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“To be, or not to be”: Shakespeare Against Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This essay hazards a new reading of the most famous passage in Western literature: “To be, or not to be” from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. With this line, Hamlet poses his personal struggle, a question of life and death, as a metaphysical problem, as a question of existence and nothingness. However, “To be, or not to be” is not what it seems to be. It seems to be a representation of tragic angst, yet a consideration of the context of the speech reveals that “To be, or not to be” is actually a satire of philosophy and Shakespeare’s representation of the theatricality of everyday life. In this essay, a close reading of the context and meaning of this passage leads into an attempt to formulate a Shakespearean image of philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; Hamlet; Renaissance; drama; soliloquy; philosophy; ontology; metaphysics; madness; acting

For a dramatic work, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has made a remarkable splash in Western philosophy. As detailed in Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster’s *Stay, Illusion!: The Hamlet Doctrine* (2013) and Andrew Cutrofello’s *All for Nothing: Hamlet’s Negativity* (2014), the play has inspired reflection from major philosophers like Hegel, Nietzsche and Derrida, and the play prompts philosophical introspection and conversation in us every time we read or see it. We are thus highly attuned to *Hamlet*’s place in philosophy, but what is the status of philosophy in *Hamlet*? That is the question of this essay.

The definition of philosophy here will be somewhat wiggly because the definition of philosophy in Shakespeare’s texts is vague and inconsistent. Sometimes it refers to metaphysical philosophy (about being-qua-being), sometimes to natural philosophy (what we now call science), sometimes to ethical philosophy (about virtuous action), and sometimes to any high-minded thought at all.¹ There are two instances of the word “philosophy” in *Hamlet* (1.5.169 and 2.2.368), both toying with the line between natural and metaphysical philosophy, but there are a great many more passages which sound vaguely philosophical, such as those containing the lines: “I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76–86); “To thine own self be true” (1.3.58–81); “The dram of evil” (Appendix B); “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.251–52); “A king of infinite space” (2.2.256–57); “What a piece of work is a man” (2.2.305–10); “Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own” (3.2.202–04); “May one be pardoned and retain th’offence?” (3.3.36–72); “Use almost can change the stamp of nature” (Appendix G); “What is a man” (Appendix J.24–26); “We know what we are, but not what we may be” (4.5.42–43); “Alas, poor Yorick” (5.1.180–90); “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.8–11); “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.165–68); and – of course – “To be, or not to be” (3.1.57–91), which is probably the most famous line in the most famous passage in the most famous play by the most famous artist in Western history.²

I

This passage is so famous that the Shakespearean scholar Douglas Bruster recently wrote an entire book about just this one soliloquy, looking at its imagery, structure and meaning, but also at its “philosophical force” (31), its “philosophical insight” (31) and its “chilling philosophy” (102). Bruster concluded that the soliloquy is not about suicide, as many modern readers, such as John Dover Wilson, believe it to be (“a like expression of utter weariness is not to be found in the rest of human literature” [127]). On the contrary, Bruster argued (channelling Schlegel, Coleridge and Shelley³) the speech “mocks human achievement and ability” insofar as Hamlet is trying to be philosophical but Shakespeare was critiquing him for, in Bruster’s words, “thinking too much” (103). I do not want to wag my finger too harshly at Bruster because his book, published in the *Shakespeare Now* series, was written for a general audience, yet he did that audience a disservice when he presented Hamlet as a failed philosopher being mocked by Shakespeare. He did that audience an even greater disservice when, in an entire book about the “To be, or not to be” speech, he did not take seriously the dramatic context of the speech that, as Bruster knows, radically changes the meaning of its “chilling philosophy”.

Consider when Hamlet cowers at the finality of death, of the afterlife, of “The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.81–82). This line is acutely problematic – as one of Shakespeare’s earliest editors, Lewis Theobald (8.165), first noted in 1733 – because Hamlet has recently seen his father’s ghost return from the grave. Has Hamlet “in a moment of deep despondency” forgotten about his father’s ghost and his final words, “Remember me” (1.5.91), after just two short months (this was Dover Wilson’s reading [74])? That is unlikely because Hamlet’s whole world has revolved around the ghost’s appearance for that entire time. Perhaps Hamlet is now convinced, as both he and Horatio have considered, that the spirit was not his father’s ghost after all but a “goblin” (1.4.21) or a “devil” (2.2.601). This solution is also unlikely, because the scene prior to “To be, or not to be” concludes with Hamlet stating that he does not know what the spirit was and that he is going to stage “The Mousetrap” to determine the truth of the spirit’s charge against his uncle (2.2.590–607). Maybe there is no contradiction here at all because King Hamlet’s spirit is returning from purgatory, which is only halfway to “the undiscovered country”, and travellers *can* come back from there (this was Theobald’s answer; his account of the theology involved was as water-tight as it was newly invented for this specific case). Maybe, technically speaking, King Hamlet didn’t return (only his *spirit* returned), so there is again no contradiction. Or maybe it wasn’t Hamlet but Shakespeare who forgot about King Hamlet’s ghost. Maybe, while in the throes of writing what would become the most famous passage in his most famous play, Shakespeare forgot about or, even more radically, just ignored the plot of *Hamlet* in order to write a poetic speech that could be plucked from the play and stand alone as a poignant philosophical statement on human suffering.

Or maybe Hamlet doesn’t mean what he says. This suggestion has the virtue of retaining the unity and coherence of *Hamlet*, even within the scene in question. For shortly after Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, he turns to Ophelia, who has been standing off to the side, and asks, “Are you honest?” (3.1.105), and then moments later, “Where’s your father?” (3.1.132). In this scene, Ophelia is indeed acting as her father’s agent: Polonius has sent her to see if Hamlet is really mad. As Hamlet’s questions to Ophelia indicate, he knows that she is working for Polonius and that he is being watched. “Are you honest?” No. “Where’s your father?” *Behind the curtain*. But *when* does Hamlet know that he is being watched? In most productions, Hamlet hears Claudius and Polonius shuffle or sneeze behind the curtain while he is speaking with Ophelia, then becomes suspicious, and then starts berating her. However, Shakespeare’s text does not require this reading. In fact, the quarto editions of *Hamlet* all place the stage direction “Enter Hamlet” before Claudius and Polonius hide, and there is no stage direction indicating that those two exit the scene. It was only in the later folio edition that there is an “Exeunt” for Claudius and Polonius followed by “Enter Hamlet”, the arrangement adopted by most modern editions. It is at least possible that Hamlet sees and is aware of Claudius,

Polonius and Ophelia. It is possible that Shakespeare intended for Hamlet to deliver his “To be, or not to be” speech knowing that he was being watched. If so, then “To be, or not to be” may not be the profoundly philosophical moment it has been taken to be by centuries of readers. It may be, instead, what someone says when he wants others to think he is crazy.

