Hamlet's Circuitous Action

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'[A]n act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform.'
— *The Gravedigger, Hamlet V. 1. 11–12*

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle famously describes Tragedy as 'an imitation of an action.' The action takes the form of a Plot, or 'structure of the incidents,' which is the 'most important of all' the six elements of Tragedy, with Character second and Thought third (Butcher 25–29). It is striking, then, that action is the one feat of which the central figure of Hamlet is largely incapable. When speaking with the Ghost, Hamlet pledges to act 'as swift | As meditation or the thoughts of love' (Shakespeare I. 5. 29–30). Ironically, his behavior throughout much of the remainder of the play demonstrates that while he thinks much, he acts little. Aristotle describes Thought at one of 'the two natural causes from which actions spring,' but Hamlet seems less inclined to act the longer he thinks through a problem (Butcher 25). Despite his advice to the players, to 'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action,' Hamlet spends an extraordinary amount of time talking, and very little acting (Shakespeare III .2. 17–18). In place of action, Hamlet's behavior is characterized by substitutes: inaction, reaction and theatrical acting.

I. Inaction

Hamlet's inaction is perhaps stated most clearly in his 'To be, or not to be' speech. Of his four main soliloquies, only one, 'Now I am alone,' concludes with a resolution to do something, namely to use *The Mousetrap* to 'catch the conscience of the king' (II. 2. 540). His first soliloquy, 'O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,' ends with a resolution to inaction, to 'hold [his] tongue' (I. 2. 159). His last, 'How all occasions do inform against me,' concludes with a self-exhortation that henceforth his 'thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth,' but it remains only in Thought that he resolves to violence, not action (IV. 4. 65). 'To be, or not to be' (III. 1. 55–89) is the apotheosis of inactivity, however, ending on the thought of one's enterprises 'los[ing] the name of action.'

In this speech, Hamlet identifies the central problem that paralyzes him: Thought, for him, is not a natural cause from which actions spring, but the main obstacle that prevents him from acting. As Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster phrase it, 'Thought and action seem to pull against each other, the former annulling the possibility of the latter' (Critchley and Webster 6). The thought of the afterlife is a 'rub,' glossed in the Arden edition as an 'impediment, disincentive (from the game of bowls where a *rub* is an obstacle of some kind which diverts the bowl from its proper course [...])' (Shakespeare 285). This sense of a diverted course is picked up later in the speech in the metaphor of enterprises 'turn[ing] awry' their 'currents.' The rub, the obstacle, 'must

give us pause' and 'puzzles the will,' making one hesitate. The obstacle is variously identified as a 'dread,' a 'regard,' 'conscience' and 'thought,' all words referring to the cognitive functions: Thought is the impediment that causes Hamlet's enterprises to 'lose the name of action.'

This speech, with its implicit resolution to be, not to actively take one's own life, finds its antithesis in the speculated suicide of Ophelia. Gertrude describes the event as though it were accidental, but at Ophelia's burial the Priest asserts that 'Her death was doubtful,' a possible suicide, and the Gravedigger too suspects that 'she drowned herself wittingly' (V. 1. 216, 12–13). He argues this on the basis that her death 'argues an act, and an act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform' (V. 1. 10–12). This statement is nonsensical, but its emphasis is firmly upon the act itself. Shakespeare gives us no evidence that Ophelia's death was premeditated, only a suggestion that she actively did the deed. The Arden edition cites the general critical consensus that the Gravedigger's words allude to the 1554 suicide of James Hales: 'the subsequent legal arguments over his property involve a claim that "the act of self-destruction" was divided into three parts, the imagination, the resolution and the perfection' (Shakespeare 410). However, two of these three terms refer to the premeditation of the act, whereas all three of the Gravedigger's concern the act itself. Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia was not paralyzed by Thought, but proceeded to act, to do and to perform.

