

Performance and Authentic Expression: The Soliloquies in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

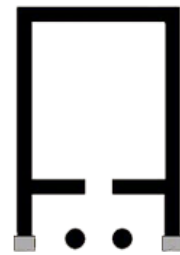
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antae

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Performance and the Expression of Feelings:

The Soliloquies in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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The *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines 'soliloquy' as 'a formal device by which a dramatic character, alone on the stage, reveals feelings, thoughts and motives in speech to the audience'.¹ Over the course of theatrical history, there have been three different types of soliloquies: those in which the characters engage in self-address, those in which the characters address the audience, and interior monologues.² In early modern drama—as opposed to Greek drama, where audience-addressed speeches were more frequent due to the presence of the Chorus—self-addressed soliloquies were frequently employed, especially in the works of Shakespeare. The Renaissance character would try to understand his own thoughts or actions (as King Lear does in his search for redemption) or talk himself into doing something (as is evident in Macbeth's soliloquies). The device of the soliloquy is explicitly described in *All's Well that Ends Well* by the Steward who tells the Countess that he has overheard Helena's offstage soliloquy: 'she [...] did communicate to herself her own words to her own ears; she thought [...] they touch'd not any stranger sense'.³ This statement shows that soliloquies usually portray a character in the midst of a private struggle, voicing emotions and ideas that he or she would not share with any other person, even though in some cases (unknown to the soliloquist) an eavesdropper might be present. Especially in *Hamlet*, soliloquies also throw light on Shakespeare's artistic representations of human beings—what Harold Bloom calls Shakespeare's 'invention of the human' and the 'internalization of the self'—and on the way human beings perceive themselves and the human condition.⁴ As Samuel Johnson notes, Shakespeare's:

chief skill was in human actions, passions, and habits: he was therefore delighted with such tales as afforded numerous incidents, and exhibited many characters in many changes of situations. These characters are so copiously diversified, and some of them so justly pursued, that his works may be considered as a map of life [...]. The love and

¹ Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 227.

² James Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies* (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), p. 13.

³ William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by G.K. Hunter (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), I.3.104 (p.26).

⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), p. 409.

hatred, the hopes and fears of his chief personages are such as are common to other human beings.⁵

This suggestion draws attention to the paradox that soliloquies—which arguably constitute some of the most contrived speeches in drama—have long been accepted as being authentic expressions of human emotions and forming part of faithful representations of the human being (what Percy Shelley calls ‘forms more real than living men’).⁶ For this reason, I will be reconsidering the association between soliloquy and authenticity in order to address the question of whether a soliloquy should be regarded as an authentic expression of emotions or as a calculated performance that the character stages intentionally and rhetorically, while knowing that he is being heard by an audience.

A lot has been said about the link between authentic expression and the use of soliloquies. It has been argued that soliloquies tell the audience something about the characters, especially about their inner consciousness and their emotional states. Alex Newell suggests that ‘the periodic revelation of a character’s mind in soliloquy [...] gives a sense of encountering the character’s truest self’.⁷ Soliloquies bring out and highlight aspects of character that may already be evident in other speeches or actions and also assist the character’s development. Harold Bloom similarly states that in Shakespeare, ‘characters develop [...] because they reconceive themselves. Sometimes this comes about because they *overhear* themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others’.⁸ Through the soliloquies, the audience also overhears the characters talking. In this way, soliloquies create a certain degree of intimacy and construct an emotional bridge between the audience and the characters due to the fact that the soliloquists offer themselves to the audience as part of their need to express their emotions and simultaneously reflect on their wordiness. In fact, Hamlet himself acknowledges and criticises his need to ‘unpack [his] heart with words’.⁹

By convention, a character speaks the truth in soliloquy, thus revealing his or her innermost thoughts and emotions. In his first soliloquy, which acts as an elegy for his father, Hamlet recalls how tenderly and protectively his father loved his mother and how passionately she loved him. This soliloquy is Hamlet’s expression of grief, anger and disgust at his mother Gertrude, his uncle Claudius and the world around him: ‘How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, seem to me all the uses of this world’ (I.2.133). This statement echoes and foreshadows Marcellus’s comment that ‘something is rotten in the state of Denmark’ (I.4.90). Stephen Greenblatt contends that, in this soliloquy, Hamlet also ‘discloses himself as tortured by obsessive recollections’.¹⁰ Rather than being concerned

⁵ Samuel Johnson (1753), cited in J.I.M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1949), p. 1.