II

The idea that Hamlet knows he is being watched has been most forcefully illustrated by the Shakespearean scholar James Hirsh.⁴ He has argued on several occasions that “substantial, conspicuous, and varied pieces of evidence demonstrate that Shakespeare designed the ‘To be, or not to be’ speech to be perceived by experienced playgoers of his time as a feigned soliloquy” (“The ‘To be, or not to be’ Speech”, 34). Hirsh’s evidence – which is convincing – goes beyond a close reading of the scene and its context in *Hamlet* to include additional Shakespearean examples of feigned soliloquies (such as Edmund’s “O, these eclipses do portend these divisions” in *King Lear* [1.2.131–32]), overheard soliloquies (such as Juliet’s “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” in *Romeo and Juliet* [2.1.75]), and eavesdroppers being deceived and eavesdropped upon (such as Benedick in *Much Ado* and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*). Hirsh also points to two non-Shakespearean feigned soliloquies which allude specifically to “To be, or not to be”: La Fin’s in Chapman’s *The Conspiracy of Charles, Duke of Byron* (3.1) and Orgilus’s in Ford’s *The Broken Heart* (1.3). And Hirsh narrates the historical shift from Renaissance drama, where soliloquies were understood as words spoken out loud by a character, to modern drama, which reconceived soliloquies as a character’s innermost thoughts only expressed in words for the benefit of the audience. At one point Hirsh exclaims, with exasperation, that seeing “To be, or not to be” as a glimpse into Hamlet’s mind because that is how it is usually played in modern performances is like believing that Ophelia was played by a woman in the Elizabethan theatre because that is how she is usually played today. And Hirsh dismantles, with palpable frustration, the argumentative gymnastics that editors (Harold Jenkins, Burton Raffel and Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor), critics (S.T. Coleridge, E.E. Stoll and Robert Speaight) and actors (Henry Irving) have proposed in an attempt to erase the problems presented by “To be, or not to be” and to salvage the sincerity and philosophical power of the soliloquy.

In the acknowledgments for his *To Be or Not To Be* book, Bruster wrote that he “benefitted” from Hirsh’s studies (105), but clearly Bruster was not convinced. Consider Bruster’s chapter titled “The Speech in Context”, which addresses the basis of Hirsh’s argument. “The presence of a perceived audience onstage would change our sense (as well as Hamlet’s) of the direction and function of his words”, Bruster wrote, before turning to wilful ignorance in a surprising way: “It may be permissible to think that the soliloquy has enough thought in and around it – prompts so much thinking and interpretation on its own – that we are allowed, with Hamlet, momentarily to forget that he may be overheard at his most intimate moment” (74–75). Impressionistic aesthetic judgement does not strike me as solid ground for selective forgetfulness.

Our situation at present, therefore, is that Bruster’s philosophically oriented interpretation hastily dismisses the dramatic context of “To be, or not to be”, while Hirsh’s contextually oriented interpretation does not consider an important implication of that reading, specifically what it says about Shakespeare’s attitude toward the kind of philosophical introspection represented in the “To be, or not to be” speech. In an effort to mend this gap, this essay is a philosophically oriented reading of “To be, or not to be” which takes seriously the dramatic context of the speech. I ask why, if Hamlet knows he is being watched, Shakespeare would choose philosophy as the language Hamlet uses to feign madness. What was Shakespeare saying about philosophy?

III

I address this question by attending to the differences between philosophy and drama. On the most basic level, philosophy is about *knowing* while drama is about *doing*: these words come from the

Greek σοφία, “wisdom”, and δρᾶν, “to do”. More specifically, the start of Hamlet’s soliloquy, “To be, or not to be”, invokes the form of philosophy called ontology, derived from the Greek ὄντο-, “being”. Ontology is, in Martin Heidegger’s definition, “that theoretical inquiry which is explicitly devoted to the meaning of entities” (*Being and Time* 32): the study of being-qua-being. Incidentally, the word *ontology* (or rather, *ontologia*) was coined by Shakespeare’s German contemporary Jacob Lorhard in 1606, just a few years after *Hamlet* was first staged. Lorhard used the term *ontology* interchangeably with the term *metaphysics*, and Shakespeare would have thought about the concerns of ontology in terms of Aristotelean metaphysics, the study of first and supreme causes and principles, supernatural and supersensible substance and structure, that which does not change, which remains true in all times in all places.⁵ Metaphysics was set off against both natural philosophy, with its theoretical attention to sublunary matters, and ethical philosophy, with its practical concern for virtuous action. With these distinctions in mind, we can note that what Critchley and Webster called Hamlet’s “ontological question” (11) is really an ethical question veiled in the language of ontology, as registered in Heidegger’s retort to Hamlet: “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? That is the question” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 1). Thus, Hamlet’s soliloquy invokes both metaphysical philosophy (in its language of “being”) and ethical philosophy (in its concern with “action”).

Like ethics, drama is about action, but drama is also about acting. *Hamlet* draws much of its energy from the tension between the ethical action the protagonist wants to take and the theatrical acting he does instead. As James Calderwood emphasised in his reading of *Hamlet*, drama allows an actor “to be and not to be” a character; a play operates simultaneously as dramatic illusion and theatrical reality in ways quite foreign to the quest for the fundamental nature of reality in metaphysics. Thus, the basic dramatic phenomenon of acting has historically been a spur in the side of philosophy, going back to Plato, as Jonas Barish discussed in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*: “The key terms are those of order, stability, constancy, and integrity, as against a more existentialist emphasis that prizes growth, process, exploration, flexibility, variety and versatility of response. In one case we seem to have an ideal of stasis, in the other an ideal of movement” (117). Philosophy and drama are by no means antithetical, but the “ideal of stasis” in metaphysics and the “ideal of movement” in drama generate “fundamentally different types of endeavour” with different assumptions and motives, as Martin Puchner argued when unpacking “the anti-theatrical prejudice in philosophy and the anti-philosophical prejudice in theatre” (541).

I want to suggest that Shakespeare did not care about the questions of metaphysical philosophy, and that he satirised metaphysics in Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” speech because he thought acting was more important than being. That is, Shakespeare valued human action and interaction, including the social roles we perform like actors playing characters on a stage, over abstract knowledge about existence generated through theoretical reasoning. Stated as such, this thesis is perhaps obvious but, if it can be shown to underwrite Shakespeare’s composition of Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, then the popularity of that passage seems to rest upon a fundamental misreading. While it seems to be a suffering man’s account of the battle between action and contemplation, and thus Shakespeare’s representation of tragic angst, a consideration of the dramatic context of the speech reveals that “To be, or not to be” is actually Shakespeare’s representation of the theatricality of everyday life. “To be, or not to be” is a clever deception the cleverness of which can be measured by how often it is taken as profound philosophy. If so, then a close reading of this passage might help us locate Shakespeare in the history of Western philosophy, as I attempt to do toward the end of this essay.

