

*Shakespeare Without  
Fear*

TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING

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*F*or Steven, Lily, and Arie  
*T*he true blank of mine eye

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## Preface

THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH A DESIRE TO UNDERSTAND THE DISTANCE between college and high school teaching of Shakespeare. From what I could tell from my small corner of the world, students at both ends of the continuum seemed to be getting shortchanged somehow when it came to the possibilities for pleasure and meaning that Shakespeare's texts seemed to offer. Many of the students who entered my classroom fresh from high school saw Shakespeare either as a dead icon, hard currency for college life, or as the idealized preserve of a high school romance with the theatre department. Neither approach entailed much love of poetic language or historical understanding. On the other hand, experienced college students seemed adept at situating the text's historical forms of ideology but removed from the pleasures of poetic language and theatrical performance. Though I had some ideas about what was going wrong in high school and college classrooms, those ideas were rooted in my own experience as a scholar, college teacher, and parent of public school children. So, with the support of my university, I spent a year inside the high school and college classrooms of other teachers of Shakespeare, sharing ideas about what teaching and understanding Shakespeare's work can mean. At the same time I began to write about what I observed in my own classes. What I learned in the process of this work is the argument of this book.

Like Virginia Woolf, I want to insist that when "the subject is highly controversial . . . one cannot hope to tell the truth" (4). Woolf's subject was sex, but teaching and the study of Shakespeare these days seem to invite equally vehement responses. The reason for such strong feelings, I believe, is the care brought by so many to the work. But also because the process of nurturing the imagination, which is at the heart of teaching literature, is as potent as it

is hazardous. As Nel Noddings explains, “When we advocate enhancing the imagination, we can expect resistance” (46). Of course, as Noddings also wisely tells us, whatever we claim in attempting to do so, we could be wrong. Faced with such possible error Woolf advises, “One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold” (4). So these essays attempt to reveal the trajectories of my thinking and practice even as I hope to demonstrate what teaching Shakespeare without fear might mean—that is, teaching for an understanding that can serve us all—teachers and students, individual readers and discipline, school and world. Thus I repeat Mary Rose O’Reilley’s invitation, “Come into my kitchen but don’t expect recipes” (xix).

Instead I proceed by divergent and nonconsecutive paths. I begin by telling the story of my own engagement with Shakespeare, and of my struggle—first as a student, then as a teacher—to create a place free from fear for that engagement in the classroom. I write about how Shakespeare can change the lives of students and teachers who refuse the canned versions of his work offered in how-to manuals. I discover the possibilities for understanding that follow from allowing ourselves to listen carefully to each other and the texts even when those texts are as presumably well known as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. I argue for resisting the long-standing but now renewed pressures to standardize the experience of Shakespeare’s work in order to measure the “achievement” of teachers and students alike. And I explore how teaching Shakespeare for understanding might bring our capacities for critical judgment closer to our capacity for pleasure and personal meaning. The essays here, then, can be read independently or consecutively.

It is my hope that the essays here offer a model of reading, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare—and all literature—as modes of living in a world that has great need for courageous imaginations. For only by seeing beyond present relationships can the work and lives of those we love continue to give our lives and world meaning.

## *Acknowledgments*

THIS BOOK BEGAN IN COMMUNITY—IN AND OUT OF THE classroom—and finds its final shape only because of those who have been kind enough to teach and learn with me. Foremost among these are the many teachers and students who allowed me into their classrooms and lives over the past three years. For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot name you. Please know that you have taught me truly what I set out to prove: that learning is a matter of heart and mind, of living in relationships of care and commitment seasoned generously with humor. Other teachers have helped me to see the good that can happen in a classroom or a text when we bring our whole selves. Some are mentioned in the text. Others who are not include Carmen Werder, Suzanne Paola, Huston Diehl, Mari Mujica, Taleigh Smith, Sally Smith, Maureen O'Reilly, and Bruce Goebel. The generous support of Western Washington University in the form of sabbatical leave allowed me to nurture both the ideas and lives represented in this book. For lessons in the Zen patience of climbing and the ease of work done in community, I thank the Sunday morning trail runners: Diane, Carol, Kathy, Polly, and Val. Your steady strength and joyful friendship helped me ascend hills both literal and figurative. For her willingness to adjust my schedule and free me from a committee or two as I worked to complete the book, I thank my chair, Kathy Lundeen. Urban Waite and Kirsten Jensen provided invaluable assistance as research assistants. Finally, three people have carried me in mind and spirit throughout the project by listening, reading, questioning, and simply believing in the process of attending to how Shakespeare and all works of the imagination come alive for teachers and their students: Steve, Pam, Janet, “my spirit is thine, the better part of me.”

### 3

## *Teaching Hamlet After Columbine*

HAMLET IS A PLAY MEN HAVE LOVED FOR CENTURIES. LIKE THE character, *Hamlet* speaks for men and the trials they endure. As one of my male students explained:

Out of all of Shakespeare's works, *Hamlet* strikes the deepest chord with me. I'm not usually attracted to tragedies. I tend to steer clear of anything that reminds me of my own fragile existence. But *Hamlet* speaks to me in a way that [Shakespeare's other] tragedies don't. Perhaps its because I see a bit of Prince Hamlet in me. Not only do I sympathize with his despair, I find in him a reflection of my own most painful moments.

Conversely, as literary criticism and the testimony of my students reveals, women have mostly endured *Hamlet*. Thus one female student asked in an online discussion: "What are we doing reading *Hamlet* over and over again?" Another young woman described her experience of reading Shakespeare's most famous play this way: "I've read *Hamlet* probably three or four times, but have generally read it for the relationship between Hamlet and his mother—the projected 'Oedipus Complex' deal." The reference to Freud's theory of masculine identity formation suggests the ways in which the play regularly functions as more than itself, more than a play about a son of a murdered father, the incestuous tale of a displaced heir apparent. If Shakespeare is cast (as he has been since the Romantics) as the poet's poet, the Pater Noster of English literature, then Hamlet is his son, the ideal in the form of an imperfect man. As a teacher or a student, it is difficult to avoid the infatuation with Hamlet implicit in its critical and dramatic history. Even when a play as obscure as *Titus Andronicus* can find its way onto film, there are still more films of *Hamlet*

than of any other Shakespeare work. And it seems to go without saying that if you know something of Shakespeare, you must have read *Hamlet*.

Yet the difference between my male and female readers' experience of *Hamlet* raises the question of why I should teach *Hamlet*. Female students do not welcome being immersed in a misogynist Shakespeare, especially if they are led to believe that celebrating such a writer is essential to their educational success. At the same time, the play often reverberates profoundly for young men. While such attachment may be in part a consequence of twentieth-century representations of Hamlet as a kind of Holden Caulfield—an Anglo middle-class adolescent male, with all the cultural and psycho-physiological associations suggested by such a designation—saying so does not answer the question of *Hamlet's* meaning for young people today. Rather it begs the more important question: what do I teach my students in the process of teaching *Hamlet*?