⁶ Percy Shelley, cited in Harold Bloom, p. 7.

⁷ Alex Newell, *The Soliloquies in Hamlet: The Structural Design* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 19.

⁸ Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. xvii.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Methuen Drama, 2006), II.2.520. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 213.

with matters of state, his troubled mind seems to be compulsively obsessed with family matters, especially Gertrude's hasty remarriage to Claudius.

Here we are also introduced to Hamlet's extremely meditative nature. Ford states that 'it is in the soliloquies that we find practically all the evidence for the view of Hamlet as one who delays to act'.¹¹ In the soliloquy after his encounter with the ghost, Hamlet seems determined on revenge. There is a shift from passiveness to a spirit of excited determination to take action, but the impression that his determination should promise action is a false one. In fact, in the same speech he lingers on to discuss his obligation to remember his father for as long as he is able to do so:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
[...]
Now to my word;
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'
I have sworn 't. (I.5.98-112)

Shifting from a focus on revenge to one on remembrance, he thus delivers an ardent discussion on how he would remember his father's commandment to remember him.¹² Here, Hamlet also reveals his psychological shock, evoked through his use of rhetorical questions, short phrases, and exclamations, as well as through the constant switching from one subject to another:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! – what else? –
And shall I couple hell? [...] Remember thee? [...] Remember thee?
[...] Yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables! Meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain –
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark. (I.5.92-109)

As Wolfgang Clemen observes, 'Shakespeare had realised early on that the thoughts of a man talking to himself do not follow one another in an ordered and logical sequence'.¹³ Kenneth Branagh also states that this soliloquy evokes the sense of a man who is emotionally 'trying to hold himself together'.¹⁴

¹¹ Boris Ford, *The Age of Shakespeare: A Guide to English Literature* (London: Cassell, 1961), p. 203.

¹² Greenblatt, p. 208.

¹³ Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (London: Methuen, 1987; repr. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁴ Mary Z. Maher, *Modern Hamlets and their Soliloquies: An Expanded Edition* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. 209.

This becomes evident in the soliloquy where Hamlet deliberates whether to kill Claudius or not while he is in prayer. In this scene, Shakespeare enacts an intense juxtaposition of Claudius and Hamlet's soliloquies which brings out a stark contrast between Claudius's penitent expression and Hamlet's vengeful passion; a contrast which is also sustained visually by the image of the helpless king on his knees while Hamlet, with his sword drawn, engages in an analysis of what constitutes genuine revenge. Adopting a brutal tone and tough language, Hamlet appears more overtly in the role of an avenger, albeit one who has conflicting emotions:

'Now might I do it, but now 'a is a-praying;
And now I'll do it – and so 'a goes to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd. (III.3.73-5)

Whereas Claudius has just been seen in his attempt at penitence, Hamlet is seen violating the spirit of Christian repentance and relishing the passion for revenge that is taking hold of him. In contrast to Claudius, Hamlet thinks in the terms of classical pagan revenge: he assumes and accepts the obligation to exact revenge. And yet, it is ironic how by the end of this soliloquy Claudius is resolved and Hamlet is not.

When Hamlet suddenly withdraws from killing Claudius—realising that if he kills him at that moment, he would not be exacting revenge but rather doing Claudius a favour—one notices that there is also something bizarre in Hamlet's twisted thinking. He postpones an act of revenge because his beliefs tell him that Claudius appears to be 'in purging of his soul' and is therefore 'fit and seasoned for his passage' (III.3.85-6). The grotesque contradiction of values is amplified when Hamlet says: 'Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent', a time when 'he [Claudius] is about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't' (III.3.88-90). The fact that Hamlet finds reasons not to murder Claudius, together with the fact that he lingers on in his speeches to discuss the obligation to remember his father, shows his conflicting deliberations and his tendency to convert his intentions into language rather than turning them into actions.

Meanwhile, in his first soliloquy, King Claudius admits his guilt and hopes for divine mercy for his brother's murder. Claudius cannot relinquish what he has gained from his crime – '*My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen*' (III.3.55). He is 'still possess'd / of those effects' (III.3.53-54) in the sense that he cannot free himself from them and unconsciously wants to hold on to them. His emotional struggle with his guilt appears to win Hamlet and the audience's sympathy.