To be clear, I am not searching here for the philosophy “behind” Shakespeare’s plays.⁶ Nor am I looking at appropriations of Shakespeare in modern philosophy.⁷ Nor am I trying to use modern philosophy to read Shakespeare.⁸ These approaches are quite lively in Shakespeare studies at the moment, but I am instead interested in revisiting an older question asked by Sidney Lee in 1899 and by Rolf Soellner in 1962: *What was Shakespeare’s attitude toward philosophy?* At the same time, just as the Shakespeare described in this essay used philosophy to do drama, I am interested

in the possibility of using Shakespeare to do philosophy – specifically, to philosophise about philosophy.

IV

In his very first scene, Hamlet is explicitly concerned with what he *is*, not what he *seems* to be. “I know not seems”, he says to his mother after she asks why his father’s death “seems” so “particular” with him:

’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief
That can denote me truly. These indeed ‘seem’,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show –
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.75–86)

This is a Hamlet who cannot act; or, rather, this is a Hamlet who acts exactly as he is. His semblance and his essence are exactly the same, he says, except that his internal state, “that within”, is even more real, even more in existence than his considerable display or “show” of mourning. For this Hamlet, “action” is “play”, Shakespeare using the language of drama here to distinguish Hamlet from an actor who *pretends* and to characterise Hamlet as a man who *is*, as a man who has “within” him something real and true – something more real and more true than the performance of grief, which is denigrated as “the trappings and the suits of woe”. This Hamlet is not acting sad; he *is* sad. He is concerned with truth, with what “can denote [him] truly”, with that which *is* in contrast to that which *appears*. Hamlet is not doing metaphysics in this speech, of course: in Heidegger’s terms (*Being and Time* 31), he is being “ontical” (concerned with the essential attributes of things) but not “ontological” (concerned with being-qua-being).

If Hamlet begins as a man concerned with truth, essence, and reality, he becomes – after the visit from his father’s ghost – an actor who alters his behaviour to make others think he is something different from what he actually is. For starters, Prince Hamlet experiences the Ghost’s revelation that Claudius killed King Hamlet as a breakdown of appearances: he immediately turns to his “tables” to register the fact that people can *be* different from they *seem*, “that one may smile and smile and be a villain” (1.5.109). Parrying his uncle’s ability to deceive with false appearances, Hamlet vows to make others think he *is* mad when really he is only *acting* mad: “I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on,” he says to his friends Horatio and Marcellus (1.5.172–73). Hamlet’s suggestion that he can put on madness, like a coat, signals a shift in his concerns from the real to the apparent, from *being* to *seeming*. In this moment, read symbolically, he changes from an ontologist concerned with essences to an actor concerned with appearances. He even outlines the formal acting gestures he plans to employ – encumbering his arms, shaking his head, pronouncing doubtful phrases (1.5.175–79) – to signify his madness.

V

What is it that brings about Hamlet’s change in behaviour, his shift from a man who *is* to one who *seems*? In the play that Shakespeare wrote, there is no clear, logical, unambiguous, psychologically compelling explanation for why Hamlet decides to feign madness, but Shakespeare did place Hamlet’s turn to acting directly after a turn away from philosophy.⁹ Shortly prior to stating his plan to act

with an “antic disposition”, Hamlet muses to his friend, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy” (1.5.169). Interestingly, the phrase “*your philosophy*” in the quarto editions of *Hamlet* became “*our philosophy*” in the folio edition, making Hamlet’s rejection of philosophy both more personal and more universal.¹⁰ For Hamlet here is rejecting philosophy *tout court*, not just Horatio’s stoicism. In fact, although Shakespeare usually referred to practical ethics when using the word *philosophy*, Hamlet’s statement – dealing, as it does, with what exists versus what does not – invokes theoretical philosophy. Based on his recent experience with his father’s ghost, Hamlet suggests that philosophers need to expand their account of reality. Alluding to what exists in both “heaven” and “earth”, Hamlet is rejecting both metaphysics (with its superlunary concerns) and natural philosophy (with its sublunary concerns). He denigrates both as “dream[s]”, as fanciful mirages which are neither rational nor meaningful.

And this exact turn – from a Hamlet who rejects philosophy to one who embraces drama – occurs again in Act II. Speaking with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet complains that those who used to hate Claudius when King Hamlet was alive actually love Claudius now that he is king, and then concludes: “There is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out” (2.2.367–69). Here Hamlet is suggesting – quite rightly – that there must exist some abstract theory that could explain why we turn our affections toward whoever holds power over us. This theory would require some sort of ethical philosophy, but Hamlet’s pun on “natural” raises the stakes of the suggestion beyond the level of both ethical and natural philosophy. “There is something in this *more than natural*”: something metaphysical. At the same time, Hamlet is also saying that the abstract theory that he is describing escapes him and escapes philosophy. He does not say “*as philosophy has found out*”, or even “*as philosophy could find out*”; he says “*if philosophy could find it out*”, implying that philosophy hasn’t and perhaps can’t find it out.

After his crack at philosophy, the very next line is “There are the players” (2.2.370), and it is here that Shakespeare revealed that Hamlet is a playgoer, a playwright, an actor, a director, and a literary theorist. He is familiar with both classical and contemporary theatre – with both the Roman actor Roscius (2.2.392–93) and the Danish acting troupe that comes to Elsinore (2.2.424–26). He has seen this company perform “Aeneas’ tale to Dido” (2.2.449), and he can recite this passage from memory with no preparation and only minor mistakes (2.2.453–67). When Hamlet later pens for the players “a speech of some dozen lines or sixteen lines” (2.2.543), he becomes a playwright himself. When he then instructs them to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (3.2.17–18), he becomes a director. And when he pronounces on “the purpose of playing” (3.2.20), he becomes a literary theorist. To unpack the intricacies of Hamlet’s literary theory would be beyond the scope of the current essay. I only want to observe that, between “More things ... than are dreamt of in our philosophy” and “Something more than natural ... if philosophy could find it out”, Shakespeare created a pattern in which the failure of philosophy is followed by an embrace of theatricality. Arguably, that is the entire movement of the play *Hamlet*: from metaphysics to drama, from Hamlet’s concern with what “can denote [him] truly” and the supernatural fireworks of the Ghost’s appearance in Act I to Hamlet’s playful use of “the trappings and the suits of woe” and all the meta-theatrical material in Acts II and III.

VI

In Act II, for example, when Ophelia recounts Hamlet’s frenzied appearance to her in her chamber, his acting abilities are on high display, complete with a costume:

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport

As if he had been loosèd out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.79–85)

Hamlet is acting here. He is not mad; he is acting mad. He has unbuttoned his shirt, messed up his hair and dropped his socks while he shivers, shakes and stares vacantly into the beyond. He is acting how we act when we want others to think we are mad (“sometimes furious, and sometimes merry in appaurance, through a kinde of Sardonian, and false laughter”, to quote Timothy Bright’s 1586 *A Treatise of Melancholie* [82]). He is acting, if I may put it this way, how actors act when they play the part of Hamlet. Those actors are not actually mad, no more than Hamlet is. They are acting mad, as Hamlet is. In fact, his appearance to Ophelia “as if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors” seems to be modelled on his own experience with his father’s return from purgatory to speak of his horrible murder. Hamlet has a penchant for using earlier events from his life as the basis for his feigned performances. So Ophelia is right when she recounts how Hamlet “raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did *seem* to shatter all his bulk / And end his *being*” (2.1.96–97, emphasis mine), for Hamlet’s interest in “being” is now over; he is now more concerned with “seeming”.

