Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators

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I would like to begin by examining the striking differences that appear in the three statements we are given in *Hamlet* about Gertrude's sexuality—differences that I believe, in the words of what used to be the standard opening gambit of articles in our field, deserve more critical attention than they have yet received. In the first statement, which is located in the center of his first soliloquy, Hamlet presents a vivid picture of his parents' marital relationship as he recalls it. He says that his father was

> So excellent a king, that was to this
> Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
> That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
> Must I remember? Why, she should hang on him
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on, and yet, within a month—
> Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman!—
> A little month, or ere those shoes were old
> With which she followed my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears—why, she, even she—
> O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourn'd longer—married with my uncle,

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My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules.[1]

It is clear that their relationship, as described here, was asymmetrical, and that this asymmetry was gendered, but not in the conventional patriarchal pattern. His father's attitude toward Gertrude was protective—almost absurdly overprotective—and did not seem to have any sexual component. Therefore, when Hamlet says that she would "hang on him," we probably expect to hear that she clung to his protection in a reciprocal dependency, but instead we are told that her hanging expressed her "appetite," and we do not usually think of people having an appetite for being protected, especially one that grows by what it feeds on. It certainly sounds like a sexual appetite, similar to those that Enobarbus refers to in *Antony and Cleopatra* when he tries to explain Cleopatra's extraordinary hold on men: "Other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies" (II.ii.235–7). The difference, of course, is that Enobarbus is saying that the appetites of Cleopatra's lovers are insatiable, whereas Hamlet says this about Gertrude's appetite.

The second statement appears in the passage in which the Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius

With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

(I.v.43–57)

The Ghost's account of his love for Gertrude is more detailed than, but consistent with, Hamlet's recollection of it in the first soliloquy: it was governed by his sense of "dignity"; it was viewed

by him as the fulfillment of his religious obligation ("the vow / I made to her"); and it was consummated in "a celestial bed," which does not sound very sexy. But his account of Gertrude's love directly contradicts Hamlet's. Hamlet described her insatiable sexual appetite for her husband, whereas the Ghost asserts that her appetite—which he calls "lust"—had sated itself on him and therefore sought out ("decline / Upon" and especially "prey on" imply that she did some of the initiating, or at least was robustly proactive in this enterprise) the gross carnal love of Claudius. The Ghost also calls this carnal love "lust," which, he later adds, was consummated in "A couch for luxury" (I.v.83), very different from the "celestial bed" that he provided for her.

The third statement appears in the closet scene, where Hamlet berates Gertrude for preferring Claudius to his father:

> You cannot call it love, for at your age
> The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,
> And waits upon the judgment, and what judgment
> Would step from this to this? . . .
> . . . . . .
> O shame, where is thy blush?
> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardure gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Nay, but to live
> In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
> Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty!
>
> (III.iv.68–94)

In the first excerpt from this statement she has outgrown the "heyday" of her libido, signified here by "blood," which is regarded as the seat or symbol of erotic energy, and which has become "tame" and "humble" (Quarto 1 reads, "Why appetite with you is in the waine, / Your blood runnes backeward now from whence it came.").[2] The insatiable sexual drive attributed to her by Hamlet and the Ghost in the first two statements is now explicitly denied (in fact, the Hamlet of Q1 says that the same "appetite" that waxed

in his first soliloquy is now "in the waine"). And the explanation cannot be that she has actually grown older, because only a few months have elapsed since the time when, according to Hamlet, she hung upon his father, or when, according to the Ghost, she preyed upon his brother. But this abruptly changes in the second and third excerpts, where her sexual blood mutinies and actively burns, and impels her to honey and make love with Claudius.

Which of these conflicting accounts of Gertrude's sexuality is correct? The answer, I will argue, is that there is no answer. None of them can be considered objective, since they come from her son and her late husband, both of whom believe that they have been wronged by her, and each account is generated by and serves a specific agenda that is directly related to that wrong. I am not suggesting that this involves any conscious deception on their parts. Hamlet and the Ghost do not deliberately distort their memories or perceptions of Gertrude in order to further their agendas; rather, their memories and perceptions of her have already been filtered through and colored by those agendas. Moreover, I think that the first two accounts are influenced by some negative stereotypes of women that circulated in this period.

