

Shakespeare's Hamlet: The Text Whose Fate Cries Out

[Video clip:]

My fate cries out
 And makes each petty artery in this body
 As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.
 Still am I called. Unhand me gentlemen.
 By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me. (1.4.81-5)

Prince Hamlet speaks these words upon seeing for the first time the ghost of his father, the former King of Denmark. The ghost has appeared suddenly by the watch platform atop the castle of Elsinore, where Hamlet has waited anxiously in hopes of such an encounter. The ghost has beckoned him to follow, but his friend Horatio and the watchman Marcellus try to prevent him. They are afraid that the ghost – perhaps an evil spirit in disguise – will harm Hamlet. Hamlet feels, however, that he has no choice but to face the ghost.

Whether or not the ghost will reveal Hamlet's destiny, Hamlet is one who is fated to be haunted. Not every day does a ghost visit us. "My fate cries out" means, in this sense, simply, "I am called." Others are not called. The ghost has already refused to answer to Horatio. Only Hamlet is called. This evening I wish to speak about the fate that still cries out to us from Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* still haunts Western culture and still calls to us. It still makes demands upon us, if we hear the call. General education – or, more precisely, liberal education – is about our

responsibility toward such a call, the fate that cries out to us from, for example, literary classics.

But first we should listen to Hamlet, who is not – at least in this scene – called toward a liberal education. Far from it! He speaks of his personal destiny. He must hear from the ghost and understand what has prompted its appearance. As the ghost calls upon Hamlet to follow, waving him forward, Hamlet feels the call of fate, something within his body, a fierceness or wildness like that of a lion. He is ready to kill his friends if they obstruct him. This moment in Shakespeare’s tragedy describes a compulsion; and in fact, the entire scene, in which Hamlet hears from the ghost of his father the tale of his murder at the hands of his own brother, and in which the ghost demands revenge – the entire scene displays the terrible force that works upon Hamlet’s mind, reducing him to the call of vengeance, binding him to his supposed fate. Thus, immediately after the ghost’s departure (his last words are “Remember me”), Hamlet swears to give his life over entirely to revenge:

Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory,

I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.96-105)

The religious language here is not accidental. The father's demand is a "commandment," and his exhortation, "Remember me," recalls Christ's words at the Last Supper. Hamlet swears to take revenge against his own uncle, the present King Claudius, and thereby fulfill his duty to his father – keeping his father's memory, in effect. The promise implies self-abnegation. He promises to become the pure instrument of his father's will. Such is the traditional role of the faithful son, a relationship that reflects the ideal of service in Western societies until the eighteenth century. The king, the father, commands, like God, and the people, the children, obey. In the kingdom, only the king is sovereign. In the family, only the father commands. Others are judged by their obedience. In this speech, Hamlet conforms to the cultural ideal; but his language reveals further cultural implications. His commitment is like a spiritual conversion. In order to host this one demanding memory, he must set aside other present concerns. And more than that -- he must eradicate his personal past, erasing his previous learning, including his "observations," a term with scientific connotations. These he now must judge to be "base" because they do not contribute to the mission of revenge. As a student at Wittenberg, ground zero of the Protestant Reformation, Hamlet would presumably have been introduced to modern intellectual and scientific trends. But his sudden commitment to revenge turns back the clock,

placing him once again in the realm of the medieval scholastic tradition, in the culture of absolutism.

His initial, dutiful response is the traditional response of the hero of the popular revenge tragedies of Shakespeare's day. What is strange and new about Hamlet is that the overpowering motive of revenge ultimately does not program his behavior and determine the shape to the tragedy, despite his initial enthusiasm. Something new happens, as we begin to see only a short time later, at the end of this scene, when, reflecting on the ghost's terrible revelations, Hamlet complains,

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right! (1.5.197-198)

Here Hamlet emphasizes his personal suffering above his filial duty. Strangely (from a medieval or Renaissance perspective), Hamlet-the-revenger sees himself as the victim rather than the agent of fate. But these lines express contradictory feelings. The expression "I was born to" suggests an ambivalence regarding the call to action.