Hamlet is also acting in the next scene when – in the midst of Claudius and Polonius’s scheming against him – he enters “*reading on a book*” (2.2.169sd). It is significant that Hamlet is reading a book for reasons that only become clear later in the play when Polonius instructs Ophelia (while directing her to interact with Hamlet as Polonius and Claudius watch) to enter reading a book:

Read on this book,
That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this:
’Tis too much proved that with devotion’s visage
And pious action we do sugar o’er
The devil himself. (3.1.46–51)

In this rather dense and difficult passage, Polonius, himself an actor who once played the part of Julius Caesar (3.2.99), suggests that sometimes reading a book is not just reading a book; sometimes it is a displaying of oneself reading a book for others. Sometimes it is, as Polonius says, a “show”. Why do we read books in public? Why do we walk around campus dressed in black reading *Hamlet*? According to Polonius, we read in public when we want to signal our solitude and studiousness to others. Reading publicly is how we, in his words, “colour” ourselves in a vivid image for others to interpret. For Polonius, publicly reading a book is not a devotional act but an acting of devotion, “devotion’s visage”, the appearance of devotion. Here a book is a prop in a performance which occurs in the acting we do in our everyday lives.

Clearly, in 3.1 when Ophelia enters reading a book, she is acting, her role having been written for her by Polonius. But in 2.2 when Hamlet enters reading a book, he is also acting. He is deliberately signalling sadness and madness in precisely the way that Polonius later describes. Shakespeare probably meant for us to recall Hamlet reading a book in 2.2 when Polonius later theorises the histrionic reading of books in public in 3.1. In fact, the first quarto edition of *Hamlet* places Ophelia reading her book back in 2.2 immediately after Hamlet enters reading his, after which follows his “To be, or not to be” speech, a textual variant discussed more fully below in Section VIII. In either arrangement, it is the act of reading that is important, not the content of what is read. As Hamlet says to Polonius, he is reading “words, words, words” (2.2.195), yet in the public, performative reading of those words, Hamlet is casting an image of himself for others to interpret. His performance is successful, at least with Gertrude, who remarks, “But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading” (2.2.170). Just as Hamlet hoped, Gertrude glosses “reading” as “sad[ness]”. It is through performances such as this that Gertrude’s “too-much changed son” (2.2.36) manages the opinion others have about him. He changes their opinions by changing his behaviour, by acting, and it works

quite well insofar as Claudius cites Hamlet's appearance as evidence for his madness: "Nor th'exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (2.2.6–7).

In 2.2, as Polonius interrogates Hamlet, the prince deflects those interrogations with equivocations that sound like nonsense but hit upon enough of the truth to give Polonius pause. "Though this be madness", Polonius famously says, "yet there is method in't" (2.2.207–08). Although it is not Polonius' intended sense, this line allows us to think of Hamlet as a "method actor", as one who never gives up his role, even in everyday life "off set". For that is precisely what Hamlet is doing here with Polonius: acting in a social situation that does not usually involve acting. But that was Shakespeare's whole point: everyday social situations *do* involve a tremendous amount of acting. Hamlet's over-the-top histrionic deceptions are merely an exaggeration of the everyday acting of an Ophelia pretending to be a loyal lover, a Claudius pretending to be a concerned uncle, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pretending to be faithful friends.¹¹

When Claudius sends those childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to investigate Hamlet's madness, the prince immediately sniffs out their espionage and, when he does, he starts acting. As soon as they arrive, a suspicious Hamlet interrogates them – "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation?" – even though he already knows the answer to these questions: "I know the good king and queen have sent for you" (2.2.276–83). Hamlet even knows precisely why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been called: he has "lost all [his] mirth", he says (2.2.298). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been asked to discover why, and Hamlet knows it. As such, in the famous passage that follows, "What piece of work is a man", Hamlet knows that he is being watched, knows that what he says and does will be reported back to Claudius, whom he wants to convince that he is mad. In this passage, what sounds like a profound philosophical statement on human nature is really only a show of madness. Hamlet feigns madness specifically by philosophising:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me. (2.2.305–10)

It is quite possible to read this passage as an encapsulation of the changing philosophy of human nature during the Renaissance – as an exaltation of human potential reminiscent of Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (1486) which then falters and fizzles out in a Montaignian view of humans as more animals than angels.¹² It is also possible, however, to read it as Hamlet's "antic disposition". Hamlet's allusion to his "disposition" in the lines leading up to this passage ("it goes so heavy with my disposition" [2.2.299–300]) recalls the previous instance of that word when Hamlet vowed to put on his "antic disposition". I am suggesting that the philosophising Hamlet does in "What a piece of work is a man" is his "antic disposition".

The famous question of *why* Hamlet delays his revenge against his uncle does not concern us here as much as the more demonstrable question of *how* Hamlet delays: the best way to buy some time for himself, he thinks, is to convince others that he is mad, and the best way to convince others that he is mad, he decides, is to be philosophical. This Hamlet is not necessarily *against* philosophy. Instead, he is an actor and, more generally, a rhetorician who *uses* philosophy to get what he wants. What seems like a sage and serious philosophical statement – "What a piece of work is a man" – is actually, when considered in the proper context, a keen moment of impression management. It is what Hamlet says when he wants his uncle to think he is mad, which is precisely what happens in the next scene with Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy.

VII

Let's pause here to review what is necessary, what is probable, and what is possible in any performance or interpretation of "To be, or not to be". It is necessary (given Hamlet's interaction with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 2.2) that Hamlet knows that in general he is being monitored. It is

probable (given Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia in the second half of 3.1) that, at some point in this scene, Hamlet becomes aware that Polonius is watching him at that very moment. It is possible (given the placement of the stage directions in the quarto editions) that Hamlet knows for certain that Claudius and Polonius are watching him when he delivers his "To be, or not to be" speech. Thus, we find in this moment one of Shakespeare's famous gaps that must be filled in by performers or readers when making sense of this scene:

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep –
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to – 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
 Must give us pause. There's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life,
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office, and the spurns
 That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action. (3.1.58–90)

Inevitably, actors and directors feel the weight of these words – their fame and esteem – usually resulting in a Hamlet who delivers this speech with the seriousness of a funeral, the sagacity of a sermon, and the self-importance of the Academy Awards. Whether it is (to cite some popular film portrayals) the inner voice of a Laurence Olivier, a Mel Gibson stopped dead in his tracks, the soul-searching of a Kenneth Branagh looking at himself in a mirror, or a David Tennant wincing in pain, what gets lost in the devotional recitation of this speech is the fact that it is only, to quote Polonius, "devotion's visage". In other words, "To be, or not to be" is not what it seems to be.