Hamlet's principal grievance in the first soliloquy is Gertrude's hasty remarriage, which he feels has made his life unbearable. (He is also distressed that her second husband is so inferior to his father, but he devotes only four half-lines to this, and, of course, he does not yet know of her adultery.) His agenda, therefore, is to make the timing of her remarriage even more shocking and reprehensible, and this is served by his memory of the relationship between her and his father. He has apparently idealized their relationship since he magnifies his father's protective concern for his mother, as I noted, and her attachment to him, and also her grief at his funeral ("Like Niobe, all tears"). It seems to me that this description draws upon and invokes the popular stereotype of the "wanton widow"—a woman who overprotests her eternal devotion to her husband, often vowing that she will never remarry, and then, shortly after his death, takes on a second husband or a lover.[3] We are not told that Gertrude made such a vow, but her excessive hanging upon her husband during his lifetime and her excessive weeping during his funeral are presented here as a form of overprotestation and a nonverbal commitment to remain faithful to him after his death. This casts an ironic light on her later response to the performance of *The Murther of Gonzago*, where she protests that the Player Queen, who turns out to be another wanton widow, "doth protest too much" that she will never have

another husband (III.ii.230). It is also significant that Hamlet attributes Gertrude's second marriage to the "frailty" of women, which calls up another popular stereotype that had even attained proverbial status.[4] The greater her attachment to her first husband, therefore, the greater the gendered frailty that she exhibited in her subsequent behavior, and thus her sexual appetite for his father that Hamlet describes in this soliloquy becomes further evidence to support and augment his grievance against her and against her remarriage.

The Ghost's grievance obviously is Gertrude's adultery, and his agenda is to explain and condemn it—or, more precisely, to explain it in a way that will completely condemn her role and Claudius's and valorize his own. He begins by accusing Claudius of seducing her "With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts" (I.v.43), but that will not work. Brabantio, similarly, tries to explain his daughter's marriage by telling the Duke that Othello employed "witchcraft" to win her (*Othello*, I.iii.60–4), but both he and the Duke take this literally ("spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" [I.iii.61]), whereas here it is only a metaphor for cleverness; and while proverbial wisdom had it that women are tempted by gifts, it is hard to imagine any gift that could tempt the Queen of Denmark, who presumably did not suffer from a dearth of worldly goods.[5] His main explanation, which more directly serves his agenda, is the elaborate contrast he develops between the pure, dignified, religious love that he offered Gertrude and the carnal "lust" that Claudius offered her and that appealed to her own "lust." This also seems to draw upon and to invoke yet another popular stereotype of the period, the stereotype of upper-class ladies who are sexually attracted to lower-class men (often horse keepers or stable grooms) because they are supposed to be more physical, more primitive, more animal-like, and therefore more virile than the men of their own class.[6] The underlying idea here is explained in Thomas Heywood's *Loues Mistris*, where Apuleius distinguishes between the two basic forms of "Desire," the true spiritual love that "Doates on the Soules sweete beauty" and seeks "Celestiall pleasur," and the "intemperate lust" that "inflame[s] the soule / With some base groome."[7] In another common version, the man is a member, not of a lower class, but of a lower race, usually a Moor or Turk, since they were also supposed to be more physical, primitive, etc., than upper-class European men, which is the idea behind Tamora's infatuation with Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, and Iago's comments to Brabantio, in the opening scene of *Othello*, about Desdemona's marriage: "an old

black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88–9), "your daughter [is] cover'd with a Barbary horse" (I.i.111–2), she "and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (I.i.116–7), and she sought "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.126).[8] Claudius is not a "base groome," of course, and belongs to the same class (and race) as Gertrude and her husband, but in the Ghost's account he possesses, and tempts her with, a base, groomlike erotic power. Moreover, even though the word is not used by the Ghost, his account enlarges the female "frailty" that Hamlet attributed to Gertrude in his first soliloquy because she is not only a wanton widow, which was Hamlet's grievance there, but was also a wanton wife.