Although it may be a curse to be the one who is destined to repair what has been broken in the state of Denmark (here we have the image of Hamlet as a doctor setting a dislocated or broken bone), it is nevertheless a high calling. To have been born into this role is to have been singled out as the only one equal to the heroic task of preserving Denmark. And notice the slippage from Hamlet-as-revenger to Hamlet as

national savior. He senses the importance of his calling. In addition, it may be psychologically reassuring to have been assigned a clear mission or purpose in life. That is, it may be a blessing to know one's fate and to accept one's destiny. ("At last I know the purpose of my life, what I was born to do!" I might exclaim. "Now everything makes sense!") As a result of the fateful call, Hamlet's sense of powerlessness and his growing hatred for Claudius are suddenly comprehensible. Now his hatred seems justified. His powerlessness has a cause, which he can address by killing King Claudius. But even in the face of such strong reasons for seizing the opportunity for revenge, the call to vengeance seems to be more a cause of anguish than relief. It causes him to regret his own birth. So very soon after promising to avenge his father's murder, he reveals a reluctance to fulfill his duty.

This is a passage on which the great German enlightenment writer Goethe commented meaningfully. Goethe sees in this moment a first indication that Hamlet's character is unsuited to the heavy demands of heroism. In his novel *Wilhelm Meister* (1796), Goethe has Wilhelm say of Hamlet:

Visualize [Hamlet's] position, and observe him when he learns that his father's spirit is abroad. Stand by him when, in that terrible night, the venerable ghost appears before his eyes. He is overcome by intense horror, speaks to the spirit, sees it beckon him, follows, and hears -- the terrible accusation of his uncle continues to ring in his ears, with its challenge to seek revenge, and that repeated urgent cry: "Remember me!"

And when the ghost has vanished, what do we see standing before us? A young hero thirsting for revenge? A prince by birth, happy to be charged with unseating the usurper of his throne? Not at all! Amazement and sadness descend on this lonely spirit; he becomes bitter at the smiling villains, swears not to forget his departed father, and ends with a heavy sigh: "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!"

Continuing, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* develops an image of Hamlet as a delicate and passive creature:

In these words, so I believe, lies the key to Hamlet's whole behavior, and it is clear to me what Shakespeare has set out to portray: a heavy deed placed on a soul which is not adequate to cope with it. And it is in this sense that I find the whole play constructed. An oak tree planted in a precious pot which should only have held delicate flowers. The roots spread out, the vessel is shattered.

A fine, pure, noble and highly moral person, but devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero, goes to pieces beneath a burden that it can neither support nor cast off. Every obligation is sacred to him, but this one is too heavy. The impossible is demanded of him -- not the impossible in any absolute sense, but what is impossible for him. How he twists and turns, trembles, advances and retreats, always being reminded, always reminding himself, and finally almost losing sight of his goal, yet without ever regaining happiness! (*Wilhelm Meister* [1796] Book 4, Chapter 13: 145-146. Eric Blackall, Trans. [1989])

It is worth listening closely to Goethe on this matter, because his writing is a major conduit through which Hamlet arrives before us today as a post-Romantic character, a modern anti-hero. In respect to literary tradition, Shakespeare is not only the greatest English author but also, by way of translation, the first great German writer. *Hamlet*, above all, seems to have inspired the German Romantic movement,

which in turn, through Coleridge and others, inspired English Romanticism.

Inevitably, *Hamlet* arrives to us by this circuitous passage. Romanticism begins, in a sense, with a fascination with Hamlet the character, who strikes Goethe as delicate and sensitive by nature, not heroic. For the German Romantics, Hamlet is a Romantic trapped in a heroic age. Goethe's own mission as a Romantic writer, from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* through the second part of *Faust*, is to free the delicate Romantic spirit from the brutal constraints of the heroic tradition.

Twentieth-century film productions of *Hamlet* follow in this mold. Toward the end of the same scene in Zeffereilli's film, Mel Gibson portrays this quality of delicacy or emotional weakness by revealing his obsession with his mother's desire for his uncle. In the midst of his vengeful anger, he allows himself to be distracted, lingering over the pain caused by his mother's possible betrayal.

[Video clip #2]

By having Hamlet overlook the scene of the banquet, and by having him uselessly strike the stones with his blade, Zeffereilli enables the film audience to understand what only a reader might see otherwise: that from the start, Hamlet strays from his mission. Nevertheless, Goethe's image of the shattered vessel shows only one side of the problem, because Hamlet and the play that bears his name likewise have an absolutely shattering effect on the heroic tradition, which turns out, in its own way, to

have been a delicate vessel. The form of the heroic tragedy, which contains only rigid and predictable heroes, is too precious and delicate to hold the roots of such a mighty oak. But what surprising power, what destructive force do I have in mind?

