "Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled / That thy are not a pipe for fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please" (3.2.74-76). Yet, even though he admires Horatio for his rationality and four-square decency, discovering in him all the qualities of a good counselor, Hamlet neither seeks his advice nor uses him as sounding board. When Horatio wisely tries to prevent him from following the ghost saying, "Be ruled. You shall not go," the advice goes unheeded (1.4.81). Hamlet can be ruled by no other character in the play, and in this he obeys the laws at work in all great tragedies.

Bacon's advises that we turn to literature when the times make it too dangerous to consult counselors, noting that "books will speak plain when counselors blanch" (34). Indeed, if the book Hamlet reads in Act II is Bacon's Essays, he knows how to escape Elsinore unharmed, and heeds the counsel of "Of Counsel."

Cunning

Bacon tells us that it is “a good deed” (37) to make a list of the ways of the cunning, so as to better spot their tricks and avoid their abuse. Yet even Hercules might not take on such a labor, for, as Bacon himself observes, the ways of the cunning are infinite. Such a list would thus require a mountain of paper and a river of ink and all the oxen and asses in the world to carry it – and still there would be more items to add. If boldness disregards reason, cunning makes reason its busy accomplice. Cunning is a depraved cleverness, often comical when it is transparent, often injurious when it is believed.

They “can pack the cards, and yet cannot play well” says Bacon of the cunning, identifying lack of ability as the root of cunning (35). The cunning man is not adept enough to trust to plain-dealing but must get by trickiness what he cannot by wit. Though Bacon calls incompetence the main impetus for cunning, surely it is not the only one. Not all cunning proceeds from mental disadvantage or the condition of being overmatched, for there are some that freely choose the “sinister or crooked wisdom” (35) when they might make their way by a plainer route. Such men are shadowy but not mysterious, as it is a simple matter to comprehend them: others are proper objects for their use and merely that.

We find a prime example of cunning for the sake of cunning in Polonius when he employs Reynaldo to use the “bait of falsehood” to take the “carp of truth” about Laertes’ activities in Paris (2.1.63). Though the courtier probably does believe that he has his son’s welfare utmost in mind when he instructs the spy to “put on him / What forgeries you please” (2.1.19-20), we recognize that such meddling must arise from something less laudable than fatherly concern. His twisted troublemaking is for no purpose, but is a

practice of trickery for self-indulgence, for gratifying a psyche that takes on faith that only “indirections find directions out” (2.1.66).

The cunning of Claudius is more self-aware and attends to more certain ends. His is a deadly and purely Machiavellian cunning. He knows why he does what he does and, though disturbed by a pang or two of conscience, cannot rationalize his motives, admitting -- to himself at least -- that he murdered his brother for the sake of “crown, ... ambition, ... queen” (3.3.55). He uses cunning evil first to commit his crimes, pouring “the leperous distilment” in the “porches” (1.5.63-64) of the sleeping king’s ear, and then to conceal them, as when he plots young Hamlet’s murder such that “even his mother shall uncharge the practice / And call it accident” (4.7.68-69).

It is highly appropriate that the “cursèd hebona” (1.5.62) enters the ear, since Claudius later uses cunning words to fill the ears of the whole kingdom and lull to sleep their reason. Because it is “given out” – pronounced by the court and circulated by word of mouth -- that Old Hamlet has been stung by a serpent, no one in the kingdom suspects foul play, such that “the whole ear of Denmark / Is by forged process of [Old Hamlet’s] death / Rankly abused” (1.5.36-38). As Bacon warns, this is what may happen in the state when the cunning man is taken for the wise.

In addition to corrupting his country, Claudius’s cunning leads others into cunning, sowing mistrust and poisoning relationships between characters. His treachery leads Hamlet to subterfuge and Laertes to sabotage, the one feigning madness, the other anointing his sword with “unction of a mountebank” (4.7.142). Claudius easily enlists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in his machinations, causing Hamlet to become

increasingly suspicious of his friends' motives, to the point where he trusts them no better than he would "adders fanged" (3.4.203).