In the third statement, Hamlet's principal grievance is that Gertrude chose Claudius over his father, and his agenda, again, is to explain and condemn her choice, although this takes a surprising turn. The condemnation is based on Claudius's manifest inferiority to his father, which Hamlet only touched on briefly in his first soliloquy, but which now becomes his major concern, centering on the portraits of the two men that he shows Gertrude. As we would expect, his description of them in III.iv.53–67, which precedes the statement I quote above, closely corresponds to the Ghost's description of the two kinds of love they offered Gertrude, according to the law that external, physical traits reflect and therefore reveal internal, mental traits. His father's face exhibits "grace," with "Hyperion's curls," "the front of Jove," "An eye like Mars," and "A station like the herald Mercury," so that it combines the virtues of "every god," suiting his dignified and "celestial" love in the Ghost's account (III.iv.55–8, 61), while Claudius's face looks "like a mildewed ear, / Blasting his wholesome brother" (III.iv.64–5), which suits his coarse, bestial love. In fact, this physical contrast seems to be another version or an extension of the stereotype of the lady and the stable groom that the Ghost drew upon, since here the man's sexual prowess and allure are associated with his ugliness instead of, or in addition to, his debased social status or race, which the Ghost relates to "garbage."[9] Thus in Heywood's *Loues Mistris*, just before the speech of Apuleius quoted above, Menetius asks him why a woman's lust is drawn to "some base groome mis-shapen, and deform'd."[10] This idea appears in the stories of "The Beauty and the Beast," for example, and in the mythical figure of the satyr, which is introduced in Hamlet's first soliloquy when he says that his father was to Claudius as "Hyperion to a satyr" (I.ii.140), and may be recalled here when he gives his father "Hyperion's curls"

(III.iv.56). The satyr, of course, was very ugly and was not merely animalistic but was part animal, and possessed prodigious sexual equipment and energy, as numerous nymphs could testify. Thus Hamlet's emphasis on the stark physical contrast between the "mildewed," beastlike Claudius whom Gertrude preferred and the handsome, godlike husband whom she betrayed is just what we would expect.

However, Hamlet's attempt to explain Gertrude's preference in the first excerpt I quote from this statement, which follows immediately after his comparison of the two portraits, is certainly *not* what we would expect, because he insists that she is too old to be impelled by lust, which directly contradicts the explicit account in the Ghost's speech and the assumption in the stereotype, and, as I pointed out, even contradicts Hamlet's own description, in his first soliloquy, of her sexual appetite for his father. How are we to understand this? We could, of course, descend into Hamlet's Freudian unconscious to discover that he does not want his mother to have erotic feelings for anyone but his father, although that is not authorized in Sigmund Freud's Oedipal paradigm. But I do not believe that we need to go beyond or below his conscious agendas in order to reconcile these conflicting assertions about Gertrude's sexuality. In the first soliloquy, his agenda is simply to condemn her hasty remarriage, so he recalls (and exaggerates?) her sexual attachment to his father, which makes this haste seem even worse. But now he knows about her adultery, and his agenda is to condemn her choice of Claudius over his father, so he does not want to allow her a sexual motive, which would serve to extenuate her conduct. If she has no excuse, then her preference will seem even worse, and therefore his explanation of it is that it is inexplicable.

All this changes suddenly and completely in the second excerpt, which is still part of the same speech, and in the third, which is only separated from the second by a brief response of Gertrude's. Now Hamlet insists that her motive is lust, just as the Ghost told him, and his vision of her making love to Claudius on "an enseamed bed, / . . . Over the nasty sty" (III.iv.92–4) is very similar to the Ghost's vision of her seeking out a "couch of luxury" to "prey on garbage" (I.v.83, 57). The reason for this change must be found, therefore, in the portion of his speech between the first and second excerpts, because that portion is the logical development of his assertion that her choice of Claudius's face over his father's is inexplicable. Since her choice was an error of "judgment," and since judgment is informed by the senses, he then

proceeds through the senses in sequence, from "eyes" to "feeling" to "ears" to "smelling" (I assume that he omits the fifth sense because one does not usually taste faces), and demonstrates that not even "a sickly part of one true sense" (III.iv.80) could have made her mistake. But this leaves him with only one other possibility, that her judgment was distorted by lust, and therefore he finally has to acknowledge this in the agonized question that marks the turning point of his speech: "O shame, where is thy blush?" (III. iv.81). Thus he is reluctantly forced to this conclusion by his two commitments: his commitment to the belief that his father's face, and hence his character, are so obviously superior to Claudius's that there is no other way to explain Gertrude's preference, and, more basically, his commitment to logical inquiry—or, more precisely, to the belief that he is being logical—that is such an essential aspect of his personality.

Even though he finally agrees with the Ghost about Gertrude's lust, however, his complaint about it is quite different. The Ghost's grievance was that it made her disloyal to him and to his "celestial" love, whereas Hamlet's grievance is that she is too old to feel lust, which he emphasizes now by describing it mutinying "in a matron's bones" and burning "frost itself," an image of the sexual frigidity that presumably comes—or ought to come—with age.[11] Therefore he is brought back to his opening accusation, but with a significant emendation: there he told Gertrude that "at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame . . . / And waits upon the judgment" (III.iv.68–70), while now he is saying that at her age the heyday of the blood *should* be tame and *should* wait upon her judgment. But he is still very concerned with the problem of extenuation because he concludes that Gertrude's choice makes the similar mistakes caused by the "compulsive ardure" of "flaming youth" much more excusable and therefore much less shameful, which, of course, makes her own choice much less excusable and therefore much more shameful, and so he is still able to condemn it.