It seems to be a suffering man's account of the tension between action and contemplation – between the action of taking one's own life and the contemplation of an unknown afterlife which prevents that action from happening. In this reading, the power of the speech comes from its

characterisation of an individual's personal struggle, a question of life and death, as a metaphysical problem, as a question of existence and nothingness. "To live, or to die" becomes "To be, or not to be", but then Hamlet surmises an insurmountable obstacle: death might not end being. There might be a state of being after death that is even more painful than the one he is experiencing in life. He then does a simple risk-reward analysis: it is better to suffer a known amount of pain here in this life than to risk acquiring an unknown amount in the afterlife in an effort to end pain and suffering entirely. Thus, Hamlet and by extension Shakespeare, enters into the tradition of philosophising about the relationship between philosophy and suicide which has fascinated philosophers from Socrates ("the philosopher will be willing to follow one who is dying" [61d]) to Cicero ("the whole life of the philosopher ... is a preparation for death" [1.30.74]) to Seneca ("the wise man lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can" [59]) to Montaigne ("all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually come down to one conclusion; which is to teach us not to be afraid of dying" ["To Philosophize", 89]) to Camus ("there is but one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" [3]).¹³

The problem with this reading is that Hamlet is not actively struggling with the question of suicide, as critics such as Eleanor Prosser have noted (161). By this point in the play, this struggle is old news. For this reason, Prosser thought the tension between action and contemplation in Hamlet's soliloquy must refer to the act of killing Claudius, not the act of killing himself: "If Claudius is guilty, shall I kill him?" (163). This reading is compatible with the notion that Hamlet knows he is being watched, but this question is also old news. Hamlet is rehashing his earlier soliloquies and, if so, then a case can be made that Hamlet does not mean a word he says in this soliloquy – not about killing himself, an option he put to rest during his first soliloquy, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129–59), nor about an inability to act against Claudius, a dilemma resolved in his most recent soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (2.2.552–607). Given the excitement in Hamlet's epiphany at the end of Act II, and the fact that he more or less walks out of one room beaming, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.606–07), and then into the next room lamenting, "To be, or not to be; that is the question", his sudden and inexplicable reversion to his earlier *ennui* is, to say the least, puzzling.

In an effort to avoid this problem, directors such as Olivier and Zeffirelli have inverted the order of the two halves of 3.1: they have put Hamlet's "nunnery" exchange with Ophelia first, and then "To be, or not to be" second. In this arrangement, it is Hamlet's discovery of Ophelia's betrayal during the "nunnery" exchange that prompts his suicidal angst in "To be, or not to be". Zeffirelli even had Hamlet observe Claudius, Polonius and Ophelia plotting and hiding, so that Hamlet clearly knows he is being watched in the "nunnery" exchange, but then Hamlet exits to deliver "To be, or not to be" alone and sincerely (in his father's tomb, to boot). For their 2015 production, Lyndsey Turner and Benedict Cumberbatch just threw up their hands and opened the play with "To be, or not to be" delivered with Hamlet alone on stage.¹⁴ The implications here are inescapable: some of our best Shakespearean directors have had to rework the greatest literary passage of the past millennium in order to make it coherent. It's no wonder the eighteenth-century novelist Tobias Smollett saw the speech, despite the admiration accorded to it, as "a heap of absurdities, whether we consider the situation, the sentiment, the argumentation, or the poetry".¹⁵

I actually find the poetry of the passage quite good – the beauty of the language is, I think, largely what sustains the reading of the speech that I am opposing here – and I see some genuine psychological insight in Hamlet's concluding thought: uncertainty about the consequences of an action can pre-empt and forestall that action. "Knowledge kills action", Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): "Action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of *Hamlet*" (60). That is quite helpful in thinking about the relationship between abstract thought and concrete ethics, but the theological assumptions made in the lines leading up to that idea are precisely the kind of spirituality that Shakespeare shifted away from in *Hamlet* – moving, as it does, from the ghost in Act I to the skull in Act V. That movement is one from the spiritual world to the material world. Perhaps, then, the greatness of the "To be, or not to be" speech resides in its proclamation, in brief, of the

shift charted in *Hamlet* more generally from metaphysical to ethical concerns – that, at least, was the reading of Emmanuel Levinas in essays such as “Ethics as First Philosophy” (1984).

Perhaps, yet it is significant that, when Hamlet says, “To be, or not to be – that is the question”, he poses the “question” of suicide as a rhetorical disputation, as the kind of thought exercise he would have been assigned in his university classes back in Wittenberg.¹⁶ Remarkably, Hamlet never uses the personal pronoun “I” in his “To be, or not to be” speech. Contrast that lack of personal involvement with the 19 instances of “I” in “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”. In the philosophical reading of the speech which sees it as a sincere statement about a genuine problem, Hamlet’s detachment and impersonality might exist because, having struggled with his personal and particular situation in his earlier soliloquies, he is now, with the benefit of time, able to take a step back to reflect upon that situation in a more abstract, generalisable way with (in William Empson’s words) “utter detachment” (102).

In the dramatic reading I am advocating here, however, Hamlet is not being philosophical; he is only acting philosophical. In this reading, “To be, or not to be” is not an inner monologue or a picture of Hamlet’s mind. It is a performance. In this performance, Hamlet is no doubt drawing upon his earlier, sincere angst. However, the fact that he is returning to and recycling that angst at a time when he is neither suicidal nor marred by uncertainty suggests that, in this iteration, it is not genuine but manufactured. Rather than working through an acute problem right before our eyes, Hamlet is presenting a reconstruction of the way that he worked through it in Acts I and II.

Note that the very same thing happens in the run up to Hamlet’s “What piece of work is a man” speech. Hamlet’s statement that “this goodly frame, the earth seems to me a sterile promontory” (2.1.300–01) feels a lot like a rehearsed recycling of his earlier, heartfelt expression of angst: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” (1.2.133–34). In both “What piece of work is a man” and “To be, or not to be”, an earlier, genuine emotional experience provides Hamlet with the vocabulary for later, pretended emotions affected in the service of his attempt to control the impression others have of him and carry out his plot against his uncle.

In this reading, Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” speech is designed to make Claudius think Hamlet is mad, which to us in the audience observing this exchange has the effect of revealing that philosophy sounds a lot like madness. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is Hamlet’s earlier statement, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.251–52), which is both a compelling description of ethics from an anti-realist stance and a statement that could qualify Hamlet for legal insanity (defined as the inability to tell right from wrong). With an ear that was extremely sensitive to language, Shakespeare may have heard that philosophy and madness sound quite similar even if their significance is quite different.