The 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy conforms closely to Aristotle's definition of Thought as 'the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in the given circumstances' (Butcher 29). This is precisely what Hamlet does, deciding that humanity's circumstances prevent us from acting on the suicidal impulse that he claims to be universal. Unlike his other soliloquies, which refer to his specific story, 'To be, or not to be' concerns a general problem of the human condition. This is a question of Thought, as opposed to Character, according to the Aristotelian distinction:

> Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be, or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated. (Butcher 29)

Even if we discount the fact that S.H. Butcher's amusingly appropriate translation includes the first six words of Hamlet's speech, the distinction applies to Hamlet's words. 'To be, or not to be' is arguably the most general maxim that could possibly be enunciated, and while the speech does reveal that Hamlet chooses 'To be' and avoids the threat of 'something after death,' this is cast in the most general terms possible. The first-person singular that features so prominently in Hamlet's other soliloquies, including the first lines of 'Now I am alone' and 'How all occasions do inform against me,' is absent from 'To be, or not to be,' replaced by the universal plural 'us' and the generalized third person 'he.' The apparent universal appeal that has given the speech its fame and popularity may stem precisely from the universality of the Thought expressed. It is not a speech that reveals Character, but one that speaks to the human condition in its broadest terms.

With such universality in mind, Kenneth Branagh's decision, in his 1997 *Hamlet* film, to inflect the speech as a conversation between Hamlet and his own reflection takes on a new resonance (Branagh). It is tempting to think of this inflection as a manifestation of Hamlet's narcissism. Staring into the mirror, focused only on himself and his existential questions, Hamlet does not fully perceive the threat posed by Claudius, who happens to be standing inches away on the other side of the glass. Gazing at his own reflection, Hamlet is paralyzed in a state of inactivity, like Narcissus himself, unable to look away from his mirror image. Like Ovid's Narcissus, Hamlet is so engrossed in concern for himself that he overlooks the love offered by a woman (Ophelia/Echo),

leading to her destruction. Hamlet's inability to look away from himself and take action leads, as in Narcissus' case, to his death, having failed to kill Claudius before Claudius can kill him.

Alternatively, Branagh's mirror could be seen as a symbol of the universality we have discussed. For the first twenty lines of the speech, the camera looks over Hamlet's shoulder at his reflection, inviting us to look with him and see our own reflections in the mirror as he diagnoses the state of humanity. Hamlet will, after all, declare in the next scene that the 'purpose of playing' is 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature' (III. 2. 20–22). Branagh's mirror may be trained as much on us as it is on the central figure of the play, whose purpose in this soliloquy is not Character, but Thought, expressing a 'general maxim' that explains not only his inactive decision 'To be,' but ours as well.

Hamlet's inaction reaches a climax (or perhaps an anticlimax) in Act III Scene 3, hereafter referred to as the "chapel scene", when Hamlet stumbles on Claudius attempting to pray (III. 3. 36–98). Both personae are unable to act. 'Pray can I not,' Claudius tells us. Instead he 'stand[s] in pause,' unable to repent sincerely for his fratricide. Hamlet meanwhile has the perfect opportunity to avenge his father's murder but hesitates. As Critchley and Webster observe:

> [I]t is clear that now Hamlet could do it. With one swoop of his sword, thought and action would be reconciled and Hamlet's father revenged. But at that precise moment, Hamlet begins to think and decides that this is the wrong moment to kill Claudius because he is at prayer and trying to make his amends with heaven.
>
> (Critchley and Webster 9)

Hamlet claims that he hesitates because Claudius is praying and is therefore 'fit and seasoned for his passage,' meaning that he will not suffer the same torment as Old Hamlet, killed 'With all his crimes broad blown.' There are many ironies in this. We the audience know that Claudius is in fact unable to pray, meaning that he would, if killed now, suffer as Hamlet wishes him to. Furthermore, Hamlet resolves to catch Claudius in a more sinful state, in the middle of some less holy 'act.' It is because Claudius is not performing such an 'act' that Hamlet does not act at this moment. A stalemate of inaction is produced.