Despite the fact that Claudius is having this attack of conscience, one should remember that exactly before the Prayer scene, he has already made the decision to send Hamlet to England, and later there is also the subsequent revelation of his intention to have Hamlet executed there. In his soliloquy in Act IV Scene III, Claudius discloses his secret plan for Hamlet's death in England, a stark contrast to the forceful recognition of guilt in his first soliloquy. The audience becomes aware of Claudius's spiritual degeneration and his will to get rid of Hamlet. Thus, Claudius's soliloquy makes us question how true his feelings of guilt and plea for forgiveness are. His soliloquy does not appear to be linked to changes in

his decision-making or in broader policy; rather, they are merely impassioned outbursts of his phases of self-reflection which do not deflect him from his course. They confirm him in his chosen path. Once he realises that Hamlet knows about his crime because of the impact that the enactment of *The Mousetrap* has on him, Claudius decides to send Hamlet to his death. As Alex Newell argues, 'the fullest subtext of some of Claudius's lines in the soliloquy, and of his conflict in general, 'apparently now involves the emotional strain of having another murder in mind, to silence Hamlet and thereby protect both his life', and, in his words, 'those effects for which I did the murder' (III.3.54).¹⁵

The soliloquy, then, is not simply an expression of Claudius's guilty conscience and his spiritual anguish, but presents a conflict that 'ends in the defeat of conscience and [...] in the triumph of Claudius's sinister intention'.¹⁶ Furthermore, after Hamlet leaves, one notices the dramatic irony in the final couplet of Claudius's soliloquy:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (III.3.97-8)

The audience, having the possibility of witnessing the whole soliloquy, is made aware of his pretence. Claudius's words reveal that even though Hamlet catches the conscience of the king, he has been deceived by appearance. Indeed, Claudius only looks as if he has been praying and his efforts to appeal to God prove to be unsuccessful. While he deceives Hamlet he also deceives himself because his thinking drifts towards another murder while being simultaneously concerned with repentance.

This instance shows that while the definition of 'soliloquy' as a device through which one expresses one's true feelings while alone on stage may often ring true, it can also be limiting due to the fact that there is often a tension between what is and what seems.¹⁷ Lily Campbell argues that the soliloquies enable us 'to trust the characters to tell the truth about themselves'.¹⁸ And yet, if the character is sharing his thoughts and emotions with us, how can he truly be alone? When it comes to Hamlet, for instance, this question might especially resonate among the audience because of how explicitly Hamlet has made his intention to beguile and deceive others. When he delivers his soliloquies, is he aware of our presence, and if so, are his soliloquies deceiving us in the same way that his 'antic disposition' is supposed to deceive other members of the court?¹⁹ As Harold Bloom notes, '[o]ne of our many perplexities with Hamlet is that we never can be sure when he is acting Hamlet, with or without an antic disposition'.²⁰ In this way, the bridge of trust and intimacy that is said to exist between the soliloquist and the audience is rendered suspect.

¹⁵ Newell, p. 113.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ For the purposes of this paper, the term *contrivance* is used to refer to the artificiality of speech and the power of language to deceive others. By *authentic expression*, I understand the sincerity of thoughts and emotions, however incongruous and paradoxical they may be.

¹⁸ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (London: Methuen & Co, 1970), p. 112.

¹⁹ If the purpose of his 'antic disposition' is to hide his true feelings and intentions from the court spies, it should also be noted that it has the reverse effect of setting Claudius – the person it was most meant to deceive – and his courtiers on the trail of his inner mystery.

²⁰ Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 402.

This, in turn, begs the following question: are Hamlet's soliloquies always an expression of his inner emotions? If not, are they just a façade that he enacts to deceive the audience or an indication of his inability to engage in a faithful self-representation despite his willingness to do so? Since some of Hamlet's soliloquies dramatise the difficulties encountered in giving truthful expression to one's inner self when engaging in introspection, it is important to reconsider the truthfulness or otherwise of these soliloquies.