Usually, the connection between philosophy and madness in Shakespeare’s plays is considered in the context of the Erasmian praise of folly tradition (see, for example, Bate and Hall). With Titus, Ophelia, Lear, Macbeth and Othello, Shakespeare repeatedly connected the descent into madness with the expression of philosophical wisdom, but in the case of Hamlet – and, I would add, in the case of the “noble philosopher” Edgar as well (*King Lear*, 11.159) – the clustering of philosophy and madness was further connected to the fact that these characters are actively trying to deceive others. Hamlet and Edgar want Claudius and Lear to think they are crazy. Thus, as an alternative to the argument that Shakespeare recuperated the negatively valued phenomenon of madness by associating it with the positively valued discourse of philosophy, I submit that Shakespeare satirised the positively valued discourse of philosophy by associating it with the negatively valued phenomenon of madness. That, at least, is the case in *King John*, where Constance sees philosophy as a source of bedlam rather than consolation: “Preach some philosophy to make me mad” (3.4.51).

VIII

Because “To be, or not to be” recycles Hamlet’s earlier soliloquies, there is definitely an argument to be made that it really does make more sense to place it where the first quarto places it – in 2.2 rather

than in 3.1. When placed in 2.2, “To be, or not to be”, with its double concern with suicide and inaction, could be a sincere expression of angst that serves as an effective transition from the suicidal thoughts of “O that this too too solid flesh would melt” to the meditation on inaction in “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”. In this arrangement of the soliloquies, the theme of suicide carries Hamlet from “Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt” to “To be, or not to be”, which pivots from the theme of suicide to that of inaction, a theme that is then picked up in “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”, which then pivots from the problem of inaction to the mechanism by which Hamlet’s inaction is overcome, the play-within-the-play.

There is a certain logical and artful progression to this arrangement, but there are also some problems. First of all, if Hamlet put the possibility of suicide to rest back in “O that this too too solid flesh would melt”, what brings him back to it when “To be, or not to be” is placed in Act II? It cannot be his discovery of his father’s murder because that gives him a reason to live, not to die. Second, the first quarto places the stage direction marking Hamlet’s entrance to the scene several lines *before* Polonius and Claudius hide, allowing Hamlet to see them. Third, and most importantly, placing “To be, or not to be” in 2.2 actually emphasises even more clearly the affectedness of the speech because “To be, or not to be” then becomes the first time we see Hamlet after he states his plan to “put an antic disposition on”. In the first quarto’s arrangement, “To be, or not to be” effectively becomes that feigned madness. When placed in 2.2, “To be, or not to be” is what we hear in place of Hamlet’s verbal jousting with Polonius. In that dialogue, we know clearly and unproblematically that Hamlet is feigning madness and toying with Polonius by calling him a “fishmonger” and so forth (2.2.172). If we hear the “To be, or not to be” speech instead of that dialogue, it brings us to see that “To be, or not to be” is just as much a feigning of madness as the “fishmonger” business. Indeed, when placed in 2.2, “To be, or not to be” is what follows immediately after Hamlet enters “*poring vppon a booke*” (E1). Once Hamlet is seen reading his book, Polonius instructs Ophelia to read upon hers. We know that Ophelia is acting, as discussed earlier, and here in the first quarto we know more clearly that Hamlet is acting due to the increased proximity of these two *acts* of reading.

The final couplet of the speech in the first quarto contains an additional indication that Hamlet knows he is being watched. In the second quarto and folio versions, the speech culminates and is given a concluding thought in Hamlet’s statement about the tension between contemplation and action. There is then a clear break as Hamlet comes to, collects himself, notices Ophelia, and comments on her prayer: “Soft you, now, / The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered” (3.1.90–92). In the first quarto, however, the concluding thought of Hamlet’s soliloquy is both grammatically and logically tied to his statement to Ophelia: “I that, O this conscience makes cowards of vs all, / Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembred” (E1). *Because* conscience makes us all cowards, Hamlet says, she should pray for him. In this version, the line between Hamlet’s soliloquy and his return to the scene with Ophelia cannot be easily drawn. “O this conscience makes cowards of vs all” belongs to both Hamlet’s reflection on the tension between action and contemplation and his exchange with Ophelia. The fact that Hamlet’s reflection morphs into his address to Ophelia confirms, first, that his words are spoken out loud (are not simply the audience’s glimpse into his mind) and, second, that Hamlet is aware of Ophelia’s presence during the climactic line of his soliloquy.

IX

If Hamlet has known all along that he is being watched, why does his behaviour shift dramatically when he asks Ophelia, “Where’s your father?” (3.1.132)? Up to that point in the exchange, Hamlet is sentimental, whimsical and a bit playful, but he then becomes unhinged and aggressive, as indicated by Ophelia’s “O, help him, you sweet heavens” (3.1.136). Traditionally, it is Hamlet’s discovery of Polonius and Claudius watching him that triggers his tirade. In the dramatic reading I have been presenting, however, Hamlet has been aware of this fact all along, and it would be Ophelia’s *denial* of it which sets him off. Instead of the moment when Hamlet realises he is being watched, “Where’s

your father?” is the moment when he forgets about, or stops caring about, his awareness of being watched. He stops putting on a manufactured show and starts berating Ophelia from a position of genuine outrage. His outburst prompts, in turn, the only sincere soliloquy in the scene, which comes after Hamlet exits, Ophelia’s “O, what a noble mind is here overthrown” (3.1.153–64).

With respect to “To be, or not to be”, however, Shakespeare took the soliloquy, a dramatic device traditionally used as an especially reliable kind of communication between author and audience, and transformed it into a rhetorical manoeuvre employed in an interpersonal exchange. Note that something very similar happens in the scene prior to “To be, or not to be” with “Aeneas’ tale to Dido” (2.2.449): an extended dramatic speech delivered in the high style of classical tragedy (this one a monologue rather than a soliloquy) is employed in such a way that, without any changes to the formal dramatic device itself, it serves a role in the narrative of the play (it prompts Hamlet’s “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I” soliloquy). The words remain the same. The monologue is still a monologue, but it becomes both more than a monologue (because it is doing additional thematic and dramatic work in the scene in which it is embedded) and less than a monologue (because it therefore does not have the special signifying power of a straightforward monologue). It becomes a self-conscious and self-referential element of drama within drama, which of course happens again shortly after “To be, or not to be” with “The Mousetrap”. Drama does not simply reflect life in Hamlet’s Elsinore; it is also equipment for living.

In short, “To be, or not to be” is a dramatisation of a soliloquy just as it is a dramatisation of philosophy. Shakespeare did not philosophise in *Hamlet*, or at least he did not philosophise sincerely. He only philosophised to dramatise how philosophy enters into our world and, insofar as philosophy enters into Hamlet’s world as a tool of deception, it could be said that Shakespeare not only dramatised but also satirised philosophy. He held philosophy up for ridicule by making it the means of suggesting madness and, ultimately, something that is a means and not an end. In *Hamlet*, philosophy is the means of deception, not the end of knowledge, which offers an alternative to the enthusiastic presentation of philosophy in the Western tradition. Shakespeare’s satire of philosophy took issue with that enthusiasm, but why would Shakespeare satirise philosophy? What did metaphysics ever do to him?