The association of Hamlet with Holden Caulfield, the hero of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, is actually a good place to start. As Louis Menand has observed, teachers and parents ask young people to read *Catcher* because "Salinger is imagined to have given voice to what every adolescent, or at least, every sensitive, intelligent, middle-class adolescent, thinks but is too inhibited to say, which is that success is a sham, and that successful people are mostly phonies. Reading Holden's story is supposed to be the literary equivalent of looking in a mirror for the first time" (82). As numerous male students such as the one just cited tell me, young men come to see themselves (and sometimes young women, though it's harder) in the figures of Holden and Hamlet and experience these texts as affirmations of a despairing self. What Menand says of Holden is true for Hamlet as well: "[He] is their sorrow king" (82). Defined as a kind of rebel with a cause, Hamlet's bitter recriminations of himself and others are represented as archetypal adolescent hopelessness.

For adults the anguished isolation of such figures is often considered a natural albeit temporary state of affairs. As Menand explains, "The moral of [*Catcher*] can seem to be that Holden will outgrow his attitude, and this is probably the lesson that most of the ninth-grade teachers who assign [it] hope to impart to their students—that alienation is just a phase" (84). Yet, if the dramatic jump in American adolescent suicide rates is any measure, such misery isn't experienced by adolescents that way. Death, the numbers tell us, often seems to young people the only means of alleviating such despair (Stevens, Borowsky et al.).

The role of school in creating such dejection has been the focus of widespread public concern of late. Since events like the Columbine massacre, we seem to have become forcibly aware of the fact that, despite popular belief, socioeconomic status does not protect against such alienation and the violence

against self and others it may lead to. Indeed, as profiles of school shooters like Columbine's Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold suggest, it is white middle-class adolescent males—those most likely to read and identify with *Hamlet*—who often seek a violent end to their grief in a school setting (Aronson 55). For this reason, I cannot help considering how teaching *Hamlet* helps my students—male and female—imagine alternatives to lives of despair and the violence it can lead to.

*Hamlet as Hulk*

Evidence of the way in which my students perceive Hamlet as an adolescent shows up in their consistent surprise when we discover his age in the play's final act: thirty. Yet their intuitive sense that Hamlet is somehow like them in their adolescence is correct. As a consequence of succession and inheritance laws, while his father lives, Hamlet is but an heir apparent, a man without a man's authority. Hamlet's father's death catapults him into manhood but with the royal and paternal usurpation effected by his uncle's marriage to his mother, Hamlet is once again left in a kind of social limbo. His uncle-king's refusal to command him—"Be as ourselves in Denmark" (1.2.122)—is, like Polonius' use of spies to acquire knowledge of Laertes' life in France, a mark of Hamlet's ambiguous status.

Like Hamlet, adolescents in our culture are capable of much that their designation as "youth" seems to argue against: they can work, they can reproduce, they can kill. Vulnerability and inexperience are poised with power and ability; while adults often stress the former, youth themselves may stress the latter (Sizer 33, Hersch). The humiliations attendant upon adolescents' ambiguous status are often assuaged, like Hamlet's, by a fierce belief in the pervasiveness of deceit and the salvific effects of loyalty. The desire to revenge "adders fanged" like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the idealization of those, like Horatio, who practice loyalty at any cost, constitute a familiar social code in both high school and college settings. As one student stated in explaining his identification with Hamlet, "betrayal is death."

Hamlet is an especially attractive figure to adolescent males, as well, because they see their humiliations in Hamlet's: his mother's "o'er hasty marriage," his beloved's apparently passive acceptance of her father's demands, his friends' willingness to betray his confidence for hope of preferment and his uncle's alleged and then proven murder of his father (notably the question of the ghost's nature hangs in the balance for more than half the play). More specifically, young men see themselves in Hamlet because Hamlet reiterates a social archetype of masculinity found everywhere, but most powerfully today in action films: a figure of feeling, Hamlet transforms his grief and the

sense of human vulnerability it provokes in him into rage and vengeance. As one thoughtful student explained it to me, when feeling slighted like Hamlet “[w]e want others to feel our pain, so we try to alienate them in the vain hope they will feel how we feel. We try to hurt them so they will feel our hurt. It becomes a twisted kind of game.” For such readers, *Hamlet* is about social survival in a culture that increasingly values performance over authenticity and achievement over peace of mind, health, and even moral virtue (Pope).

As a teacher who works determinedly against the idealization of Shakespeare and hopes to develop her students’ personal and critical responses to his work, I find such readings of *Hamlet* a challenge: How can I teach *Hamlet* in a way that honors my students’ experience while helping them to see the play as more—much more—than a mirror of that experience? Attempting to do so, I have come to believe, demands what Nel Noddings calls a pedagogy of care. In brief, such a pedagogy entails a deep attention to students’ search for meaning, an understanding of the roots of that meaning in the students’ relationship to others, and hence a deep respect for and attention to the work at hand, in this case *Hamlet*. Honestly, as I admit elsewhere in this book, because of the issues raised in Shakespeare’s most famous play, bringing such care to the work was no easy task for me. *Hamlet* seemed to require paying inordinate attention to male characters who unconsciously put themselves at the center of life and expect women to unquestioningly accept this arrangement. As well, women students like those I have cited often quickly discern that if and when women figure in discussions of *Hamlet*, they function in the Oedipal sense as figures of male anxiety. And, as the reference to Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex implies, male anxiety and alienation is often assumed to be the inevitable consequence of all male socialization.

Consequently, teaching *Hamlet* can seem to entail complicity with a critical history that alienates women and naturalizes the suffering of young men. T. S. Eliot’s judgment that the problem with *Hamlet* is the insufficiency of its women is the most famous instance of such a reading. In his critique of Gertrude as the “objective correlative” at the heart of the play, Eliot finds her the play’s fatal flaw. “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare’s, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son” (765). And “it is just *because* her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing” (766). Whether or not Gertrude, and Ophelia for that matter, are adequate representations of women is not Eliot’s concern. Rather, it is the inadequacy of Gertrude as a cause of Hamlet’s grief.

It might seem that a feminist defense of Gertrude and Ophelia could ground a teaching alternative to such a tradition but, like Eliot, many feminist critics also find *Hamlet*’s women wanting. Given the habit of reading *Hamlet*

as a protomodern psychological drama in which excess and inadequacy take center stage, it is not surprising to find that feminists turn the tables on critics in the Eliot tradition by detailing the misogyny at work in Shakespeare's representations of women in the play. In such readings psychoanalysis locates a male fantasy of a "suffocating mother." Gertrude, like Ophelia, turns out to be an incomplete, insufficient woman because she is not meant to be a distinct creature. "[Gertrude] remains relatively opaque, more a screen for Hamlet's fantasies about her than a fully developed character in her own right; whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to her status as mother" (Adelman 34). The foundation of such readings of *Hamlet's* women characters is often powerful historical research that locates the play's representation of women in specific contexts of women's lives in Shakespeare's day. These contexts include the misconceptions about childbirth and lactation that led to high rates of infant mortality then attributed to the inadequacy of women's bodies ("frailty, thy name is woman" 1.2.146) and the distinction between marriage in a prohibited degree (the "incest" of Claudius' marriage to his "kin") and the legality of a widow's second marriage (Paster 230, Jardine 39). Such work helps to illuminate the ways in which Shakespearean women like Gertrude become "the focus of guilt not because of what [they do], but because [they] embod[y] the contradictory claims of kinship on women" (Jardine 47). Still, such historicizing does less to defend than explain.