The opposing views on the truthfulness or contrivance of the soliloquies are reflected in the dilemmas faced by directors and actors when they deliberate how to deliver a soliloquy: should it be regarded as a private expression of authentic thoughts and feelings or as a performance which the character is staging intentionally while keeping the audience in mind? As John Barton, a founding director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, remarks:

There's one particular kind of set speech which many actors find the hardest problem of all. What should they do with a soliloquy? A situation in which a character is almost alone and seems to be talking to himself. Should such a speech be done to oneself, or should it be shared with the audience?²¹

In her study of how modern actors have chosen to perform Hamlet's soliloquies, Mary Z. Maher refers to two ways of managing soliloquies. These are the internalized method and the externalized method. The internalized method refers to the delivery of a soliloquy in which the actor speaks to himself and the audience is overhearing, while the externalised method involves the actor making eye contact with the audience and interacting with it.²²

Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' speech in particular has instigated widespread perspectives as to how it should be staged.²³ The reason is that the stage directions preceding and following it are so scant that it is unclear whether the speech is indeed a soliloquy which Hamlet speaks to himself, or a calculated performance which Hamlet delivers while knowing that he is being overheard. This soliloquy can be interpreted as an expression of Hamlet's despair and disillusion as he is seen wavering between life and death. In Lawrence Olivier's production of the play (1948), the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy follows the nunnery scene and takes place outdoors. This creates a sense of privacy and shows that Hamlet is indeed engaged in a conversation with his inner self. In this interpretation, it becomes evident that the main focus of the soliloquy is on Hamlet's personal dilemma and his contemplation of suicide. In Olivier's rendition, this atmosphere is accentuated by having Hamlet leaning over a precipice and drawing a dagger, moving on to contemplate the temptation of suicide – a demonstration that he is a man who cannot make up his mind – until he finally tosses it into the sea as a symbol that he has given up the contemplation of suicide.

²¹ John Barton, quoted in William E. McDonnell, 'The Shakespearean Soliloquy: A Problem of Focus', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 10 (1990), 227-234, (p.227).

²² Maher, p. xiv.

²³ *ibid.*, p. xi.

However, Hamlet's use of euphemisms and metaphors in this soliloquy, together with the supposed poignancy of expression, suggests that it is a 'purple patch' that evinces contrivance and deception. Critics like Linwood E. Orange claim that in this soliloquy, Hamlet knows that he is being overheard by Claudius and Polonius, and therefore view it not as an authentic outpouring of emotion but as a deliberate attempt on the part of Hamlet to convince them that he is mad and contemplating suicide.²⁴ The Second Quarto of the play shows that Hamlet has an opportunity to become aware of Claudius and Polonius's scheme to spy on him. Polonius's utterance, 'I hear him coming: withdraw, my lord,' does not stop Hamlet from being aware of Polonius and Claudius's presence well before Polonius became aware of Hamlet's (III.1.54). This would mean, therefore, that Hamlet arrives on stage just in time to see the spies hide.

In Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film version of the play, Hamlet walks along a wall of mirrors behind which Claudius and Polonius can be seen reflected and yet concealed. Whether Hamlet sees them or not is unclear, but there is definitely a staginess and a level of awareness on Hamlet's part that is evident in his looks of suspicion. This is confirmed by a 1997 letter from Branagh to Edna Zwick Boris in which he says: 'I therefore chose to play the idea that he suspected people [...] might be listening'.²⁵ Branagh notes that there is 'a cautiousness – partly due to his instincts, and partly due to his intellect – so he gets rather caught up in the idea of being watched'.²⁶ The scene is not simply reflective or contemplative, but also underpinned with suspense. Hamlet draws his dagger and as he says, 'And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action', he touches the blade to the mirror (III.1.85-6). The reaction shot reveals Claudius behind, flinching. In a speech full of antithesis and opposing ideas, it is apt that the major visual image is a mirror which reflects the subject (Hamlet) in opposition to himself, a position reminiscent of Jacques Lacan's *mirror stage*, in which the image of unity that is offered to the subject is subverted by the very imaginary identity that is reflected in the mirror.²⁷ Simultaneously, this visual image allows him to 'meet' his 'mighty opposite' in Claudius behind the mirrored door. The mirrors, thus, simultaneously create a double audience and a double message: one given to Hamlet (who is deliberating whether or not to kill himself), and one to Claudius (the murderer of Hamlet's father).

Another layer of meaning is, of course, meant to be deciphered by the film audience. We never know for sure if Hamlet knows that he is being observed, but there is a strong suspicion that Hamlet is aware of Claudius and Polonius's presence. The mirror thus enables Hamlet to

see first of all his own face. [...] [T]he mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because [he] cover[s] it with the

²⁴ Linwood E. Orange, "Hamlet's Mad Soliloquy," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (winter 1965): 60-71.