Hamlet's awareness of Claudius's true nature in the face of his uncle's seeming beneficence leads him to an early and profound understanding of the nature of cunning, and therefore of duplicity. His discovery "that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (1.5.108-09) seems to us a revelation such as green youth have upon first discovering that evil can parade as good, that a foe can come to us disguised as a friend. Most readers will believe that "[t]here needs no ghost...come from / the grave / [t]o tell us" such news (1.5.124-26). Yet history shows us the prudence of listening to ghosts from the grave who remind us, as does Bacon, that there is no greater danger to the body politic than when "cunning men pass for wise" (37).

Death

Bacon seems detached when writing about death, as though the subject did not much suit the temper of his mind. He prefers to quote the last words of historical figures rather than to tell us what he thinks about death. It should not too much surprise the reader that the thinker does not dwell too deeply on mortality, nor perplex us that everything in life held his interest better than the extinguishing of that vital spark. Even in one who thinks about everything, it seems no great fault to shun thoughts of our departure and decay. It is true, as Bacon claims, that "men fear death as children fear to go into the dark" (5). And yet, while the child venturing into darkness will divine there forms or phantasms, dying men and women often suspect that there is nothing to be found at the end of our days -- not even a darkness through which we may stumble. In

writing about death, Bacon seems to imply, if only through his omissions and silences, that dwelling upon this subject is fruitless, as we can know well only life and the things of this world, all else being but species of superstition and vain hope.

Much in contrast to the Essays, we have in Hamlet a work which deals subtly with all aspects of death and mortality -- grief and mourning, murder and suicide, the duties of sons to dead fathers, the afterlife. Indeed, Prince Hamlet is slated by temperament and fated by intolerable circumstance to become one of literature's most death-obsessed characters. Naturally more philosopher than man of action, more inclined to examine life than to take lives, Hamlet is a doomed humanist whose agonizing dilemma is sustained by his inability to take action – or more exactly, by an inability to act precipitously regarding matters of life and death. He cannot “take arms against a sea of troubles” (4.1.59) because doing so requires him to enact a bloody oath made to a ghost, which is an act indefensible by reason. His inability to rebel against reason and slay Claudius on the basis of spectral evidence, leaves Hamlet with two bad options: accept death immediately by making his own “quietus” (3.1.75) with a bare dagger; or postpone death for a time staying trapped in a vexing and insoluble dilemma. The sensible course of returning to university in Wittenberg does not seem to occur to Hamlet, who is in a mourning frame of mind cannot yet find a tenable way past death.

Nature places in us the instinct to shrink from death; consciousness reinforces our will to defy it. If thinking “does make cowards of us” (3.1.85), it is because of what we think about when we think about death. And none are there insensible to its horrors. When Shakespeare has the ghost tell Hamlet that the secrets of the dead “[w]ould harrow up [his] soul, freeze [his] young blood” (1.5.16-17), he gives voice to the audience's own

primordial fears regarding the abominableness of death, thereby enabling us to appreciate more keenly young Hamlet's dilemma. As Bacon notes of the dying, "[g]roans and convulsions, and a discolored face show death terrible" (5). More than the Everlasting's canon gives Hamlet pause when considering "self-slaughter" (1.2.132). The dying process is itself another very good reason for avoiding death as long as possible, as Hamlet aptly expresses in his wish to be able to dissolve and thereby avoid the agonies of dying: "Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" (1.2.129-30). Fear of physical suffering in dying and in the afterlife keep Hamlet permanently on the "to be" side of the "to be or not to be" dichotomy which is the play's consuming question.

Claudius's comments to Hamlet about the inevitability of death and the perversity of obdurate mourning sound sensible enough when first we hear them. None could quarrel with the observation that, "[f]rom the first corse till he that died today, / 'This must be so' " (1.2.105-06), and yet how wicked these words become when we discover that Claudius himself killed old Hamlet as in his garden he slept, just as Cain slew his brother and made Abel the earth's "first corpse." And his line to Hamlet, "Thou know'st 'tis common -- all that lives must die" (1.2.72), takes on a very sinister cast indeed when we are told the murderer's most vile and uncommon *modus operandi*.