The criticisms of feminists and the iconoclastic Eliot suggest then that there might be better choices than *Hamlet*. Yet teachers, parents, and scholars continue to recommend *Hamlet* to adolescent readers. They may do so because of its role in shaping contemporary notions of modern consciousness and the power and beauty of the play's language. In his uncertainty, Hamlet can be seen as the prototypical modern, a man who often takes refuge from harsh material facts in the intricacies and indeterminacy of language. Yet exploring the play's relationship to the historical development of cultural theories of consciousness and language demands a conception of literary study (as well as teacher preparation) far removed from the skills development emphasis required by most high school and many entry-level college classes. The language of *Hamlet* and especially the titular character's speech are thus the much-worked ground of labor.

The power of the play's language, especially Hamlet's soliloquies and dialogue with others, is what attracts. And the attraction may be strong, for what Menand says of Holden Caulfield can also be said of Hamlet: "[He] is a demon of verbal incision" (82). Indeed, despite the fact that Hamlet is directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of five men by the play's conclusion, it is language, not action, that is his reputed form. For male students especially, the value of Hamlet's ability to outwit those around him is prized and celebrated. As one college student described the resolution of *Hamlet*, "Brute strength

wins in overtime, but all the attention in the end goes to Hamlet. That'll show them jocks . . . err, the King.”

Yet looking to the critics for means of developing students' interest in Hamlet's speech requires no little grasp of complex philosophical and philological debates. Indeed, to read criticism of the play's language can feel to those unschooled or removed from postmodern debates like being let loose in a dense thicket of linguistic and textual analysis intent on exploring what Shakespeare was doing or could do with words: the problem of textual authority (with three *Hamlets* to work with), the range and facility of Shakespeare's prose and poetry, his delight in rhetorical tricks—especially his love of doubling and antithesis—and the problem of language itself as a ground of meaning fill pages and books.

Yet like the critics, when teachers address the language of the play they often lean toward Hamlet's speech and, in part because of their own disciplinary focus on reading and writing skills, the soliloquies. The danger of such critical and teacherly focus on Hamlet's language, I believe, is a dissociation of Hamlet's speech from the social context in which it takes on meaning. Despite Horatio's friendship, Hamlet *is* isolated in the play, emotionally and socially. While adults often assume such isolation is a function of the human condition, it can have very different meanings for young people, who often naturalize social groups and forms of isolation entirely contingent on transitory forms of school and social life. Hence, an emphasis on Hamlet's language, while appearing as a content-driven exercise, may well reinforce the inevitability of Hamlet's social isolation and thus the tragedy that follows in great part from it.

On the other end of the pedagogical spectrum is the form of teaching in which the students' freedom to explore the text appears to outweigh the need for arriving at a complex understanding of it. Though there is no question that simply telling students what things mean teaches them little that will be useful to them in the long run, the advocacy of abandoning students to their own disparate and inexperienced readings or performances seems no solution to the problems teaching *Hamlet* presents. Given that the opening line of Hamlet's first speech is a clear expression of his desire for death, that he follows that claim with a declaration of despair—“How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” (1.2.133–34)—and that in grieving the loss of his father he transforms his sadness to rage at his mother's marriage, such a pedagogy teaches students that the nature and movement of Hamlet's language stands apart from the moral and existential questions raised by his claims. Worse, by refusing to engage such questions and help my students explore the means and possibilities for answering them, I lead them to believe not only that any reading of the text will do as long as it involves perfunctory attention to linguistic evidence, but that the question of violence—toward the self and/or others—is inconsequential to the study of the play.

Because of the cultural popularity of *Hamlet* as iconic Shakespeare, the effect of such pedagogical and disciplinary practices upon students' understanding of not only Shakespeare but the nature of literature is profound. As one student put it in response to the question of whether it is important to be familiar with *Hamlet*, "Yes. . . . *Hamlet* encompasses all of Shakespeare's ideas, thoughts, and views toward every aspect of life—making the experience of *Hamlet* more important than any of his other works." When combined with students' social cynicism and scholarly focus on highly specific forms of linguistic analysis, such beliefs work to affirm or generate students' sense that the figure of Hamlet is less tragic than ideal. More simply, students come to believe that Hamlet's painful social isolation (as a prince he has no peers, even Horatio's willingness to die with him seems less an expression of love than loyalty), his grief (at his father's death and his mother's quick and incestuous remarriage) and his loneliness (fearing his safety he must betray even his own heart: "I loved you not," he tells Ophelia) are the inevitable ends of any man of status and feeling. If such beliefs shaped only students' sense of a single work we might forego their study and simply stop teaching the work in question. But because Shakespeare is often presented as *a* if not *the* representative of English literature (and even of world literature) such conclusions shape students' sense not only of human nature and the possibilities for community but also their understanding of the role of language and art in the development of each.

### *Fatal Flaws*

The difficulty of attempting to help students attend to Shakespeare's language is often shaped by a disconnection between school-induced formal notions of Shakespeare's poetry and students' often private senses of the uses of such language. While students will generally admit they care little about the rhetorical tools at work in Shakespeare beyond their utility for advancing in school, such disinterest is no measure of the pleasure they often take in discovering the complexities and beauty of his language. In responding to the question of whether they enjoy the language of Shakespeare, student answers almost always divide neatly between a clear no (it's too "hard," i.e., too antiquated), and a yes that finds its explanation in private terms. Pleasure in poetry is hidden, rarely shared except in theatrical venues, even as students will readily admit the power of language to shape consciousness.

While students who take pleasure in Shakespeare's poetry might be seen as having the passion that could carry them energetically into the rigorous analytical practices of the discipline of literary study undertaken by professional critics, their sense of personal relationship—even trust—in the language distinguishes them from the professional critics. For contemporary critics, shaped

by the rise of postmodern theory in the '70s and '80s, *trust* might be the last word to describe the nature of language. A working assumption of postmodern theory is that language constitutes the undecidable terrain of human history and consciousness. To speak of trusting language, then, is to risk accusations of sentimentality or belief in the long disparaged transparency of language. In graduate school, like many, I was schooled in a skepticism rooted in distrust of language and the dangerous seductions of narrative. This skepticism was and continues to be motivated by valid ethical concerns about the uses and abuses of language and by complex understandings of the history of aesthetics in Western culture—understandings which our students are rarely familiar with or exposed to except in upper-level college English and philosophy courses. (Where would Nietzsche fit in secondary school accountability measures?)

Yet students, I've found, easily conform to the approaches of postmodernist instructors in college and not only because, as those who have made it to college, they've learned the game of school. Rather, such conformity is easy because such skepticism finds its counterpart in popular conceptions of the low cultural value of linguistic skill, except when used as a weapon. As students will readily explain, material wealth more than rhetorical skill speaks power in our culture. When presidents can't form a meaningful sentence without help from speechwriters, there is little use arguing the point. Nevertheless, as our national obsession with test scores reveals, we continue to equate verbal intelligence with academic success. The consequence is that personal and consequently collective experiences of the pleasure and power of language take refuge in the private homes of our students. The classroom reiterates what the social sphere of school insists: that what we care about is incidental to "success." Love, we teach our students, with all its requisite vulnerability is, ultimately, not very smart.