As in his 'To be, or not to be' speech, Hamlet fails to act here because of Thought. He stays his hand from killing Claudius because the act 'would be scanned' (must be considered further). Once again, rather than leading to action, Thought is an impediment to action. However, Hamlet's reasoning here directly contrasts with the sentiments expressed in the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy. His stated justification for not killing Claudius is theological. He understands what has happened to his father, killed before he could make his final confession:

> 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. (The Ghost, I. 5. 10–13)

Hamlet claims that he hesitates because he wants to make sure that Claudius suffers the same fate. However, in the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy, he expresses deep uncertainty about the afterlife. He describes it as the 'undiscovered country,' referring to the vague 'something after death' and 'ills [...] we know not of' (III. 1. 77–81). Earlier in the play, he argues for a quasi-agnostic approach to belief, claiming that 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I. 5. 165–66). By the time he comes across Claudius apparently praying, Hamlet is allegedly willing to 'take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound,' but earlier on he was

not so sure, concerned that 'The spirit [he had] seen | May be a de'il' (III. 2. 278–79, II. 2. 533–34). It seems to be his uncertainty, rather than his certainty, that makes Hamlet pause.

This uncertainty bears a wider significance for a contemporary audience. Stephen Greenblatt discusses the suggestions in the play that the Ghost 'is in or has come from Purgatory' and the related problem of 'distinguish[ing] the [...] visitations of tormented souls pleading for help from the [...] visitations of demons,' to which Hamlet seems to allude in his suspicion that the Ghost may be a devil (Greenblatt 211, 189). However, Greenblatt notes the 'famous problem' with these suggestions:

[B]y 1563, almost forty years before Shakespeare's Hamlet was written, the Church of England had explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic conception of Purgatory [...] This fact alone would not necessarily have invalidated allusions to Purgatory: there were many people who clung to the old beliefs, despite the official position. (Greenblatt 211)

Hamlet's uncertainty is the uncertainty of the time. His justification for waiting to kill Claudius is dependent on the idea that his father is in purgatory, and Claudius must suffer the same fate. With the doctrine of purgatory in dispute, this justification becomes doubtful. It is not because he is certain that Claudius will go to Heaven that Hamlet hesitates, but because he is not certain that Claudius will suffer the ill fate that Hamlet wishes for him. Hamlet is unsure whether this is the right moment, and so does not take the opportunity. Thought stands in his way.

Hamlet's hesitation in the chapel is peculiarly foreshadowed in the First Player's speech about Pyrrhus (II. 2. 406–56). Like that between Claudius and Hamlet, the encounter between Priam and Pyrrhus is characterized by inaction. Priam's sword is 'Rebellious to his arm' and 'Repugnant to command,' just as Claudius' stubborn knees will not bow. Pyrrhus' sword 'seem[s] i'th' air to stick' as he moves to strike, and he stands 'Like a neutral to his will and matter, | Did nothing.' Like Hamlet in the chapel, he wishes to strike, but something prevents him. In Gregory Doran's 2009 film, the First Player and Hamlet make identical gestures at these respective moments of hesitation, highlighting the parallel between the two scenes (Doran).

The difference is that 'after Pyrrhus' pause | A roused vengeance sets him new a-work,' while Hamlet by contrast sheathes his sword and waits for another opportunity. Hamlet draws a similar contrast between himself and the First Player, criticizing himself for failing to act against Claudius, 'unpregnant of [his] cause,' in contrast to the Player, who has far less motivation to be emotional, yet brings himself to tears over the fictional fate of Hecuba. This raises the tension between action and theatrical acting, to which we shall return, but for now it is only important to note the contrast between Pyrrhus and the player on the one hand (the active figures), and Hamlet on the other 'Like John-a-dreams,' which the Arden edition glosses as 'a stereotype of a dreamy, inactive man' (Shakespeare 276).