During the graveyard scene, Hamlet arrives at a reconceptualization of death wherein he comes to view it as a state inextricably linked to being, connecting each sentient thing to the Universe's cycles of birth and departure. He reaches this mature understanding of death not because he has spoken with a ghost nor taken his uncle's advice regarding mourning, but because he has an opportunity to think about the death of

someone not immediate to his present quandary. Chancing upon the skull of his old court jester Yorick amongst the bones the gravedigger casually disinters, Hamlet is taken back in time, relieved for a few moments of the oppressive burden of his ongoing dilemma. The experience of confronting the skull of a well-liked figure from his childhood enables him to view death from a distance and, for the first time in the drama, to bring some objectivity to bear upon the subject of human mortality. “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him” (5.1.202-03), Hamlet says contemplating what remains of his old court jester, recognizing that death may not be, after all, “a consummation / Devoutly to be wished” (3.1.63-64).

Delays

“There is surely no greater wisdom than well to time the beginnings and onsets of things” (35) Bacon writes, and we wish that he might have been on hand to counsel Hamlet regarding the importance of not missing one’s cues in life. For Bacon, timing is everything; opportunities not seized at the perfect hour are forever after lost. Fortune frowns on those who tarry when danger looms, and alike on those who rush to attack unwarranted when deceived by the merest shadows. “The ripeness, or unripeness, of an occasion...must ever be well weighed” (35) the time known and the action endeavored or forborne.

Hamlet knows that the moment is momentous, that ripeness is everything, but conceives of ripeness in a more passive or contemplative way, in the sense of there being to everything a day or season. When he says, “Rightly to be great / Is not to stir without great argument” (4.5.53-54) he seems to be in agreement with Bacon that it is reckless to

take action without first parsing all the pros and cons. “Time is out of joint” (1.5.189) for Hamlet because he knows quite well that he has lost the capacity to affect the course of future events in such a way that might return to him the father and the kingdom that Claudius has taken. Since for him time itself “is out of joint,” fortuitous moments can be neither recognized nor seized. Hamlet has the wits to sense early on what Marcellus spoke in the opening scene: that there is something in the situation, or “state,” of the country is now “rotten” -- not merely “dire” or “evil” – and putrefied past recovery by any strategy or courage on his part. Strangely enough, the fortuitous moments that he failed to seize occurred before Act I, with his decision to abide at Elsinore in obdurate mourning rather than to return university in Wittenberg. Yet, Hamlet’s notion of weighing matters well is one which appears to preclude the possibility of his taking any decisive action, whether the grisly one of avenging his father’s murder or the far better one of returning forthwith to college thousands of miles away from the Castle Elsinore. Instead, caught in the snare of grief and honor and indecision, Hamlet delays.

Discourse

For Bacon discretion is the better part of speech, or, rather, in his words, “discretion of speech is more than eloquence” (52). To “vary and intermingle” present matters with past; to mix question with opinion and to spice argument with jest; to eschew mockery of others and to speak only rarely of oneself; to “privilege from jest...religion, matters of state, great persons” (52) is to evince excellence in discourse. We see that, for Bacon, the art of conversation is partly the art of pleasing, and, moreover, that to please is more important than “to speak in good words or in good

order” (52). The essay shows The Essays’ author to be a prudent and politic man, perhaps a bit more court counselor than philosopher. As a former advisor to the lately-executed Earl of Essex, Bacon was no doubt sensitive to the hazards of offending monarchs on questions pertaining to duty and dogma.

Bacon’s advice not to jest on taboo matters serves, as much as anything he wrote in the Essays, to distinguish his outlook from that of Shakespeare, or more generally, to demark the wonted realms of Elizabethan nonfiction and drama: the essays to define the qualities of things, the plays “to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to Nature” (3.2.24). It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare would have succeeded as well in showing “[t]he very age and body of the time/ His form and pressure” (3.2.26-27) had he been willing to set royalty and state matters outside the bounds of satire. Though Shakespeare of needs used many-layered disguises in his work to evade the censor’s wrath, to avoid such subjects would be for him to banish more than half his imaginative world.