The consequences of such a conflation of cultural and disciplinary beliefs about the power of language to move us are grave for readers of *Hamlet*. This is especially so when combined with the gendered criticism of the play and contemporary students' misconceptions of literary tragedy. Each perspective leads students to believe that what happens to Hamlet in the course of the play is not only inevitable but in some sense *natural*. Put another way, each excludes the possibility of understanding Hamlet, as well as the other characters of the play, in ethical terms—that is, as figures of community who could have made different choices. Whether Hamlet is a "classic case" of the Oedipus complex (Freud, Jones 1910, Rose), an historical figure of the conflation of patriarchal mourning and melancholy in early modern England (Mullaney, Adelman), or a figural representation of the psychological or existential nature of the human experience (Garber, Mack) Hamlet is, such readings argue, a product of forces that determine his actions and consequently those of many others in the play.

For much less complex reasons, students also often believe that tragedy in general and the events of *Hamlet* in particular are the effect of inevitable conditions. With formulaic predictability my students will explain that, as a tragic hero, Hamlet is doomed to come to a bad end by his status as a great man who is too proud. The effect of a persistent misreading and mistranslation of Aristotle that has found its way into many high school and college classes, their sense of tragedy is in itself tragic—that is, generating a terrible loss out of a mistaken sense of what’s true. Attempting to define the kind of central figure required by tragedy, Aristotle defines the essence of tragedy as an imitation of “actions that excite [our] pity and fear” (Adams 56). By *action* Aristotle means the ways in which “personal agents, who necessarily possess distinctive qualities both of character and thought” are defined by their actions. Notably, Aristotle explains, “character determines men’s qualities, but it is in their actions that they are happy or the reverse” (53). Despite Aristotle’s unwavering emphasis on action as definitive, he nevertheless lapses into platonic essentialism in considering what kinds of men will necessarily excite the pity and fear of his imagined audience. Here is what he says:

It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented [which excites our pity and fear] must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that is *a man* who is not eminently good and just, yet *whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty*. He must be *one who is highly renowned and prosperous* . . . (56, emphasis mine)

Despite the complex argument about human identification and social class suggested by the passage, it is only the italicized lines that students often seem familiar with. In their retelling it is a “great” character’s “hubris” or “fatal flaw” that causes his (or her) downfall—a mistranslation of the original Greek word *hamartia*, rendered in this quotation more accurately as “error or frailty.” Unfortunately, such a mistranslation effectively undercuts Aristotle’s argument about action lying at the heart of tragedy—choice and its consequent moral drama are transformed into a determining aspect of a character’s psychology.

Reading *Hamlet* becomes in this way an exercise in affirming the inevitable nature of violence and death. As students have told me, when I've inquired about the role of violence in the play as a form of resolution: "violence is action, it is resolution." The work of imagination figured in Aristotle's notion of tragic identification, the opening of the heart to the suffering of others, is eclipsed. Even worse, as these students explain, we may experience relief when death finally arrives, having awaited it like the predictable escape of the hero in an action flick.

*Hamlet and the Ethics of Violence*

*Most great literature is so radical, it takes its knife so near the bone, that we sometimes don't want to deal with it. It is dangerous to stand in a classroom with literature in our hands.*

—Mary Rose O'Reilley

THE BELIEF OF STUDENTS AND CRITICS ALIKE THAT THERE IS NO alternative to the violence—emotional and physical—of *Hamlet* kept me from teaching it for a long time. But I have come to see that such belief ignores the risks and consequent possibilities of reading and teaching the play presents. If Aristotle's right, the possibilities of learning from tragedy require a willingness to feel for the human beings presented and the "unmerited misfortunes" they experience. Such willingness assumes an ethical relation between human beings and the role of feeling in developing and sustaining that relation. As great philosophers and any attentive teacher of young people can tell you, nurturing such openness involves clear and unavoidable risks.

Admittedly, given the baggage *Hamlet* comes with—including the critical and pedagogical traditions I've outlined—such openness often seems difficult to achieve. Students already know too much and too little. And the pressures of teaching are great. Talk with any teacher for any length of time about the forces that shape their choices and eventually you will discover a sense of limitation that finds its best expression in "time." There isn't enough of it, apparently, no matter where you are—elementary, secondary, or beyond, quarters or semesters. There is the demand for "coverage" and, more and more, for "accountability." Pressured and constrained, teachers find themselves making compromises simply to get through with a sense of having covered the bases. And despite the declining numbers of students required to read Shakespeare or *Hamlet*, the sense remains that *Hamlet* constitutes an important base. So teachers teach it as a rite of passage, perhaps sharing the history of its reception, some critical response, a few of the dramatic and cinematic productions, but

mostly they are pleased to get their students through it and, if they are lucky, to “enjoy it” by making room for theatrical play.

Given the lack of resources and support for teachers in many schools, there is little cause for blame or guilt. But could it be different? I have come to think so. For in teaching our students that making it through a “difficult” yet “essential” text is the primary goal, and that strong feeling about such texts, whether hate or love, is inessential to understanding, we are teaching them to close their hearts not only to the work they do, but to the experiences of others that constitute the very matter of art. Whether or not this has long been the case or is a product of the increasing speed of life in our world, I cannot say for sure. But now more than ever I believe it is time to consider teaching *Hamlet*, not as a “classic” whose preapproved status guarantees the nature of our students’ achievement even before they have begun, but as a play capable of arousing deep grief and compassion while developing students’ capacity for engaging profound moral and existential questions even as they learn the pleasure of poetry’s power. In what follows I suggest some possibilities for doing just this.

One of the greatest misconceptions among students today about Shakespeare and his contemporaries is that, as great artists, their work was original. Ask any student what associations they have with the word “imitation” and you will discover their negative sense of anything that is not new and unique. Rather than didactically explaining that Shakespeare stole the plots of almost all of his thirty-seven plays from other writers, or that imitation was the basis of education during the period—and admittedly I’ve done both—teachers can simply begin by helping their students recognize the conventional nature of *Hamlet*. That is, as one of the most useful guides to teaching *Hamlet* (by Australian teacher Bronwyn Mellor) argues, by exploring the nature of the revenge tragedy genre that Shakespeare was working with in writing *Hamlet*, students can begin to grapple with the historical and cultural context of Shakespeare’s work. Understanding the generic and hence communal nature of Shakespeare’s plays is a place to start. By hearing of or reading something of other popular revenge tragedies of the period (Mellor offers brief plot summaries)—*Thyestes*, *Gorbuduc*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, even Shakespeare’s own earlier attempt in *Titus Andronicus*—students may begin to view Shakespeare’s work not as some kind of Athena, popping full grown out of Shakespeare’s skull, but as a creative human response to a very specific historical and cultural moment. Developing students’ understanding of the genre of the play also allows them, Mellor argues, to identify conventions of the play, what she lists as “The Ingredients of Revenge.” These include a hesitating revenger, a villain, a ghost, a suffering heroine, murder, lust, madness—real and feigned—and physical horrors, such as torture and poisoning (6).