²⁵ Edna Zwick Boris, 'To Soliloquise or not to Soliloquise', in: *Stage Directions in Hamlet: New Essays and New Directions*, ed. by Hardin L. Aasand (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), p. 128.

²⁶ Maher, p. 217.

²⁷ The motif of the mirror in this production also suggests that the self can be an audience to the self in delivering a soliloquy. The soliloquies can also be discussed in terms of to what extent they allow the soliloquist to discover the inner self.

persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.²⁸

When Hamlet confronts his double in the mirror, he gains insight into his own state of mind and his deepest feelings, secreted away behind the masks of his public persona, and yet at the same time, he tries to (mis)represent his private self through public speech acts, the effect of which might ironically be to conceal the inner truths he claims to impart.²⁹ As Jacques Derrida observes, the negative traits of unreliability and duplicity are also at work in speech because it does not constitute 'pure expression'.³⁰ The people who are listening to the speech are interpreting Hamlet's utterances; a process which may lead to more misunderstanding and deceit. Edna Zwick Boris makes reference to an 1844 anonymous review in a clipping at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon that says Claudius and Polonius 'should be seen listening, and seen also by Hamlet'.³¹ It can be argued, therefore, that Hamlet's soliloquies serve as a means to hide his true feelings and intentions from the court.³²

The argument that Hamlet is trying to hide his true thoughts is corroborated by the fact that this soliloquy shows his ability to convert the personal into general speculations about the human condition. Instead of 'I', 'my' and 'me', we find the first person plural, 'we', 'our' and 'us', which shows that Hamlet is considering universal feelings. Even though the soliloquies may be reflective, they are not always intimate or personal. The 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is innovative in the way it enables the soliloquist to consider the human situation more generally.³³ There is no reference to Hamlet's father, his mother and Claudius. Hamlet ponders on the ramifications of life and death, equating life with suffering and misery. Referring to different calamities that touch the human condition, ranging from 'the oppressor's wrong' to 'the pangs of despis'd love' and 'the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes' (III.1.70-73), Hamlet points out that one would choose to bear those miseries because of 'the dread of something after death' (III.1.77). He is willing to explore the complexities of the human thought and the human condition, and questions his ability to set right a world in which 'the time is out of joint' (I.5.186), endowing heroic action with more perception and rationalisation, while rendering it more inward and personal. Nevertheless, by the end of the soliloquy one is still unable to fully understand what self-image Hamlet is presenting – be that of a man who is contemplating suicide, an avenger debating whether or not to act and kill his father's murderer or simply considering the human condition more generally. The soliloquies further demonstrate

²⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, ed. by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, and William McGuire, 2nd edn (New York: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 20.

²⁹ Considering that *Hamlet* is play in which the private is inextricably linked to the public life, this can be expounded upon through further discussion on the connection between soliloquies, the performance of self and the possibility of misrepresenting oneself to oneself and to the others.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 40.

³¹ Edna Zwick Boris, p. 127.

³² If concealment and duplicity is Hamlet's aim, though, it should be noted that this 'antic disposition' seems to have the reverse effect of setting courtiers on the trail of his mysterious actions.

³³ Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 115.

Hamlet's constant struggle to find a language through which he can express himself. Even though he might want to deceive those around him and the audience through his contrived use of language, the soliloquies reveal one essential, albeit paradoxical, truth: in his awareness of the deceptive potential of words and in his willingness to uphold his self-image, Hamlet, even though unintentionally, reveals his complex and enigmatic character.

This complexity manifests itself in the binary opposition of seeming versus being of emotions present in Hamlet's soliloquies. This is evident, for instance, in Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of Act II, which Hamlet delivers after having listened to the actor's speech about the fall of Troy and the death of Priam and Hecuba. Rejecting what he sees as pretended shows of grief, Hamlet draws a clear distinction between the player's unreal passion and his own genuine grief, between 'actions that a man might play' and the authentic action that he himself has to perform:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
[...]
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing. (II.2.485-504)

In drawing a connection between his own task and the player's, Hamlet comes to regard his situation in a theatrical light:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. (II.2.495-501)

Hamlet seems to be amazed by the player king's ability to engage emotionally with the story he is narrating even though it is entirely fictional. It is also ironic that the actor playing the role of Hamlet comments on the power of an actor to simulate emotion. He claims to have "the motive and the cue for passion" that the actor lacks, but he is of course equally an actor, equally in a play, [...] remote from the real world'.³⁴ In Hamlet's imagination, the player's performance combines with the ghost's ability to amaze 'the very faculties of eyes and ears' (II.2.501). Hamlet's thoughts, emotions and desire for action struggle with each other, their conflict intensified by the fictional portrayal of a revenging son and a grieving mother: Pyrrhus and Hecuba.