In a very real sense the characters in a play are their discourse and in ceasing speaking cease to be. When Hamlet appears mad, it is the loss of his “scholar’s” speech and the “honey of his music vows” that Ophelia grieves, likening his wild utterances to “sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh” (3.1.158-66). It is reasonable for her to believe that Hamlet’s “wild and whirling” (1.5.133) words mirror an internal chaos of the mind, just as she previously believed that his learned speech and wooing words accurately reflected his thoughtfulness and feelings. One could argue, in fact, that Hamlet’s greatest flaw throughout the play is neither the flaw of indecision nor of melancholy but that of abusing -- after having elaborately courted it -- the trust of a person incapable of offering him any harm.

In Shakespeare, as in life, to trust others is to take their words, especially pertaining to important matters, at face value. When people are no longer able to more-or-less trust the words others speak, the consequences are sudden madness or creeping cynicism. This is the madness we see in Ophelia, the cynicism we observe in Hamlet. We see his change of attitude toward language when the scholarly Hamlet says that the book he is reading contains only “words, words, words” (2.2.194), as if words had devolved from valuable signifiers of thought and feeling into futile, nonsensical signs. Shakespeare is making adroit use of irony in creating a character who uses words better than anyone else in literature and who yet finds words unable to offer consolation or to diminish the futility of his situation.

Bacon claims that it is bad manners to talk about oneself too much, advising that “speech of a man’s self ought to be seldom and well-chosen” (52). It seems that Hamlet, though, who speaks about of nothing better or more often than self, should speak of little else.

Envy

Of all emotions, love and envy lay the strongest claims upon us; they are the most mesmerizing and most dangerous to our equanimity. The power of these emotions derives in part from their perpetual and encompassing nature, from the way they cause us to dwell upon the objects that inspired them. As Bacon writes, “love and envy do make a man pine, which other affections do not, because they are not so continual” (16). In a word, love and envy are obsessive. While the obsessive nature of love leads to a variety

of consequences, envy typically bodes no one any good. Envy is “the proper attribute of the devil” and constantly battens upon the very thing which should most be abjured (16).

Bacon likens being envious to being “bewitched.” Hamlet’s father also use descriptions related to witchcraft or the devil in speaking of Claudius, a character whose crimes, like Cain’s, were motivated by envy. Old Hamlet calls his brother “the serpent that did sting thy father’s life” (1.5.38) and says that he beguiled Gertrude “[w]ith witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts” (1.5.43). Hamlet’s constant raging about the inordinate lust of his mother suggests the he also believes that she has been bewitched by his “satyr” uncle (1.5.43).

Claudius compares himself to Cain when he says of the murder he commits, “It hath the primal eldest curse upon ’t -- / A brother’s murder!” (3.3.37-38). Though he is aware of the enormity of his crime, he guilt is not so much as to interfere with his enjoyment of those things for which he committed the murder, which he identifies as “[m]y crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen” (3.3.55). The rule of primogeniture in Elizabethan England made older brothers the object of much envy from their younger brothers. When Bacon observes that “kings are not envied but by kings” (14), he is making the point that we envy most those to whom we are most in the habit of comparing ourselves. And to “envied but by kings”, he easily might have added “...and their younger brothers.”

Friendship

Bacon tells us that no good thing can be enjoyed and no bad thing borne without friendship. Almost every person will feel instinctively that this is so. The desire to form

connections of conviviality and intimacy with others is primordial and universal, more powerful than the procreative urge and as old as humankind – or older, since we see in every mammal, and especially in other primates like ourselves, strong bonds of affection and comradary.

Friendship is the central human experience for Bacon; without friends, life is inert and insupportable: “For a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love” (41). For Hamlet, on the other hand, truth-seeking is the most important human activity; the mental strife and dislocation that often accompany fidelity to truth may make life insufferable, but that it so whether or not one has friends: “What a piece of work is a man!...and yet, to me, what is this quintessence / of dust? Man delights not me – no, nor / woman neither....” (2.2.315-21). One could nonetheless argue that even those who, like Hamlet, value truth more than friendship, suffer intellectually as well as emotionally when they neglect the latter, for friends have the capacity to “[make] daylight in the understanding” (42).