The moment of inaction that costs Hamlet his life occurs in the final scene of the play, when Horatio offers to 'forestall' the duel with Laertes, but Hamlet determines simply to 'Let be' (V. 2. 196, 201–2). He appeals to 'providence' to justify this decision: 'If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come' (V. 2. 198–200). Once again, Hamlet hesitates not out of certainty, but out of uncertainty, though here the uncertainty is explicit in his words. There is no appeal to the Catholic doctrine of purgatory here, as in the chapel scene. Hamlet defers instead to 'providence,' resigning himself to his fate and accepting his ignorance of that fate. Earlier in Act V Scene 2, Hamlet asserted that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,' but the phrasing is distinctly vague as to the identity of that divinity (V. 2. 10). Critchley and Webster propose:

> Critchley and Webster 12 The point might be that if there is any providence at work, then we know nothing of it. Such knowledge is the unique attribute of the divinity of

whom we mere mortals can know nothing.

The resolution that Hamlet reaches in the final scene is similar to that of the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy. The determination is made 'To be' or to 'Let be' because the one certainty is uncertainty: Hamlet cannot know what death or providence might have in store for him. Hamlet's inaction here, refraining from cancelling the duel, allows Claudius and Laertes to carry out their plot, leading directly to Hamlet's death.

II. Substitutes for Action: Reaction and Theatrical Acting

While Hamlet is *in*active for most of the play, he is more than capable of *re*acting extremely fast when the circumstances absolutely demand that he do so. He identifies this trait himself during his tussle with Laertes at the site of Ophelia's grave, remarking that 'though [he, Hamlet, is] not splenative rash, | Yet [he has] in [him] something dangerous' (V. 1. 250–51). Laertes' hostility seems to provoke this 'something' to a certain extent. 'What wilt thou do for her,' Hamlet asks, 'show me what thou'lt do,' for whatever extraordinary demonstration of devotion it may be, he will 'do't' (V. 1. 260, 263, 266). For once, Hamlet's language is exclusively focused not on thought or speech, but on deeds and action.

Hamlet is restrained at Ophelia's graveside, but other instances demonstrate his capacity to react vehemently, and with more than mere talk, to urgent situations. When he encounters the Ghost for the first time, he actively follows it against the protests of Horatio and Marcellus, threatening to 'make a ghost' of them if they restrain him (I. 4. 85). Hamlet goes on to prove his willingness to kill when provoked in each of the murders he commits during the course of the play. Critchley and Webster highlight that 'Hamlet stabs Claudius to death after just one line's reflection' (Critchley and Webster 10). In fact, this is true of both Claudius' and Polonius' killings. Discovering from Polonius' shout that someone is hiding behind the arras in Gertrude's closet, Hamlet cries 'How now! A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead!' and kills him (III. 4. 22). When Laertes reveals Claudius' plot, Hamlet responds 'The point envenomed too? Then venom to thy work!' and strikes the king with the poisoned sword (V. 2. 306). Hamlet processes a sudden development, the arrival of new information, extremely quickly, and reacts by killing without hesitation.

Gertrude calls Hamlet's slaughter of Polonius 'rash,' a word the prince applies in turn to Polonius himself (III. 4. 25, 29). As we have seen, Hamlet denies being 'splenative rash' at Ophelia's gravesite, but he does admit that he acted 'Rashly' in the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, 'And praised be rashness for it' (V. 2. 6–7). As in the slaughters of Polonius and Claudius, each taking a single line of verse to occur, the emphasis is on the speed with which Hamlet orchestrates the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The false commission he writes calls for their 'sudden death' without 'shriving time' (V. 2. 46–47). The Arden edition glosses the latter as 'time for confession and absolution of their sins,' noting that 'Hamlet's father has complained that his sudden murder did not allow him time for confession [...] and Hamlet decided not to kill the King [in the chapel scene] in case he was confessing his sins and therefore in a state of grace' (Shakespeare 436–37). The killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern therefore contrasts directly with Hamlet's hesitation in the chapel scene. Under imminent threat of death, Hamlet reacts with all the swiftness and determination he lacked in the chapel scene and, far from thinking over the state of his victims' souls to the point where he cannot go through with the killing, 'They are not near [his] conscience' (V. 2. 57).