³⁴ Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 114.

In this soliloquy, Hamlet's fascination with theatricality and its power to provoke an emotional response becomes evident. In fact, in the rendition of this histrionic soliloquy, Branagh's Hamlet stands in a book-lined study containing a small toy theatre and theatrical masks on the shelves. It is also in this soliloquy that Hamlet turns again to theatricality and expresses his intention to test the veracity of the ghost's account of his father's death and Claudius's guilt by enacting *The Mousetrap*, a play that dramatizes a murder similar to that of his father, and by adding a speech to the play. In Branagh's production, on Hamlet's assertion that 'the play's the thing, / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (II.2.539-40), a lone miniature figure onstage drops through a small trapdoor and the film cuts to the face of King Claudius. Moreover, Hamlet himself has to resort to the speech of the stock revenge hero—'Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! (II.2.15-6)—in order to ignite in himself the necessary fury and vindictiveness for his father's murder. It seems, then, that fiction, even more than reality, has the power to stir impassioned reactions.³⁵

The soliloquies therefore bring out the distinction between the *vouloir-dire* and the *énoncé*. There is always a tension between what the speaker wants to say and what he utters; there is always *différance* that postpones the desired expression of self-presence, which Derrida equates with consciousness.³⁶ As Derrida argues, the words enounced in speech are not necessarily authentic because of the difference that exists between what one says and what one *really* wants to say. The real meaning of expression is 'present to the self in the life of a present that has not yet gone forth from itself into the world, space or nature'.³⁷ Hamlet himself is initially frustrated at his inability to express himself as he wishes (I.ii.85-86). He realises that he cannot say anything about this or how he feels to his mother or uncle out of respect and for his own safety. The emotional turmoil between having strong feelings and not being able to express them makes Hamlet feel as if he is coming apart, shown in how he wishes his 'flesh would melt' (I.2.129). Ultimately, he resorts to the language of the theatre to express himself.

From the soliloquies, it becomes evident that Hamlet vents his feelings on external subjects (namely his family and members of the court) through his antic disposition, while at the same time engaging in solitary behaviour and focusing on his own emotions and psychological afflictions. In a drama of moral confusion and full of inner turmoil, the device of the soliloquy and its allowance for emotional introspection is conducive to the entire structure and to the major concerns of the play. The soliloquies are significant because in them, one finds comments on life that are 'illuminating and true at the deepest level of our human experience'.³⁸ They also contribute to the play's being what August Wilhelm Schlegel calls a 'tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied

³⁵ The power of fiction to stir emotions is also made evident in Claudius's soliloquy in the prayer scene, which has such an impact on Hamlet that it deflects from his vengeful actions, the enactment of *The Mousetrap* and its effect on Claudius, which itself serves as a metafictional comment on the impact that the play *Hamlet* can have on the audience.

³⁶ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, p. 147.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁸ John Robert Osgerby, *Guides to English Literature, Shakespeare's Hamlet* (London: Hulton Educational Publications, 1965), p. 3.

meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators'.³⁹ In the end, soliloquy is a means through which Hamlet can try to express himself and better understand his own feelings, even though he sometimes does so through the language of theatre and draws attention to the power of theatricality to provoke an emotional response. However, rather than enabling the audience to fathom Hamlet's inner conflicts, the soliloquies serve to further strengthen the enigma of Hamlet's character. This is also enabled by the fact that the soliloquies remain open to widespread interpretations and amenable to different performance options. These soliloquies give the audience a sense of Hamlet's frustration, while simultaneously showing that his character remains opaque and inscrutable because of the different masks he seems to wear when he is interacting with other members of the court and even when he is alone on stage. Thus, this renders problematic the notion of a soliloquy as a device through which one obtains an acute glimpse into a character's emotional state.

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³⁹ August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. by John Black (1809). <http://www.project-hamlet.info/reception/schlegel.html> [accessed 9 March 2014].

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