Hamlet’s fate might have been less tragic had he availed himself of friends who could serve as “*participes curarum* – partakers of cares” (41). Though one can perhaps understand his reluctance to have a heart-to-heart discussion with Rosencranz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s failure to confide in Horatio in any consistent fashion is puzzling. Bacon says that “the principle fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the heart” (41). Yet, Hamlet chooses to talk to himself, rather than rather to Horatio who he claims to wear “[i]n [his] heart’s core -- aye, in [his] heart of heart” (3.2.77-78).

Bacon tells us that even “great kings and monarchs” set such a high store on friendship that they will oftentimes converse freely with friends even “at the hazard of their own safety and greatness” (41). This observation appears to apply not at all to Hamlet, a prince who goes out of his way to avoid revealing his secrets and whose favored mode of self-expression is the soliloquy. As next in line to the throne of Denmark, he may have always made it his custom to dodge court intrigue and to keep his own counsel, seeking out books and solitude instead of friends.

Yet, from his first speech in the play wherein Hamlet says, “I have that within which passeth show” (1.2.85), we are made aware that his reserve is probably neither habitual nor a consequence of being in mourning for his father. Alone among those assembled at the banquet, he recognizes that appearances jibe poorly with realities, and alone he is troubled by this disparity between what is and what seems to be. It is Hamlet’s “prophetic soul” (1.5.40) that sets him apart. The same consciousness that connects him with the truth about what is going on in the castle disconnects him from those around him, including his mother, his girlfriend, and his childhood friends.

Horatio’s relative lack of status may make it difficult for Hamlet to regard him as enough of a peer to seek his advice on matters of state, but this should not preclude him from using his friend as a sounding board before making his own decisions. It is clear that Horatio, “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.353) is the only witness left standing who will be able to supply any kind of accurate account of the history of Hamlet’s life and death, or as Hamlet says, to “[r]eport me and my cause aright” (5.2.350). That requested historical account would have been more complete and vivid had Hamlet been more forthcoming with his only friend.

Gardens

When Laertes says at Ophelia's grave, "Lay her in the earth,/ And from her fair and unpolluted flesh/ May violets spring" (5.1.262-64) we can imagine them growing there in time, and as Bacon notes, the violet is the flower that "yields the sweetest smell in the air" (71). Mad Ophelia gathers wildflowers, and dead Ophelia is crowned with "fantastic garlands" (4.7.169). Wildflowers are apt imagery to show that, even with her reality shattered and her mind ranging freely in madness, Ophelia manages to keep a part of her self, for her gentleness remains. When she distributes bunches of flowers and herbs to Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius, she does not do so willy-nilly, but makes a fitting choice for each one: to her brother, she gives "rosemary...for remembrance" and "pansies...for thoughts" (4.5.175-79); Gertrude gets fennel and columbine, which denote unfaithfulness; and Claudius receives rue, meant to represent sorrow and repentance, and is given also a daisy, which stands for unrequited love. The daisy is the only flower gift that may be a bit problematic, since his love for Gertrude is reciprocated, though one could say this is a foreshadowing of those last moments in the play when she realizes that the "pearl" in the goblet was poison (5.2.292). After giving the others their flowers, Ophelia keeps some rue for herself; though mad, she is not so crazy as to imagine herself happy.

If there is method in Hamlet's madness, in Ophelia's madness there is a sensible lesson, or a "document in madness" (4.5.178). Ophelia remains incapable of the self-interest and ugliness portrayed by the other characters, and in this she handles, perhaps

better than most would, the cruel tragedy of a father killed by a lover apparently gone mad. Nor does she curse the world for being “an unweeded garden” (1.2.135). “Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself / She turns to favour and to prettiness,” observes Laertes (4.5.188-89). Even in madness, Ophelia is Ophelia.