As we know, Hamlet proves not to be up to the task fate has assigned him. The mystery of Shakespeare's play is why, given such strong motives for revenge, Hamlet is unable to act. This problem mystifies Hamlet himself, who on several occasions chides himself for his inaction. In Act IV, when he observes the army of Fortinbras, the young, active Norwegian prince, marching to battle against Poland over a worthless scrap of land, he envies the apparent decisiveness of the soldiers.

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds.... (4.4.54-63)

For Hamlet, the point is that honor demands great action, even when the stakes are low -- and in his own case the stakes are obviously quite high. This is the voice in Hamlet's head that continues to argue for traditional heroic values, but it is not the voice that ultimately guides his thoughts and feelings. Hamlet is caught between two

worldviews, one of which is not even fully formed but is taking its shape through his experience. Hamlet is caught up in the kind of moment that philosopher Jacques Derrida has called an "event." The event, in this special sense, is a happening that cannot yet be defined. Its meaning is not yet secure because its consequences cannot be known. (The Iraq War, for example, was and is such an event. The Declaration of Independence of the United States is another.) Earlier in this very speech, we can hear the other voice, the nascent voice of modernity, when Hamlet asks:

What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unused. Now whether it be
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on the event --
 A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
 And ever three parts coward -- I do not know
 Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do,"
 Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
 To do't. (4.4.34-47)

What is modern about this speech is not the argument, which is fundamentally traditional; instead, it is the mode of argument, its questioning spirit. That spirit runs counter to the ideology of the explicit argument. The strength of Hamlet's thinking is his ability to say, as here, "I do not know," even when he is almost overwhelmed by a

desperate need to know. More than any other admirable character in the literature of the Renaissance, Hamlet is able to live with uncertainty. By this, I don't mean that he enjoys uncertainty or feels no anxiety, but simply that he cannot bring himself, finally, for the sake of peace and comfort, to seize upon a false certainty and to take the easy path to action. We could name numerous villainous characters who live comfortably with uncertainty, enjoying the vicissitudes of chance. Machiavellian villains like Iago in the tragedy of *Othello* thrive on uncertainty, because it gives them opportunities to improvise evil. Iago famously says of himself, "I am not what I am." He manipulates conventional people who rely on the predictable social behavior of others. What is virtually unique about Hamlet is his status as a "good Machiavellian," someone who acknowledges the merely conventional nature of cultural beliefs, and at some level rejects convention, but does not abuse this knowledge. Instead, he struggles toward responsibility, which can only be maintained in a condition of uncertainty.

But wouldn't the responsible thing be to exact revenge, to keep the promise to his father's spirit? That would be to fulfill his sacred duty. But I would distinguish responsibility from duty, which in a certain way is its opposite. Dutiful behavior is programmed behavior. Duty is obedience. Once you accept your duty, there is little further room for thinking. Responsibility, on the other hand, has no fixed rule. Duty responds to the commands of the sovereign, whereas responsibility is a condition of

the sovereign self. Therefore, duty requires no real decision. Although dutiful behavior may seem to require decisive action, it does not require a decision. Decisions are made only in the midst of indecision. Only the undecidable can be decided.

Responsibility, like justice, is a matter of decision, which can only arise out of indecision. The person we conventionally call “decisive” is often merely choosing according to a rule, and thus obeying rather than deciding. The very drive to be decisive can be destructive of moral character. Occasionally Hamlet is tempted, as at the desperate conclusion of the speech in question:

O, from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth! (4.4.66-67)

Thoughts that are bloody are not really thoughts; they are already deeds and are emptied of their thoughtfulness. The temptation here is to make one decision from which all actions will henceforth flow without the need for further thought. It is to abdicate responsibility by deciding never again to decide. We see an extreme example of this in Macbeth, the hero of another Shakespearean tragedy. Macbeth is eager at one point to reduce the messy uncertainty of thinking to the fateful simplicity of action. Macbeth, King of Scotland, had already considered killing his follower Macduff out of suspicion that Macduff would betray him, when he hears news that

Macduff has fled to England to join the rebellion. Macbeth reacts by establishing a policy that erases the distance between his desires and his actions, in effect sacrificing deliberation for the sake of expediency. "Time," he complains, "thou anticipatest my dread exploits":

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
 Unless the deed go with it; from this moment
 The very firstlings of my heart shall be
 The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
 To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
 The castle of Macduff I will surprise;
 Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword
 His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
 That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
 This deed I'll do before this purpose cool. (4.1)

In this speech, Macbeth reduces himself to a truly bestial state. He is a killing machine. From this time forward, he is controlled by his worst fears, because he has left himself without the means to test his beliefs in light of evidence or to weigh his options in the light of possible consequences. Such a temptation follows from anxiety. What looks like boldness and decisiveness is actually a kind of cowardice in the face of an uncertain future.