The preceding discussion of the statements about Gertrude's sexuality has been based on the assumption that dramatic characters, including the ones who give us these statements, should be regarded as representations of real individuals who possess personalities and what we now call interiority, which involves agendas, emotions, and even internal conflicts that can affect the reliability of the statements they make. I would now like to examine this assumption, but first I must introduce some much more real individuals who have a crucial role in it—namely, the

playwrights and the audiences they had in mind. For the question here is not whether these characters actually possess this interiority, which would not make any sense, but whether the playwrights who created them intended to endow them with interiority, and intended to have their audiences be aware of this factor and take it into account in judging the reliability of the characters' speeches.

The answer to this question, again, is that there is no answer, or rather, that the answer necessarily depends on which speeches and which characters and which playwrights are involved. Even if we limit ourselves to the speeches of Shakespeare's characters, it is clear that they vary widely in this respect. In fact, they can be placed on a scale in terms of the kind or degree of reliability that we attribute to the persons who speak them. At one pole are the speeches of the prologues, epilogues, and choruses in *Romeo and Juliet*, *2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Henry VIII*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, whom we regard, not as individuals, but as spokespersons for the playwright (indeed, the epilogues in *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* state explicitly that they speak for "our humble author" [Epi. 27] or "Our bending author" [Epi. 2]).[12] They are therefore authoritative in both senses, which means that we assume that the speakers have no personalities or motives of their own, and that their only purpose is to give us the information that the author wants us to have about the preceding or following action and, sometimes, to indicate how we should react to it. It follows, then, that the audiences were expected to rely on them completely.

I must point out, however, that not all critics do rely on them, because critics (including what used to be called "the present author") can also have agendas of their own, just like the characters. This, again, does not imply any conscious deception on their parts. They do not deliberately distort the evidence in the play in order to further their agendas; rather, that evidence has already been filtered through and colored by those agendas. Thus some critics who do not approve of Henry V, and therefore do not want Shakespeare to approve of him, have to engage in some strenuous filtering of the chorus to that play (which calls him, among other things, "the mirror of all Christian kings" [Cho., II.6] and "This star of England" [Epi. 6]) so that they can tell us that it cannot be relied on and must be ironical.[13] But they do not tell us how the audience would realize this, especially since the reliability of the chorus was a well-established dramatic convention, or how the playwright could rely on their realizing this. That is crucial,

because if they did not realize this they would misunderstand the meaning of the chorus and therefore the larger meaning of the play as a whole, which the playwright certainly could not have intended. And that brings me to my basic assumption underlying this examination of the reliability of dramatic speeches—the assumption that the playwright wanted his audience to understand the play that he is writing for them. That would be his major artistic agenda, and one that we can always rely on.

At the same pole would be the speeches of characters such as the bleeding Sergeant in *Macbeth*, I.ii, who describes Macbeth's victory over the rebel Macdonald to Duncan and his attendants. Once again, we rely on him completely, and I think it will be helpful to spell out the reasons for this. Although the Sergeant is a "real" individual, unlike the choruses and prologues, his role here is also defined by another well-established dramatic convention, the convention of the *nuntius*. The sole purpose of a *nuntius* is to inform the other characters and hence the audience about events that took place off stage. We therefore regard him as a reliable narrator, since he cannot have some personal motive (such as a desire to curry favor with Macbeth) to mislead his onstage auditors by falsifying his report.[14] More importantly, Shakespeare could not have any artistic motive to mislead his offstage auditors by making the Sergeant falsify his report because it contains essential information about what Hamlet calls "some necessary question of the play" (III.ii.42–3) that we need to know if we are to follow the ensuing action, which brings me back to my basic assumption about the playwright's agenda—his desire to have his audience understand his play.

This also applies to the speech of Rosse, immediately following this one, where he tells Duncan about the victory over the rebel Cawdor and the Norsemen. Rosse, unlike the Sergeant, is not simply a *nuntius*, since he appears in some later scenes, but here he functions as one, and we rely on his report for the same reasons that we rely on the Sergeant's. There is also another reason that we rely on both of their speeches, because they come at the beginning of the play and therefore are part of the necessary exposition of preceding events that the audience must know before the action proper begins. In this respect, then, they are like an expository prologue, who we saw is by definition a reliable narrator. Indeed, the information they convey could have just as easily (but not as effectively) been rewritten as the prologue to *Macbeth*.