Great Place

As those who live near the summit of a mountain breathe a thinner atmosphere and find fewer side paths to explore than those living at its base, so are men and women of high position constrained in ways those of common place are not. Bacon goes so far as to say of those of great place that “they have no freedom,” being “thrice servants”: of “fame,” of “business,” and of the “state” (17). Like the climber who loses strength as he attains altitude, the striver after place forfeits liberties as he accrues power, loses control over his own affairs as he gains sway over those of others. Nor when he has gained a high purchase is his foothold secure, for higher up “standing is slippery” and any misstep may auger a fall (17).

So why do some vie for ever higher place, if plainly “by pains men come to greater pains” (17)? Bacon supplies an answer that seems modern in perspective and ageless in truth: they sacrifice their liberties for power who hold themselves in low esteem. They “need to borrow other men’s opinions to think themselves happy,” he observes, because they do not know their own minds (17). And the illusion thrives, because the business of getting and keeping power keeps them so busy, it leaves no hour for introspection. Thus the men known to all may stay “strangers to themselves” (17).

Fortunately, though, Bacon says that not all who seek standing do so to prop up flimsy selves. A few seek great place because they know that “power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring,” as a good thought without a good act is goodness disabled (17). For them the great place they have climbed to becomes a high ground for doing good works, which makes them to goodness what angels are to God.

Bacon tells those trying to achieve great place to imitate the “best examples,” and tells those trying to maintain great place to “set before [them, their] own example,” always examining and often reforming (18). As a novice climber finds his ascent easier when he moves along a guide rope staked down by an experienced mountaineer, his tread reprinting the expert’s steps, so a young striver led by a sage will more readily ascend. “Imitation is a globe of precepts,” Bacon says, which we must study to make our place great in the world; yet, upon reaching the desired position, we need to shift our study to our “own example,” seeing our actions, not through a magnifying or distorting glass, but plainly in a plane mirror (18).

Strivers should endeavor to “ask counsel of both times, of the ancient time, what is best, and of the latter time, what is fittest”; the past will reveal what is best, the present what is best for the time being (18). They must also strive for consistency: “Seek to make thy course regular,” and “express thyself well, when thou digressest from thy rule,” Bacon advises those in great place (18). For the essayist, consistency is an important attribute of action, though not its end; when experience requires that we amend our actions, we should do so and say why. Those in great place should listen to all advice, even though it come from the meddlers like Polonius, yet take of their counsel only “the good part” (18).

Bacon identifies four chief vices of authority: “delays, corruption, roughness, and facility” (18). By “facility” he means being too easily swayed by others; by “roughness” too brutish in holding sway over them; by “corruption” too easily tempted; by “delays” too easily detained. Though Hamlet is born to be king, and not the type of individual Bacon has in mind when he writes of those who by means and toil acquire “great place,” he remains an excellent example of the dangers of delay, unable to choose between either killing Claudius on a ghost’s so-say or to return to Wittenberg. In his position as a displaced heir to the throne whose authority is circumscribed and provisional, Hamlet illustrates the vice of delay, as through his inactivity, evil has leisure to marshal legions of deceits against him. one who has risen to great place, but one in line for the throne. Although we might expect Bacon to deem Corruption the worst of this unsavory quartet (with Roughness second and stepping on Corruption’s heels), he claims that Facility “is worse than Bribery.” The reason for this is that, though “bribes come but now and then,” importunity is forever urging its case (18).

Since, as Bacon says, “All rising to great place, is by a winding stair,” it behooves us to seek friends who will cheer our progress and to side with factions that will clear obstacles from the steps (18). Upon at last reaching a place of authority, however, we should be our own man or woman, neither rewarding our faction nor penalizing the opposition, but instead endeavoring to serve all and make ourselves equal to our position. As Bacon reports and as it was “anciently spoken; A place showeth the Man” (18); less in the climbing up to than in the occupation of a great place are his virtues and vices assayed and shown. Once in great place, Bacon advises us to deal kindly with the “memory of [our] Predecessor,” lest our own successor does disservice to our memory

when we are gone (18). Respect colleagues and consult rather than exclude them from matters of interest and import. Lastly, forget awhile our great place when in private conversation, such that we may be truest in all private matters to ourselves and truest in all public business to our place.