By providing students with such context, Mellor seeks to enlarge their sense of Shakespeare through comparative analysis of the plots and language of—as the list of ingredients suggests—apparently similar plays. More importantly from my perspective, in realizing that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is far from “original” in its basic ingredients, students may begin to consider other factors that might make it meaningful for Shakespeare’s audience as well as ourselves. The virtue of Mellor’s approach—beyond demystifying Shakespeare by illuminating his conventionality—is that it begs the question of revenge tragedy itself, a question implicit in the recurrent “ingredient” of the uncertain revenger. That is, why were—and why are—stories of such hesitant yet labyrinthine vengeance and finally wholesale violence so popular? What human and yet quite historical problems did and do revenge tragedies explore? Mellor attempts to situate “the moral and social implications of revenge” during the period by quoting at length from Gamini Salgado, an editor of several revenge tragedies from the period. Salgado, however, treats the popularity of the genre much as student misreaders of Aristotle do: as a natural event in the uneven process of social development. As Salgado explains it, while “the law condemned private revenge . . . there was still alive a tradition of private revenge dating from an older and more turbulent time when the power of the state to punish crime was neither codified in law or always effectual” (qtd. in Mellor 14).

The suggestion is that violence is the inevitable recourse of those without access to the strong arm of law. Such a claim implies that the more “developed” a society’s judicial system, the more the government overtakes the violence required to protect the social good from the harm of those who place their interests above the rest. While this might be a commonplace in teaching the history of Western politics and government, is it accurate or inevitable? And what happens to our sense of compassion if we are taught to believe so? As anyone touched by violence can tell you, the question of justice is far from simple. What is the nature of human relationship, especially when touched by violence? How accountable are we for one another? And how do we understand the role of violence in our lives?

I offer these questions not as problems to address to students directly, though I might, but as queries that open up the question of violence against self and others *Hamlet* explores. Violence may be an extremely popular form of resolution, but as Hamlet himself seems to intuit from the start and discovers clearly in the end, it is a risky and often losing game whether acted out by the individual or the state. Who then decides when violence is appropriate? Against the self? Against others? And how do and should we feel about the perpetrators and the victims of violence? Does the play help us in imagining alternatives to the violence represented in the play and which forms its resolution? If so,

what are they? If not, what is the purpose of a world in which violence is the inevitable end? Is it one we wish to claim and celebrate?

In attempting to engage student interest in *Hamlet*, teachers often make use of allusions to the play in contemporary cinematic productions such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Last Action Hero* or Steve Martin's *L.A. Story*. Such practices assume that until students overcome their historical distance from the play they cannot engage the issues of human existence, community, and artistic expression *Hamlet* raises. I have come to believe it can and often does work the other way: by realizing their own stake in the issues the play raises, students find the energy to negotiate the linguistic and historical distance that can make interpreting *Hamlet* difficult. Thus, rather than assuming that *Hamlet* (and by extension Shakespeare) is valuable for our students because of what they can learn about English literature or history in the process, we ought to take seriously the value of literature and (by extension) art to our own lives and hence to our students. That is, we ought to teach from the belief that the work matters to us in the profoundest sense and thus can and should matter to our students. While loving the poetry of *Hamlet* is a start, such love is not what connects the teacher to the student. Rather, it is the sense, conveyed by the teacher, that poetry, and more specifically Shakespeare's poetry, can make the student's life better, richer, and in the end more meaningful. The power of the language can be separated from such questions only by risking our own ethical relation to it. The challenge then is to connect students to the moral and existential questions at work in *Hamlet* in such a way that they can begin to forge their own aesthetic, linguistic, and moral responses to it.

I am convinced that there is more than one way to elicit such responses. But given the context of widespread anxiety and despair in young people's lives in the United States, and the fear if not the reality of violence, taking seriously the question of the ethics of violence to self and others at work in the play provides students an opportunity to connect their learning about Shakespeare and literature in general to issues of deep significance to them.

Consider then, as my students readily do, the similarities between the nature, desires, and actions of Hamlet and those of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the mass-murderer-suicides of Columbine fame. Like Hamlet, Harris and Klebold demonstrated above-average intelligence and had their trouble with the law rationalized by parents and local authorities. What a local police officer said of Harris might be said about Hamlet, given his trouble generating commitment to a course of action: "He is intelligent enough to achieve lofty goals as long as he stays on task and remains motivated" (qtd. in Aronson 39–40). Claudius's response to Hamlet's murder of Polonius—"[T]his vile deed / We must with all our majesty and skill / Both countenance and excuse" (4.1.29–31) describes as well the nature of parental and police response to

Klebold and Harris's burglary of stereo equipment as well as the death threat Harris made to a fellow student on the Internet. Like Hamlet, Harris and Klebold were rebuked for their refusal to conform to the dominant culture, and made their unhappiness known by their preferred forms of entertainment and dress, and by their intermittent public expression of despair and rage. Though Shakespeare doesn't specify the costumes of his characters, conventional staging of Hamlet as a man in black turns upon his mother's request that he "cast [his] nightly colour off" and his own defense of his "inky cloak" and "customary suits of solemn black" (1.2.68, 77–78). Harris and Klebold's famous attire of black trench coats and their general affection for gothic forms of dress and play were defended by them and by those who share their preference much as Hamlet did his own: "These indeed 'seem', / For they are actions that a man might play" (1.2.83–84). That they were indeed "the trappings and the suits of woe" seemed certain only after the fact of their own and their many victims' deaths (1.2.86). All three men long for vengeance against those that treat them with disrespect and struggle to embody what William Pollack calls the "Boy Code." In brief, this involves never showing weakness publicly, acting tough, engaging in risky behavior, achieving the appearance if not the reality of dominance by repressing feelings of inadequacy and fear, and masking feelings of vulnerability with anger (Pollack 23–25). "Isn't it fun finally to get the respect that we are going to deserve?" Harris asks Klebold and the imagined audience of the video they made before their massacre (Aronson 86). The mix of present and future tenses suggests the hope of honor redeemed and fear of inadequacy that marks Hamlet's speeches about his inability to avenge his father's death quickly and clearly. "Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—," Hamlet asks Horatio at the start of the final scene of the play. "He that hath killed my king and whored my mother, / Popped in between th' election and my hopes, / Thrown out his angle for my proper life, / And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?" (5.2.64–69).

Finally, among the similarities most profound between Hamlet and the Columbine killers is their declared love and concern for their parents. The only remorse expressed in the video Harris and Klebold left behind speaks to the effect of their actions on their parents and their desire to free them from a sense of responsibility. "They're going to be put through hell once we do this," Harris says (Aronson 40). Then in a tragic expression of his disconnection, Harris speaks to them directly. "There's nothing you guys could do about this" (Aronson 40). Indeed, Harris quotes Shakespeare in attempting to exonerate his parents' responsibility for his and Klebold's crimes: "Good wombs hath borne bad sons" (Aronson 40, *Tempest* 1.2.119). Hamlet's love of his father—"so excellent a king . . . so loving to my mother" (1.2.139–40) and his perverse devotion to his mother similarly shape our sense of his hidden vulnerability.