Hamlet accuses himself of cowardice because he doesn't fully understand his dilemma. He believes, in one part of his being, that his promise to his father is irrevocable; and yet he senses in another part of his being that such a promise cannot

legitimately be exacted, presuming as it does the utter subjection of his individual will. The ghost exacts from him a promise that he cannot refuse and that, at the same time, cancels Hamlet's will. In the promise he would will to negate his will; it is a decision to put an end to all decision-making. The rest, the bloody work of revenge, would follow like clockwork. To follow the principled path of the soldier or of the revenger is not to be decisive or responsible, but merely to be an instrument of an external will. This is precisely what Hamlet is unable to do. He will not behave or think in the programmed, suicidal manner required of the revenger. In a modern Western context, such a demand is unacceptable, if not impossible.

The fantasy of control depends on a concept of the self as perfectly unified. But only someone whose self is divided, whose thoughts are three parts coward, has the chance of discovering wisdom. Hamlet cannot or will not rest in the false certainty of programmed action. Macbeth's circumstances are extraordinary, but his experience speaks to the ordinary circumstance of the man who is bound by duties he has never actively chosen. Macbeth finds comfort in his dishonest decision to cast off his responsibility. Hamlet's story moves in the opposite direction. The duty of revenge is forced upon Hamlet by the ghost, and Hamlet spends the balance of his life struggling against a decision that was never genuinely his own.

Hamlet's modernity is not only an effect of his independent thinking; his modern spirit is also discernible in the way he invites the unconscious into his conscious deliberations, opening for himself – and for us – new possibilities of thinking. In this way, he demonstrates his responsibility toward the future. It is one of the reasons Hamlet accuses himself of “thinking too precisely on the event.” Hamlet's thinking, which, when “quartered,” has only “one part wisdom” and “three parts coward,” characterizes our modernity. The one part of wisdom requires the other three parts; good decisions often depend on extended periods of indecision that elevate our anxiety level and can make us feel foolish. In Hamlet's speech, this analysis is implicit in language whose import is not entirely conscious but is on the way to consciousness.

At other times, Hamlet speaks in ambiguous, punning language that exceeds our mastery as interpreters. In the first confrontation we witness between Hamlet and his uncle, the newly crowned Claudius, prior to the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet speaks in a veiled, defensive manner. Claudius, who has just married Hamlet's widowed mother Gertrude, attempts to establish authority over Hamlet by speaking not only as his King, but also as his father. Claudius is concerned about Hamlet's apparent grieving, which he is afraid may conceal resentment. Claudius speaks:

KING

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son --

HAMLET

A little more than kin and less than kind.

KING

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET

Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun. (1.2.64-67)

Hamlet's first reply mocks the double status of cousin/son. Claudius is his father now, as well as his uncle, and so he is "more than kin" or too much kin. Claudius is also "less than kind." But "kind" is a synonym for "kin" -- the connection we find in the word *kindred*. Therefore, Claudius, says Hamlet, is a little more than kin and less than kin. Simply by being more, he is less. And to be less kin is also to be less kind. Claudius is unkind to Hamlet in having assumed a double kindred and in having displaced his father. We have not exhausted the meaning of this line. Here Hamlet's meaning cannot be controlled, contained, or known with certainty. Often Hamlet's speech does violence to conventional discourse, and perhaps to the dramatic form itself, for which it is too compacted. When he exclaims, in contradiction to Claudius, "I am too much in the sun," he means that he is being observed too closely -- by the king in particular, whose traditional analogue is the sun, and who is just now questioning him, attempting to bring to light Hamlet's inner condition. Hamlet is in

the spotlight, people are observing him, looking for signs of his acceptance or refusal of Claudius' sovereignty. But Hamlet also says, at the same time, "too much in the son." He is the son of too many fathers. And, in a gesture that foreshadows his encounter with the ghost, Hamlet suggests that his duties are divided and are therefore too heavy. "I am too much in the son" can mean, "I cannot bear the condition of being the faithful son; this is too much for me."