Love

Laertes says that love is the product of hormones and passing fancy when he tells his sister that Hamlet's passion for her is but "a fashion and a toy in blood" (1.3.6). Polonius expresses much the same sentiment when says of the moody prince's feelings for his daughter, "Affection? Pooh!" (1.3.101). Ophelia's brother and father are expressing the standard Renaissance attitude towards romantic love: that it is an immoderation to be avoided, a glamour to make women unchaste and men stupid. Bacon too warns against it, portraying love as a usurping folly that deposes one's sovereign reason: "Sometimes like a Syren; Sometimes like a Fury" (16) but at no time is it ever wise. He claims that only flighty persons are "transported to the mad degree of love" (16), that no one of noble and resolute character would allow himself to be swept off course by a great passion. If in Bacon's reckoning there are any unmad degrees of love to which people may be transported, he does not define or defend them. Falling in love and falling for love are the same in his philosophy.

At first look, the two romantic couples in Hamlet – Hamlet and Ophelia, Claudius and Gertrude – appear to be prime exhibits in support of Bacon's claim that is "impossible to love and be wise" (16). Like Romeo and Juliet and like Othello, Ophelia is a Shakespearean character who appears to illustrate the madness and dangerousness of

falling in love. But that is not her function in the play. It is certain that neither the “mad degree of love” or the “pangs of despised love” (3.1.72) are to blame for her madness, but, rather, the cruel circumstance of a father slain by a former suitor that unhinges her mind. Nor is it crazy or unrequited love that makes of Hamlet a murderer. Rather, it is the machinations of the murderous Claudius, who secretly kills the king and therein destroys the prince’s peace of mind; the meddling of Polonius, who eavesdrops behind the draperies; and Hamlet’s own misjudgment that causes him to slay Ophelia’s father. Ophelia’s problem is not that she is too trusting in love but, instead, that she is too fragile to cope with the consequences of Claudius’s hidden and forceful evil.

The affections of the young couple are, if anything, as ordinary and innocent as the intrigues of Elsinore are the opposite. When Polonius questions her about Hamlet attentions, Ophelia replies “he hath importun’d me with love/ In honourable fashion.../And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,/ With almost the holy vows of heaven“ (1.3.99-113). This suggests that Hamlet has backed up his words of love with talk about marriage – or that Ophelia believes he has so spoken. Though we do not know what Hamlet past vows to Ophelia were, in the poem he writes he claims to love her best and signs himself “thine evermore” (2.2.124). In the third act, he acknowledges, “I did love you once” (3.2.116) and at her burial he cries at the grieving Laertes, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not (with all their quantity of love)/ Make up my sum” (5.1.291-93). All this suggests that Ophelia and Hamlet were a young couple “in love,” not in the heedless way of Romeo and Juliet, who were willing to stage their deaths for the sake of their love, nor even in the manner fashion of smitten Antony, who could put nothing else before love, but in the conventional way.

It has been observed that Claudius and Gertrude are one of the two happily-married couples (the MacBeths are the other) in Shakespeare (Greenblatt 137). Theirs appears to be true love; he says she is “conjunctive of my life and soul” (4.7.14), and she cuts short the widow’s traditional period of mourning to marry him. Claudius and Gertrude might serve as an object lesson to those who believe in the transformative power of love, unless the expected transformation is that one will become a regicide and the other an unwitting harlot. Shakespeare suggests that the love makes one better, and, as Bacon observes, it might make one a lot worse. Both the author of *Hamlet* and the writer of *Essays*, appear to agree that it is better to be a cynic about love than to be love’s slave, saner to shun love than to die for it, and more realistic to see love as intoxication than to view it as a remedy for life’s troubles.

Conclusion

What we mean when we say “the spirit of the age” is often simply those ideas and opinions that are shared by the leading writers of the age. These reflections on the many affinities and few oppositions existing between the *Essays* and *Hamlet* attempt to show how their authors -- writing in the same era, in the same land, and in the same language -- happened very often to be of the same mind. This close reading of Shakespeare and Bacon is thus also a reading of the spirit of their age.

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