While such a comparison may shock by suggesting a parallel between literary and historical figures and thus obscuring the consequent nature of the violence they act out, it makes clear what students readily believe about literature: that in it, if it works, we discover what we didn't know we knew. That is, in art we recognize something like truth, an accurate representation of life as we have known it, but in such terms as teach us to understand such contexts more fully and deeply. Virginia Woolf calls such a quality "integrity" and though she uses the term to attack the work of feminist authors like Charlotte Brontë and to celebrate Shakespeare as an apolitical ideal, she makes clear through detailed rendering of her own reading that the recognition of such truth is no science but the outcome of the diverse circumstances of our lives.

By taking seriously Hamlet's grief and the desire for suicide with which the play opens—that is, the question of violence and the existential and moral questions such violence begs—I hope to offer my students the opportunity to see and judge the characters of the play and the language with which they are rendered in ethical terms. In doing so I aim to restore the possibility of pity and fear—of feeling—Aristotle argues is requisite to successful tragedy by restoring the possibility of imagining not only Hamlet's world and the tragic choices he makes within it but as well the alternatives he fails to see or choose. Among other things, detailing the similarities between Hamlet, Harris, and Klebold may help students take seriously the possibility that things might have been different. The juxtaposition of Hamlet with the Columbine killers is shocking in part because we think of Hamlet, and he is regularly taught, as different from the Columbine murderers precisely in his capacity for thought and feeling. Yet, like the Columbine killers, it is precisely Hamlet's inability to transform such thought and feeling into just rather than vengeful actions that constitutes the heart of his tragedy.

Many of my students insist initially that Hamlet has few or no choices given the threat of death his father's murder assumes. Unable to trust anyone, he uses verbal and physical violence to protect himself, they claim. Further, in distinction from the Columbine killers, Hamlet's violence is impulsive and unplanned. He doesn't want to hurt anyone, they explain, that's what all his equivocation is about. When I ask why he kills Polonius or abuses Ophelia these same students say he does so to protect himself. He hurts others because he feels unsafe. He has, they want to insist, no choice. When I challenge the assertion of his powerlessness and suggest that Shakespeare clearly does not place him in immediate danger in either his mother's chamber or his public exchange with Ophelia, they begin to question their certainty about his lack of choices. More significantly perhaps, such questioning leads to discussion of how such certainty about Hamlet's powerlessness determines their understanding of

tragedy. That is, if Hamlet has no choice, how can we conceive of him as either virtuous or malevolent? Are good and evil imposed on us? And if so, why do readers often pity Hamlet but loathe Gertrude?

Rather than assume the goodness or evil of such figures, I encourage my students to ask why Hamlet conceives of violence as his only option. Shakespeare points us toward an answer in Hamlet's opening appearance in the play. Here, we meet a Hamlet innocent of all the ghost will soon reveal of his father's murder. And it is his depth of feeling that defines him. Chastened by his mother and his uncle-now-king for the seeming impropriety of his grief at his father's death, he insists, I "know not 'seems'" (1.2.76). According to Hamlet all external actions are but "shows of grief" for only "that within . . . passeth show" (1.2.82, 85). Only the heart's feeling "can denote [him] truly," he declares (1.2.83). Instructed that feeling—beyond the "obsequious sorrow"—is "obstinate," "impious" and "unmanly," Hamlet struggles to put his heart away, wishing as he will repeatedly throughout the play for the courage to commit suicide (1.2.92–94). "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon against self-slaughter!" (1.2.129–132). Here as in his more famous "To be, or not to be" speech, Hamlet's despair in a world in which feeling is allowed but for show metamorphoses into a more conventionally masculine and hence acceptable form of feeling—rage at women. "Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146).

Rather than accept that Hamlet's rage at women is natural or inevitable, I ask that my students analyze the context in which Hamlet's grief turns to rage at others. For instance, what Hamlet accuses Ophelia of is in fact what is required of and performed erratically by him. "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance" (3.1.142–45). By playing "mad" in both its senses of enraged and insane, Hamlet does not have to confront the nature of his own love—for his father, his mother, Ophelia, or the world in which he lives—a world which his language makes so clear he grasps in all its paradoxical beauty. While psychoanalytic and gender critics often rightly point out that Hamlet repeatedly projects such "feminine" feeling and the vulnerability it is believed to betray onto the women in his life, such readings themselves often betray the assumption that feeling *is* a form of weakness or that there is no form of masculinity available to Hamlet or to Shakespeare's readers that does not demand such perverse denial of one's relationship to and need for others. Neither seems true to me, or especially helpful for students who must learn to live in a world of men and women. Indeed, if Hamlet is worth our attention it is precisely because he struggles with such beliefs and a world in which, now that his father is dead (though far

from gone), the costs of forging a manhood in which feeling and intelligence combine to resist brutality are clear even if the means of doing so are not.

Consider the trajectory Shakespeare presents between Hamlet's state of mind following his encounter with the ghost in the first act and the violence with which all his relationships end. Presented with the horrifying possibility that his uncle has murdered his father in order to usurp both his father's crown and his bed, and that his mother has conspired in these crimes if only by desiring the murderer, Hamlet is warned by the ghost of his father to "[l]eave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86–88). The confusion and grief consequent upon such a revelation and command, from a specter of his father, no less, who asks for vengeance—"If thou has nature in thee, bear it not" (1.5.81)—is expressed in his complaint that "[t]he time is out of joint. O cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.189–90). While often read as a conventional statement of humility, the next we hear of Hamlet is Ophelia's terrified report of his appearance in the privacy of her "chamber." According to Ophelia, Hamlet appears there "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" (2.1.79–85). Grabbing Ophelia's arm, he "raise[s] a sigh so piteous and profound / that it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being" (2.1.95–97).

While Hamlet's feeling here is often conflated with the rage he later displays, what happens to student understanding of Hamlet if we note the difference? The Hamlet in these lines admits a deep sense of grief and the human vulnerability it illuminates. Unlike the rage into which he metamorphoses his grief, such feeling draws him toward others, for only in shared vulnerability is there comfort. His rage, on the other hand, drives him away from others. His famous command to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery!" becomes in this way not simply an expression of misogyny (and it is that), but a desire to have all human vulnerability hidden. It is this rage, as well, that culminates in the murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius, Claudius, and the deaths of Hamlet himself and the women who indeed love him best. Though Horatio might seem the rare exception to this morbid scenario, even he believes suicide is the best measure of his love for Hamlet in the end.