Hamlet's punning language in this scene is the first indication of his strategy of eluding close inspection by feigning madness. In this next clip from the Zeffereilli film, we see the motif of spying in both directions. Hamlet's old schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, have been conscripted by King Claudius to discover Hamlet's intentions. They question Hamlet and report back to the King. Hamlet, meanwhile, spies on them. He also, as you'll see, eludes their questioning by speaking nonsense:

[video clip #3]

Project on screen (don't read):

Hum, I have heard
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play
 Have by the very cunning of the scene
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaimed their malefactions;
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;

I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be a devil, and the devil hath power
 T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (2.2.589-606)

At the end of this clip, we see Hamlet realize that he can make use of the troupe of actors that has just arrived at the castle to test Claudius' guilt. In response to the simple call for revenge, he now states, "I'll have grounds more relative than this." In other words, he seeks "a justice that would not go through vengeance" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*). His plan is to stage a theatrical performance in which the crime, as told to him by the ghost, will be reenacted before the King. And Hamlet, in the mode of a judge, will observe the King's reaction, looking for signs of recognition.

This move, too, is in keeping with Hamlet's general tendency toward a modern outlook. Not only does he favor the uncertainty of something like a judicial process above the certainty of revenge, but he also recognizes the importance of the interior life of the accused party. The point goes beyond the fact that Claudius committed the crime; his guilt must be acknowledged. Even if his guilt can be known with certainty, it isn't enough simply to punish him. This problem is at the heart of the concept of the sovereign self. The modern, sovereign self is not in the position of the ruler, who is

singular in his sovereignty. The modern person is called to be responsible toward others, to acknowledge the reserve of singularity in other people – their secret self, if you will. In the context of the modern judicial system, guilt must be shown by evidence – of intention, of motive, and so forth. Whether or not evidence takes the form of a confession, it delves into the interior of the subject; it points to subjective facts.

Hamlet first of all insists on guarding this reserve in himself. In Act III, scene 2, Hamlet confronts his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he realizes are merely pretending to show concern for his well-being but are actually working for the King, questioning him in order to report what he says. Hamlet takes a wind instrument, a pipe, from one of the actors, to demonstrate to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern why he will not answer them. He hands the pipe to Guildenstern and asks him to play it, and Guildenstern says that he can't play:

GUILDENSTERN

I know no touch of it, my lord.

HAMLET

'Tis as easy as lying; govern these ventages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

GUILDENSTERN

But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.

HAMLET

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do 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. (3.2.355-371)

In his refusal to be the instrument of another person's will, Hamlet separates himself from a conventional way of thinking about the self. In the conventional views of pre-modern Europe, the self is defined by its function in society, in relation to people of higher and lower rank. In these terms, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to serve as the King's informants against Hamlet, they are merely behaving logically. The King is their absolute superior; by definition, he knows better than they. To obey him, even at the expense of Hamlet's privacy, is to do good. In fact, privacy is not a valid category of cultural value in the light of the king's godlike right to know. Hamlet, on the other hand, insists upon a private life, a life of thought. Again, the test case is his relationship to the former king, his father. In the case we are now discussing, Hamlet's policy of secretiveness is necessary for practical reasons. But it is what he keeps from the ghost, what he preserves of himself for himself in the face of an overwhelming sovereign demand – which is to say, almost everything – that shows us the extent of his commitment to a new definition of the self.

By way of contrast, consider a famous speech by Polonius, King Claudius's counselor, to his son Laertes, who is preparing to return to France. Polonius exhorts him:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (1.3.78-80)

On the surface, what is problematic about Polonius's moral instruction is not the central principle of self-interested behavior, but its moral justification. Being true to oneself does not guarantee honest dealings with the world. Honest devotion to one's own interests, in fact, may entail deceptive and dishonest behavior. This is the case for Polonius himself in his treatment of his son Laertes. Not long after instructing his son in the value of honesty and consistency, Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo after him as a spy. He orders Reynaldo to test Laertes' reputation by impugning his character among his acquaintances. If men confirm Reynaldo's false insinuations, he is to report the information to Polonius. As Polonius explains:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out. (2.1.64-67)

Who would be able to tell whether the information induced by such falsehoods is true?