Any answer to these questions would be highly speculative: here we must shift from a reading of Shakespeare’s play to a reading *into* it, *away* from it. But any answer would have to include the notion that Elizabethan England was a metaphysical wasteland suspended between two great ages of metaphysics with the medieval scholastics – Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham – on one side and the early-modern system-builders – Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Spinoza – on the other.¹⁷ Shakespeare lived at the end of an age in which social interaction in the here and now had asserted itself over abstract speculation on the beyond, making the greatest philosophical writing of the Renaissance political and ethical, not metaphysical, and also essayistic rather than systematic, written by the likes of More, Machiavelli and Montaigne. Shakespeare, with his satire of philosophy in *Hamlet*, can stand as the marker of an age weary of metaphysics.

The most important statement about philosophy in the Elizabethan age came from another literary writer, Sir Philip Sidney, who pitted philosophy and its concern with universals against history and its attention to particulars. Sidney preferred poetry over both because he thought poetry could package universal truths and values in the particular examples that make writing enjoyable and memorable. Shakespeare did not deal with philosophy in these terms in *Hamlet*, but I mention Sidney because, if there was a precedent for someone coming from roughly where Shakespeare was coming from to be suspicious of philosophy, it was not particularly unique or innovative for Shakespeare to take that position.

It was innovative, however, for Shakespeare to treat philosophy as a method of rhetorical manoeuvring able to manage interpersonal relationships and achieve personal goals having nothing to do with abstract speculation on truth, virtue, knowledge and beauty. Shakespeare did not, like Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Hamlet’s fellow alumnus of Wittenberg, simply “bid *on kai me on* [being and non-being] farewell” (1.1.40) because he felt Aristotelean metaphysics had no practical

consequences. Instead, Shakespeare discovered a new, surprising use of philosophy. It could be a script for feigning madness and, more generally, an instrument for casting an image of oneself for others to interpret.

X

In this account, Shakespeare did not view metaphysics as evil or inconsequential. He simply saw it as a less pressing concern than the acting we do in our everyday lives, and here Shakespeare sounds more like the modern sociologist Erving Goffman, with his dramaturgical theories of everyday human interaction, than any metaphysical philosopher. From the perspective of dramaturgical sociology, Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" is not a mental picture of Hamlet's mind but, as Goffman would say, his presentation of a self designed to elicit a certain response from the audience whose attitudes Hamlet is attempting to manage. With apologies for the comparison, here Hamlet is a distant ancestor of the Alan Sokal, who in 1996 submitted a nonsensical paper using inflated philosophical language, specifically post-structuralism, to deceive the editors and readers of the academic journal *Social Text* (see *The Sokal Hoax*). Where Sokal used philosophy to signify brilliance, Hamlet uses it to signify madness, but they are similar in that both are insincerely *using* philosophy.

As a moment of impression management, "To be, or not to be" has (Goffman would say) a meaning that is inseparable from the context or situation in which that speech is uttered. To change the context – to make the passage a serious philosophical soliloquy uttered when Hamlet is alone on stage – is to change the meaning. This is simply to observe that, like anything, philosophy has no necessary, absolute, essential, natural quality or motive. What philosophy is depends on how it is used. "Use almost can change the stamp of nature", as Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet* (3.4.165) several centuries before the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein worked out his argument that the meaning of a word is its use (§43). The ways we use philosophy can change what it is, which is a fairly obvious point, but the slightly less obvious point is that philosophy is a discourse that is used rather than one which simply is. In other words, philosophy is rhetoric, the discourse to which it is often opposed. From a Shakespearean or Wittgensteinian perspective (on this point they are the same) in which use or intent is the constituent factor in meaning, we can ask of any philosophical statement, *What's the use?* Indeed, the history of Western philosophy could be compellingly rewritten by asking not, *What have the various philosophers and sects believed?*, but rather, *What (in addition to or instead of the disinterested search for truth) are philosophers trying to do with their writing?* A use-oriented as opposed to belief-oriented history of philosophy is arguably the logical extension of the Shakespearean and Wittgensteinian notion that meaning resides in use.¹⁸

Indeed, the Hamlet depicted in this essay is one interested, along with J.L. Austin, in "how to do things with words". For this Hamlet, philosophy is a performative utterance. It is something you do. It does not merely describe the world. It is not something that does or does not accurately refer to reality in the sense that it is either true or false. Philosophy for this Hamlet does not involve truth and falsity; it has no truth-value. It is an intentional, goal-driven speech act. Hamlet thus can be seen as what we have come to call a pragmatist, both in the sense of the American pragmatism that runs from James to Rorty (like them, Hamlet is interested in the practical uses of philosophy), and in the sense of the linguistic pragmatism of Austin and Searle (like them, Hamlet is interested in the relationship between the content and the effect of words or, in this case, of philosophy). In the "To be, or not to be" speech, there is a discrepancy between, as Austin would say, the locutionary act (what the words mean) and the illocutionary act (what the words are designed to accomplish). What the speech says and what the speech is meant to do are clearly different things.

It is certainly possible to be philosophically sincere and still rhetorically sophisticated, even rhetorically devious – Plato, Erasmus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Derrida come to mind. Indeed, that exploitation of the resources of literary expression in the service of philosophical thought is precisely what Sidney was calling for in his *Apologie for Poetry*. I would even place Shakespeare in the above group of artistic philosophers (or philosophical artists), but not the Hamlet of "To be, or not to be".

This Hamlet is not using irony and indirection to convey a philosophical truth that would be less impactful were it stated in straightforward argumentative prose. That is what Shakespeare was doing. In contrast, Hamlet has no philosophical objective; he is not making a philosophical point. His philosophical statement is operating entirely in the service of his rhetorical objectives. Hamlet uses philosophy to do rhetoric, while Shakespeare used philosophy to do drama.

XI

I am not advocating a return to the position Sidney Lee advanced in 1899 when he contrasted Bacon and Shakespeare to suggest that the former was a lover of philosophy and the latter a hater: “On scientific philosophy, and on natural science, Shakespeare probably looked with suspicion ... Metaphysics, in any formal sense, were clearly not of Shakespeare’s world ... The faint, shadowy glimpses which Shakespeare had of scientific philosophy gave him small respect for it” (145–47). Nor am I asking us to go back to Rolf Soellner’s 1962 recuperation of Shakespeare’s attitude toward philosophy: “In agreement with humanistic practice, Shakespeare ridiculed violations to life and common sense committed under the name of philosophy, such as retreat from life, overindulgence in pleasure, and pedantic dissection of the obvious. But far from proving hostility to philosophy, such satire proves a certain philosophic literacy” (149). Despite the title of my own essay, I think it misses the point to act as though our mission is to determine whether Shakespeare was for or against philosophy. That is like asking whether Shakespeare was for or against trees. Like trees, philosophy gave Shakespeare a way to characterise people and to symbolise things. In the words of Erik Schmidt, “His interest in philosophy, especially before the later romances, was oriented by his dramatic goals” (326). Philosophy was fundamentally something Shakespeare *used*, not something he *did*. Like trees, philosophy was something for Shakespeare to represent, rather than a discourse which informed his representations. Philosophy was a part of the human experience that did not need to be separated out and valorised as the explanation of human experience. Thus, like many great philosophers in the line that runs from Hegel to Derrida, Shakespeare was interested in the phenomenology of metaphysics, in the ways it surfaces in society and in history. Shakespeare was philosophical principally in the sense that he was a philosopher of philosophy, a meta-philosopher of sorts, one interested in descriptive rather than normative thought and interested in the conceptual origins of social life. In the words of David Schalkwyk, “This kind of conceptual analysis, which pays close attention to the embodied place of words in social practice, is as philosophical as any of the grander queries about the causes of the universe or the certainty that I can know only what is in my own mind. This is the philosophy that Shakespeare does best” (134).