By juxtaposing such an admittedly violent Hamlet with Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, my students begin to realize the ways in which we idealize some human beings in order to safeguard ourselves against fear of others—others whose lives we assure ourselves, for one reason and another, have less meaning or significance. In *Hamlet* those others are principally Polonius, Ophelia, and Gertrude, characters often dismissed as insignificant because

of their apparent powerlessness or lack of understanding.<sup>1</sup> Yet the very same judgments are often used to defend Hamlet. Given the vexing tension between the nature of the ghost and the weight of his claims, as well as Hamlet's own relative powerlessness and uncertainty, how can we blame him for acting out of fear? my students ask. And given the power of Claudius to command even Hamlet's closest friends, isn't Hamlet's verbal abuse of Ophelia and his murder of Polonius better conceived as forms of self-defense than abuses of power? Such questions are worth asking because they help to develop our sense of the moral and existential ground of the play. But if we start from the presumption of Hamlet's moral superiority we will never get there. By contextualizing the play—historically and generically—and by challenging the critical and cultural idealization of Hamlet, my students may recover a sense of what is at stake for Hamlet as a human being and hence what ultimately is lost. By challenging the assumption that violence is a means of effecting justice, I hope that my students may discover a capacity to learn to feel Hamlet's losses even as they fear the judgments that lead to such grief.

But he is not the only one my students need to feel for if they are to develop their sense of the tragedy of *Hamlet*. In grasping Hamlet's human weakness and vulnerability they are better poised to grasp the humanity of the other characters in the play. Not surprisingly, once students begin to see Hamlet not as a cultural hero but as a figure of grief and loss, their views of the other characters in the play deepen accordingly. They begin to notice not only Ophelia's capacity for compassion implicit in her description of Hamlet's appearance in her chamber, cited earlier, but also the spirited integrity manifest in her request to her brother, when he warns her against loving the prince, that he not "show [her] the steep and thorny way to heaven / Whilst like a puffed and reckless libertine / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads" (1.3.48–50). Consequently, they are better situated to observe the nature of her destruction at the hands of those she loves most—her father, brother, and Hamlet.

Indeed, looking closely at Ophelia, we glimpse the seeds of another story at the heart of *Hamlet*, a story not of violence and death but love. Asked by the king and her father to betray Hamlet's trust by encouraging his confidence while the "fathers" listen in, Ophelia agrees. Worse, as a test of her lover's intentions, she attempts to return to him "remembrances," which he meets with denial. When Hamlet insists that he "never gave [her] aught," Ophelia's mask is thrown off and she insists on the truth of his love of her. "My honoured lord, you know right well you did, / And with them words of so sweet breath composed / As made the things more rich" (3.1.99–101). Caught in a game of rejection and denial, Hamlet attacks Ophelia's beauty as the signature of human weakness, a weakness he associates with his love for her. This love,

Shakespeare makes clear in their exchange, is what Hamlet both feels and fears admitting. “I did love you once,” Hamlet confesses (3.1.116). “Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so,” Ophelia returns, no longer trusting her own sense of things yet affirming for Hamlet once again the power of love to shape our experience of the world (3.1.117). It is a power, Hamlet’s answer reveals, he cannot face. “You should not have believed me,” Hamlet retorts, “for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but she shall relish of it. I loved you not” (3.1.118–119). Terrified of the risks of love—of trust and the possibility of loss all trust admits—he chooses instead the certainty of death and the story of sin which guarantees it. As the footnote to the *Norton Shakespeare* edition assures students, “Virtue grafted onto fallen human nature cannot eradicate completely the taste (“relish”) of original sin” (Greenblatt 1706).

In her book *The Birth of Pleasure* Carol Gilligan argues that “[t]he foundational stories we tell about Western civilization are stories of trauma” (6). Gilligan focuses on the ancient stories of Oedipus, the *Oresteia*, and the Book of Genesis, pointing out how in all these stories “a trauma occurs in a triangle composed of two men and a woman” (7). Gilligan is not interested in rehearsing a by now familiar feminist critique of these narratives. Instead she seeks to offer a counternarrative that might help us hear where the voice of love and pleasure “drops off and a tragic story takes over” (5). She finds this story in the ancient wives’ tale of Psyche and Cupid. What she says of that love story is useful in considering the significance of how we understand Hamlet and Ophelia and the tragic ends they come to. Like *Hamlet*, “Psyche and Cupid is a love [story] that takes place in a culture that is unraveling; the myth of the magical princess does not have its predicted happy ending. Instead . . . we are shown what happens to the psyche—soul, breath, and blood—when one becomes an object in the eyes of other people, what happens to love or desire when one is used as the instrument of another’s revenge; we see the difficulty of choosing love in the midst of confusion” (33). Both Hamlet and Ophelia are used in this sense—Hamlet by the ghost of his father, and Ophelia by all the men who claim to love her: her brother, father, and beloved. And neither is able to choose love, to claim it openly in the midst of the confusion that surrounds them. Both their lives end with violence yet their means are different—while Ophelia turns inward, her inability to resolve the contradictions that structure her sense of what love entails resulting in insanity, Hamlet turns outward, attacking the living signs of his own vulnerability in others. Both nevertheless are figures of deep despair.

Encouraged to read them in this way, students may discover that Ophelia’s mad speech constitutes an inversion of Hamlet’s. Both fail to conform to the expectations of others. Yet Ophelia is described as “[d]ivided from herself and her fair judgement, / Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts”

(4.5.81–82). Horatio claims that “[h]er speech is nothing” but nevertheless “doth move / The hearers to collection” (4.5.7–9). Prepared by conventional renderings on stage and screen to see her as a “crazy lady,” students are often surprised to discover that Ophelia’s mad speech speaks boldly of the bad bargain offered her for love.

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day  
 All in the morning betime,  
 And I a maid at your window  
 To be your Valentine.  
 Then up he rose and donned his clothes,  
 And dugged the chamber door;  
 Let in the maid, that out a maid  
 Never departed more.  
 . . .  
 Alack, and fie for shame!  
 Young men will do’t if they come to’t,  
 By Cock, they are to blame.  
 Quoth she, “Before you tumbled me,  
 You promised me to wed.”  
 So would I a’ done, by yonder sun,  
 An thou hadst not come to my bed. (4.5.47–54, 58–64)

Like *Psyche*, Ophelia is offered a very bad bargain—in exchange for love she is asked to be blind, to refuse to see herself as whole (not just a body but a soul), and hence to see those who claim to love her, those whom she believes love her, as monstrous in their willingness to treat her as an object. Grieving this bargain she finds refuge in madness, and finally a passive acceptance of her own death. Polonius and Gertrude make equally bad bargains, trading their integrity for the protection of the father-king, sacrificing love—Polonius’s for his children, Gertrude’s for her son—for the appearance of propriety and the relative safety it provides.