A lie can provoke a true admission, but it can also induce another falsehood. And in

the meanwhile, Polonius risks damage to his son's reputation. Many critics have viewed Polonius as a foolish man. But the method of indirection Polonius summarizes in this last line governs the behavior of several major characters in the play. It is a behavior characteristic of what we call Machiavellian, after the influential and notorious sixteenth-century Italian political theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). Neither Polonius, nor Claudius, nor Hamlet ever seems to act openly in a manner that reveals his intentions. As if by policy, each employs other people as tools. Such indirect or mediated action confers the advantage of deniability. In the case of Polonius and Claudius, it is a strategy of power. In Hamlet's case, it is a strategy of self-defense in reaction to the manipulative power of the King. Hamlet, in his modernity, is born out of a crisis that is cultural as well as personal. Part of the problem for the traditional culture of Hamlet's Denmark (and for Shakespeare's England) is that even its moral representatives and precepts prove, on close examination, to be false. King Claudius' interest in Hamlet, for instance, is undermined not by his apparently selfish desire to protect himself (when the king is the state, to protect himself is to protect the state), but by his prior usurpation of the throne, which turns an otherwise sovereign motive into a selfish one. But if we cannot know whether the foundation of a king's authority is divine and not corrupt, we are left always vulnerable to abuse insofar as we obey our king. One of Shakespeare's

great dramatic insights is his perception that the cynical model of kingship developed by Machiavelli applies equally well to royal subjects, and for the same reasons. For Machiavelli, the king is justified in breaking his faith, killing unjustly, and so forth, because as a rule men are “scoundrels.” As he puts it, “human conditions will not permit” the king to be always good, trustworthy, merciful, and religious, even if he ought still to choose to behave honorably whenever possible.

Regardless of his motives, Polonius’ methods are inadequate and corrupt. More critical, though, is the inadequacy of his theory of self. His advice to his son, “to thine own self be true,” is based on the myth of self-sameness, of the internal consistency of the self. This is the theory of the objective self, one that is properly programmed by duty to one’s superiors and to one’s traditions. Self as destiny. But Polonius’ methods show that he does not trust the traditional theory of self. Polonius’ Machiavellianism is just as thorough-going as Hamlet’s, but Polonius believes in his ability to control the outcome, to intend his consequences. In other words, he is still enthralled by the concept of a personal destiny. In contrast, Hamlet, in his indecision and uncertainty, experiences his self as being in flux. His future is always yet to be determined. In the world in which we now live, responsibility characterizes our relationship to an uncertain future. If it is true that Hamlet fails in his struggle to understand his destiny,

it is also true that his failure opens the way for another kind of relationship to the future.

Because I am speaking this evening in the context of a General Education Salon Series called “Classics for Today,” I have the task of answering a central question, but one that implies a whole series of difficult and unavoidable questions. The central question is: How does Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, an obvious classic of Western literature, speak to us today? This is a question with broad implications. In order to answer such a question, we would need to know in what sense Shakespeare’s great tragedy belongs to today rather than to the past. And, does it belong also to the future? This last question is crucial, I believe. It may not be possible for *Hamlet* to have relevance for us today if it does not itself have a future and if it does not beckon to us from the future, because the true “classic for today” must surely make demands on its readers that cannot be exhausted today or anytime soon. Such is all the more the case in the context of a program of general education designed with the future in mind.

Here at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, an explicit objective of general education is “to equip students with the capacity for life-long learning.” That, I would argue, is a hard task; but there are ways in which the reading of classics can contribute to the development of a capacity for life-long learning. A classic for today must engage students in challenges that extend into the future; it must ask questions that

cannot be answered today – questions that perhaps cannot yet fully be heard but that await or anticipate the thinking of future readers. In this sense, a classic for today does not belong primarily *to* today. It belongs to the future. It is a living text.

But to say that a text is living is to admit that we cannot fully read it. We have not yet read *Hamlet*. This text remains untranslatable. It is foreign to us, not because it belongs to the distant past (the past is not so hard to read!), but because it speaks to us from the future. It calls to us. Our work of translation – whether from one language and culture to another, or interpretively in a single language (but what is a “single” language?) – our work of translation, the reading and questioning of such unreadable texts, is our responsibility to the future.