This is the rashness, the 'something dangerous,' that causes Hamlet to react with extraordinary swiftness and vehemence to serious provocation. Of his plot to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he remarks that 'Or I could make a prologue to my brains | They had begun the play' (V. 2. 30–31). The Arden edition argues that 'This picks up the idea of rashness [...] and emphasizes again that his action was impulsive rather than premeditated' (Shakespeare 435). As we have seen, where for Aristotle Thought is one of the 'natural causes from which actions spring,' for Hamlet premeditation is an impediment to action. He is more than capable of acting decisively and brutally, but only when the urgency of the situation prevents him from thinking too long about it. However, in Hamlet's choice of metaphor here, the prologue to a play, we are reminded of Hamlet's other substitute for action, theatrical acting.

Hamlet's first resolve once the Ghost has left him in Act I is concealment and disguise. He swears Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy and in the process announces his plan 'To put an antic disposition on' (I. 5. 170). He describes in detail the gestures and phrases that he forbids them from using to communicate that this disposition is feigned, and in doing so acts out those phrases and gestures:

> That you at such times seeing me never shall
> With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
> Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase
> As 'Well, well, we know,' or 'We could an if we would,'
> Or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be an if they might,'
> Or such ambiguous giving out to note
> That you know aught of me. (I. 5. 171–77)

The 'thus' and 'this' of the second quoted line clearly indicate that the actor should imitate the gestures Hamlet is imagining. The four phrases he cites as examples of 'ambiguous giving[s] out' are crammed extra-metrically into their lines, producing an erratic, fast-paced effect as Hamlet's disposition becomes 'antic' before our eyes. The five instances of the word 'or' complement this effect by highlighting the great length of the list of forbidden behaviors. Hamlet uses an 'antic' theatrical performance to explain his intentions to put on just such a performance to Horatio and Marcellus.

Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is not original to Shakespeare's version of the story, but the new context in which it is placed adds great ambiguity to the motivations behind it. In Saxo Grammaticus' telling:

> The fratricide is not a secret act [...] Young Amleth is too young and weak to attempt the revenge that the social code manifestly demands. His task, then, is to survive until he is capable of killing his uncle, but his uncle knows the social code perfectly well and can be expected to snuff out Amleth's life at the first sign of menace. Amleth's solution is to feign madness [...] Though Feng [the equivalent of Claudius] is suspicious, the wily Amleth manages to elude the many traps set for him and eventually to accomplish his great task. (Greenblatt 189)

In Shakespeare's play, no such motivation for feigning madness is possible. Claudius does not know that Hamlet is aware of the fratricide, meaning that there is no threat to Hamlet's life so long as he feigns ignorance. Far from being a means to avoid the threat posed by the king, Hamlet's 'antic disposition' draws Claudius' attention, leading him to investigate the prince, which puts Hamlet in more danger of having his plots against the king discovered. It is hard to see

any practical purpose for the feigned madness, and Hamlet himself offers no explanation, simply predicting that he 'perchance hereafter shall think [it] meet' (I. 5. 169). He even tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, despite rightly suspecting that they will relay the information to Claudius, that he is 'but mad north-north-west' but not 'When the wind is southerly' (II. 2. 315–16). They and Claudius correctly interpret this to mean that Hamlet is exhibiting a 'crafty madness' (Guildenstern), a madness that he 'puts on' (Claudius) (III. 1. 8, 2). Thus, Hamlet alerts the king that he is up to something, stoking the suspicions that ultimately lead to Claudius' plots against the prince's life.