What distinguishes Hamlet is the space Shakespeare provides for consideration of the bargain he makes in the course of the play. What does it mean “to be, or not to be” (3.1.58)? To “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (3.2.16–17)? Yet despite the eloquence and depth of Hamlet’s study of human life, in the end he is unable to take responsibility for his acts, a responsibility even belief in predestination does not erase. “Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet” he tells the son of the man he’s murdered. “If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away, / And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes, / Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it” (5.2.170–73). Hamlet

chooses revenge, slowly but surely throughout the play—in his cruelty toward Ophelia, in his facile arrangement for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths, in his murder of Polonius, and finally with his exuberant execution of the king. And what is it he wants? As any student can readily tell you, what Hamlet wants is a world in which authentic feeling—the love he feels for his father, Ophelia, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, among others—is celebrated rather than feared or exploited. The great tragedy of *Hamlet* in this sense is the titular character’s inability, despite his gifts, to find a way to resist the bargain he’s offered by the ghost: the exchange of a father’s acceptance for the possibility of honest relationships with those he loves. Love becomes then a weapon in an arsenal of violence aimed at securing the self from a loss enacted by the bargain itself. “I loved Ophelia,” Hamlet declares from the pit of her grave. Unable to reveal his love to her himself, he can nevertheless unthinkingly use it as a weapon against her brother when Laertes threatens his status as aggrieved lover. “Forty thousand brothers / Could not, with their quantity of love, / Make up my sum,” he declares (5.1.254–56).

Shaped by other experiences of the play and our own culture’s taste for violence as a form of resolution, my students sometimes believe that the play offers no alternatives to violence. Resisting such views, I point out that the ghost’s distinction between the dire vengeance to be wreaked on Claudius and the space for conscience and divine judgment he demands for Gertrude suggests the possibility that forms of justice other than violence are indeed possible. The ghost goes further, however. In directing Hamlet not to seek to punish his mother for her “falling off,” he warns Hamlet to “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.47, 85) pointing to the corruption of self involved in the judgment revenge requires. That Hamlet cannot sustain such divided consciousness is affirmed by the ghost’s reappearance in Gertrude’s “closet.” Hamlet, in preparing for violence against Claudius, has had to harden his heart against his mother’s humanity and the relation between that life and his own. “Have you forgot me?” she asks him. His answer betrays what he fears to remember. “No, by the rood, not so./ You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife./ But—would you were not so—you are my mother” (3.4.13–16). Her response to his rejection of their relation, “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?” illustrates her understanding of what follows from such alienation (3.4.21).

It has taken me a long time to come to such a reading. Like my students I have had to evade the ideal Hamlet to find one that was meaningful to me and thus could be meaningful to my students. The *Hamlet* I have come to teach then is one that begs the question of how the tragic losses of Columbine could have been prevented. But I did not invent it. Shakespeare makes clear, I believe, Hamlet’s desire for a world where the strength of relationship, of love and compassion, rather than the power to dominate, secures the meaning

of our existence in the face of the inevitable suffering living entails. In the end he is incapable of acting on that desire and the consequences are tragic. After all, then, Aristotle is right. It is not his thoughts that define him but his actions. When we celebrate Hamlet, it is his capacity for thoughtfulness, his intelligence, and his capacity for feeling that we often note. But these gifts alone do not protect or lift him from despair. Why is that? Often, the answer suggested by students and teachers alike is that Hamlet's intelligence, his capacity for feeling about the world and those he loves within it, are not signs of his shared humanity but of his uniqueness. As one teacher I observed put it, "what makes Hamlet so admirable is that he is so sensitively conscious . . . [yet] the richness and variety of his mind are misunderstood by those around him." When a student responded that "Hamlet is the figure of a great intellect who is destroyed by bringing himself down to the level of others less capable of introspection," sadly, the professor answered, "Yes, you're right."

The remarks from students with which I began suggest such idealization of Hamlet's isolation often excludes readers, many young women among them, who see relationship and care, rather than power, as the most worthy human aims. But idealizing Hamlet does something worse than reenact a typical gendered hierarchy between an ethic of power and that of care. In celebrating Hamlet as a figure of isolation we risk teaching our students that the beauty of Hamlet's language and the pleasure it brings are useless in our struggle to create a world in which tragic endings are not inevitable. Put another way, what is left out of such approaches is the power of language to move the human heart. Dependent on understandings of beauty rooted in human relationship and community, the experience of language as expressions of human feeling are nevertheless considered, as the male student just quoted suggests, the province of private sentiment. Celebrating Hamlet as a figure of linguistic power works consequently to confirm students' view that the most effective use of language is as a weapon and a shield—a means of shielding the heart and transforming grief into the power of rage.

The tragic irony of such a reading is made explicit when we consider the cultural work of Shakespeare's play in a country in which school violence is no longer shocking. For *Hamlet*, I have come to believe, offers a wealth of opportunities for exploring what is lost when human beings, capable of pity and fear, fixate on knowledge (and the power it is assumed to secure) rather than understanding as the highest good. Hamlet's desire to fix Claudius's guilt becomes in this sense a negative example of our own desire to fix the truth of *Hamlet* in binary terms: the strong and the weak, the intelligent and the ignorant. Encouraging our students to pity and fear the anxieties of age and class at work in Polonius's petty meddling, the innocence of Ophelia's love for the men in her life, or the sense of inadequacy that culminates in Claudius's

murder of his brother, can only develop their sense of Hamlet's pain and suffering. For if the lives and deaths of these characters mean nothing to us, how can we pity Hamlet's losses or fear the confusion that leads him to such an end?

In the end then, answering my student's question—why read *Hamlet*?—has forced me to connect my belief in the social role of art to my practice as a Shakespeare teacher. More specifically, I have determined that poetry in its ancient, larger sense of the beautiful—a beauty which is deeply human in its expression of love and the grief it arouses in us for the suffering, the “unmerited misfortune,” that marks human life—can and must be something more to my students than an introduction to that story as it has been told. I teach literature because it has the potential to awaken a consciousness of the relationship between the self and the world. In the Buddhist tradition such openness to relationship is called *bodhichitta*, a Sanskrit word that means “noble or awakened heart” (Chödrön 86). Though many fear that such openness begs a kind of hopelessly subjective immersion into the self or feeling, in fact the opposite is true. Hardened objectivity constitutes a kind of isolation which in turn generates its own prison of feeling; fear of the unknown. As Parker Palmer puts it, “The shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world. And how could it be otherwise?” (1993, 21). Acknowledgment of such a relationship articulates the responsibility of the knower for both the self and the known, for living in community—a community that occupies the present, the past, and the imagined future. Teaching *Hamlet* with such questions in mind, I have discovered, can begin to offer both my male and female students a *Hamlet* that serves them by challenging them to understand the nature of tragedy in deeply historical yet communal human lives. Will such experiences prevent social violence? Not alone. But imagining how it could, I offer my students a very different kind of reading practice, one that I hope will lead to a very different story than the one Harris and Klebold wrote with their lives. Ironically, perhaps, doing so also honors Shakespeare's gift for representing such tragedy and the human grief consequent upon failures in preventing it. Even today the poets teach us how to imagine such work. So, to end where we might begin . . .

*Some Words for Hamlet*, by William Stafford

Listen—I lived by the river a long time:  
 none of the fish ever said anything. Hamlet,  
 calm down: your ghost has led you  
 over an edge.

You filed your tongue, those quiddities  
 a haunted mind can find, your hand a shadow

about the brow that stopped the sun,  
your skull a grave.

Look—even in summer, now and then a leaf will fall.  
Every mind, when it comes to that, is a haunted  
mind. And even if your skull is a grave  
you can't bury the stars.

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*Endnote*

<sup>1</sup>For an example of how this happens in classrooms see Pace and Townsend.