XII

So why has “To be, or not to be” become Shakespeare’s most famous line and most famous passage? Why is it celebrated with utter sincerity and devotion? Have millions of readers got the passage wrong? Have they mistaken Shakespeare’s satire of philosophy for a serious attempt at philosophy? Does the popularity of “To be, or not to be” stem from the ignorance of the masses?

Stated as such, this reading sounds elitist, and not quite right, although this elitism does have some footing in *Hamlet* insofar as Prince Hamlet scorns the general public for its simplistic and superficial audience of drama: “The groundlings ... for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise” (3.2.11–13). Hamlet also identifies a more discerning audience, in which he includes himself, one which appreciates nuance. When drama is “overdone”, he says, “though it make the unskilful laugh, [it] cannot but make the judicious grieve” (3.2.25–26). Here Hamlet identifies two different kinds of drama that appeal to two different kinds of audiences, one overblown which appeals to the simpleminded masses, and another understated which appeals to the intellectually elite. Yet Shakespeare seems to have found – in the “To be, or not to be” passage, in *Hamlet* as a whole, and in his career at large – a kind of drama that appeals to both audiences at

once, a drama that is both overblown and understated. As I have sought to illustrate, the play *Hamlet*, and the “To be, or not to be” passage in particular, is understated in its representation of overblownness.

Thus, it could be that Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” speech has become so famous precisely because it has the potential to prompt and sustain two very different, even opposed interpretations from these two different audiences. “To be, or not to be”, like much of Shakespeare’s art, is both *poetic* and *dramatic*. It is poetic insofar as it involves elegant, poignant and rich statements that put an artful stamp on ideas that relate to key moments in the experience of human being. And it is dramatic insofar as it situates those statements in the actual social and psychological transactions that produce and sustain them. Those who read “To be, or not to be” as sincere philosophy see it as great literature because it captures something profound about the human experience and its relationship with all existence. Those who read “To be, or not to be” ironically also see it as great literature, but for a completely different reason. From this perspective, the speech is not a profound representation of the human condition. Instead, it is a representation of the uses of profundity.

Notes

1. According to the tally by Soellner: “For Shakespeare ‘philosophy’ seems to have been primarily a practical discipline. Of the thirteen times he used the word, in ten cases it is clear from the context that he meant moral philosophy; in the three other cases he must have thought either of natural philosophy, that is science as then understood, or perhaps of learning in general” (136).
2. In the middle of the eighteenth century, it became common to refer to “To be, or not to be” as “the celebrated soliloquy”; see, for example, Voltaire (146).
3. Bruster delivers, more or less, the Romantic reading of Hamlet as articulated by Schlegel: “The whole is intended to show that a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting” (40); by Coleridge: “The effect of this over balance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet’s mind” (32); and by Shelley: “The character of Hamlet, as I take it, represents the profound philosopher; or, rather, the errors to which a contemplative and ideal mind is liable” (54) – all quoted from Williamson.
4. See the series of works by Hirsh. Although she did not cite Hirsh, Videbaek also argued that Hamlet’s speech is “a well-thought-out, calculated, rehearsed, Machiavellian message sent to an anticipated on-stage audience” (2). Recently, Hirsh’s argument has also been supported by Arrington, and the idea has also been explored from a dramaturgical perspective by Boyle.
5. Sandford’s translation of Agrippa’s *Of the Vanitie and Vncertaintie of Artes and Sciences* defined “Metaphisicks” as “thinges supernaturall and the Science of them” (70), and Marten’s translation of Peter Martyr’s *The Common Places* alluded to Aristotle’s “metaphisicks, or treatise of supernaturall things” (154). Puttenham wrote that poets “forasmuch as they were the first obseruers of all naturall causes & effects in the things generable and corruptible, and from thence mounted vp to search after the celestiaall courses and influences, & yet penetrated further to know the diuine essences and substances separate ... they were the first Astronomers and Philosophists and Metaphisicks” (6). Metaphysics was increasingly understood as ontology in the seventeenth century. Fotherby spoke of “the Metaphisickes, considering the pure essence of things”, while Harvey declared that “Metaphysics is called also the first Philosophy, from its nearest approximation to Philosophy, its most proper Denomination is Ontology, or a Discourse of a Being” (17–18).
6. On the philosophical ideas informing Shakespeare’s drama, see McGinn, Nuttall and Bevington. For an excellent reflection on the possibility that what Shakespeare was doing in his plays could be considered “philosophy”, see Martindale.
7. On the place of Shakespeare in modern philosophy, see Kottman, Stewart and Bates and Wilson.
8. For some examples of criticism using modern philosophy as a lens for looking at Shakespeare, see Lupton, Pascucci, Saval and Colombo and Fusini.
9. Regarding the ambiguity of Hamlet’s decision to feign madness (a decision that does not make sense given Hamlet’s needs and aims) see, for example, Greenblatt: “By excising the strategic rationale for Hamlet’s madness, Shakespeare made it the central focus of the entire tragedy” (307).
10. On this textual variant, see Hui.
11. See Mercer, esp. chapter 7, “Performance” (173–98), for a reading of the relationship between the two key themes of deception and acting.
12. For these staples of Renaissance humanism, see Pico and Montaigne, “On Experience”.

13. For a reading of “To be, or not to be” in the context of this history, see Minois, esp. chapter 5, “To Be or Not to Be: The First Crisis of Conscience in Europe” (86–115), which begins by quoting Hamlet’s soliloquy and asserting, “Shakespeare said it all in these few lines” (87).
14. See Turner and Maltby. After outcry, Turner and Cumberbatch moved “To be, or not to be” to its location in the first quarto (where Doran and Tennant also placed it in their 2009 production).
15. Smollett, “An Introduction to the Study of the *Belles Lettres*” (1762), quoted from Vickers (4.498).
16. Baldwin argued that “To be, or not to be” alludes specifically to Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (2.603–07).
17. On the lull of ontology during the Renaissance, see Hankins.
18. On the role of biography in philosophy see, for example, Wittgenstein’s brother and biographer Monk.

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