If this feigned 'antic disposition' is so counterproductive, it must have another explanation beside the pragmatic, namely the psychological. Hamlet, as we have seen, is largely incapable of direct action, inactive most of the time, prone to hesitation and taking action only in response to immediate and emergent threat. Though he esteems Man for being 'express and admirable in action,' he 'ha[s] of late, but wherefore [he] know[s] not [...] forgone all custom of exercises' (II. 2. 271, 261–3). There is some psychological reason for his inaction, but he is no more able to identify it than he is the 'something dangerous' about which he warns Laertes. I would argue that the theatricality of putting on an antic disposition is a substitute for the action he finds himself unable to take. Feigning madness, he can feel that he is doing something, acting in some sense, rather than being totally inactive.

Moreover, as Critchley and Webster observe, theatricality is 'The only way in which it appears that Hamlet can attempt to close the gap between thought and action' (Critchley and Webster 8). In three of Hamlet's four main soliloquies, Thought paralyzes him, but in the 'Now I am alone' speech, he formulates a plot, one that he actually carries out, 'hav[ing] these players | Play something like the murder of [his] father | Before [his] uncle' (II. 2. 529–31). In the same speech, Hamlet observes that the First Player 'But in a fiction [...] Could force his soul so to his own conceit | That from her working all the visage waned [...] and all for nothing,' while the prince himself 'peak[s] | Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of [his] cause, | And can say nothing' (II. 2. 487–92, 502–4). As though taking inspiration from this contrast between the active player and his inactive self, Hamlet resolves to act through the medium of drama. Having identified that some psychological impediment prevents him from acting, he takes action through the use of theatrical actors.

The purpose of the plot is to establish the truth of the Ghost's claims, since it 'May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power | T'assume a pleasing shape' (II. 2. 534–35). This is not unreasonable given the demonology of Shakespeare's day. According to Greenblatt 'Demons were clever, and it had long been understood that they were capable of insinuating themselves into human communities by pretending that they were souls in pain' (Greenblatt 189). The suspicion, then, is that the Ghost might be a demon playing the part of Hamlet's father, using a quasi-theatrical fiction to lead Hamlet astray. Hamlet's answer, appropriately enough, is to use a theatrical fiction of his own to reveal the truth. In Critchley and Webster's terms, Hamlet uses 'the manifest fiction of theater' as, paradoxically, a 'vehicle in which the truth might be presented' (Critchley and Webster 8).

The plot that Hamlet formulates depends on the central mechanisms of theater itself. In keeping with the Aristotelian model, *The Mousetrap* is 'an imitation of an action,' 'something like' (II. 2. 530) the action that Hamlet suspects Claudius of having committed. Moreover, Willmar Sauter defines theater as 'the communicative intersection between the performer's actions and the spectator's reactions' (Sauter 53). Hamlet depends on precisely this intersection to achieve his ends. He will 'observe [Claudius'] looks' when the action on stage 'tent[s] him to the quick' ('probe[s] him to his most sensitive point' according to the Arden gloss) and 'If [Claudius] do blench' ('flinch' or 'blanch' according to Arden), Hamlet will know what 'course' of action to take (II. 2. 531–33). It is at the very intersection of stage action and spectator reaction that Sauter describes that Hamlet will learn the truth. This is precisely what occurs in the event, for 'Upon the talk of poisoning,'

Hamlet and Horatio observe the king's guilty reaction (III. 2. 281). Not only are they convinced, but through our privileged position in the theatrical framework, we the audience are given certain proof of Claudius' crime: the full extent of his reaction to the play is that he soliloquizes in our hearing, confessing his 'offence' to be that of 'A brother's murder' (III. 3. 36, 38).

Despite the vast amount of time that Hamlet spends thinking and speaking, this is the only carefully meditated plan that he puts into action. It is also one that does not involve him actually taking action except in an extraordinarily circuitous manner. Hamlet is inactive most of the time. He is able to react when his Thought does not impede him, but his predominant means of acting throughout most of the play is a theatrical one. He 'puts on' madness and puts on plays, theatrical substitutes or circuitous imitations of straightforward action. In a sense, then, though action is the most crucial component of Aristotle's model of Tragedy, the inactive Hamlet's theatricality is as Aristotelian as it comes, for he is constantly undertaking an 'imitation' of action.

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