I would also place in the same general category the prologue-like expositions of the preceding action presented in Egeon's long,

tedious speech at the beginning of *The Comedy of Errors* and in Prospero's long, tedious speech at the beginning of *The Tempest*. Although both speeches are ostensibly addressed to another character (Duke Solinus and Miranda, respectively), they are obviously intended for the audience, and are therefore supposed to be reliable.[15] This is also true of the expository conversations of the two unnamed Gentlemen about Posthumus and Imogen at the beginning of *Cymbeline* and of Camillo and Archidamus about Leontes and Polixenes at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale*, which function like prologues. Just as reliable, and just as awkward, are Orlando's complaint to Adam about his mistreatment by Oliver (which Adam certainly knows) at the beginning of *As You Like It* and Horatio's explanation to Marcellus and Barnardo of the conflict between Denmark and Norway (which they would probably know) at the beginning of *Hamlet*.

This category would also include the *nuntius*-like speeches that are presented later in the play but have the same purpose of informing other characters and the audience about some offstage action. In terms of their reliability, it does not seem to matter if their speakers are nonentities who are limited to this role (such as the First Lord, who describes Jaques's reaction to the sight of the wounded deer in *As You Like It* [II.i.25–63], and Jaques de Boys, who describes the conversion of Duke Frederick [V.iv.151–66]), or more fully developed individuals.[16] In *Hamlet*, three of these speeches come from major characters: Ophelia's report to Polonius of Hamlet's behavior in her closet (II.i.74–97), Gertrude's report to Claudius and Laertes of Ophelia's death (IV.vii.166–83), and Hamlet's report to Horatio of his exchange of letters on the sea voyage (V.ii.4–55). The reports of Ophelia and Hamlet, unlike those of a simple *nuntius* (or of the First Lord and Jaques de Boys in *As You Like It*), are "in character," as we would now say, since their emotional coloring and even their diction and cadences clearly reflect the personality and mood of the speaker (this is not true of Gertrude's report, which is much more like a self-contained poetic set piece),[17] but they must be reliable because we must rely on the information they convey, and therefore can rely on the playwright's desire to satisfy what we now call our "need to know" a necessary question of the play. This desire, in fact, is an essential corollary of my basic assumption that he wants his audience to understand the play he is writing for them.

All the speeches I have examined so far can be considered special cases in that their reliability is guaranteed by the conventions of Shakespeare's theater, which is why they are all at one pole of

the scale I am constructing. At the opposite pole are the speeches of characters who obviously intend to deceive someone, and it is obvious because Shakespeare has them reveal their intention in advance so that they will not deceive the audience. Thus at the beginning of *Richard III*, Richard is given a long, prologuelike soliloquy in which he reveals his basic agenda to "prove a villain" (I.i.30) and his specific "plots" to deceive King Edward and Clarence; and similar soliloquies are given, usually quite early in the play, to most of Shakespeare's other villains, including Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (II.i.1–25), Iago in *Othello* (I.iii.383–404), and Edmund in *King Lear* (I.ii.1–22), where they declare their evil intentions and plan their deceptions. (Indeed, this itself was a dramatic convention going back to the Vice characters in the Moralities, such as Covetous in W. Wager's *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* and Nichol Newfangle in Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like*, who on their first appearance took the audience into their confidence.) We can be certain, therefore, that Iago is lying when he tells Othello about Cassio's sleep-talking (III.iii.413–26), and that Edmund is lying when he tells Gloucester about Edgar's remarks on "declin'd" fathers (I.ii.71–4), and so we might say that these villains are really reliable after all, because we can rely on their soliloquies of self-revelation, and these soliloquies assure us that we can rely on the unreliability of their later statements to other characters.

Unlike these soliloquizing villains, Goneril and Regan do not announce in advance that they plan to deceive their father in the love contest at the beginning of *King Lear*, but Shakespeare does not allow them to deceive us. Their protestations of love for Lear are so excessive that we immediately suspect, like Gertrude reacting to the Player Queen in *The Murther of Gonzago*, that they "protest too much" (Lear does not suspect this, which shows that he is much less astute than she is in discerning the playwright's intention, although we saw that her comment reflects ironically on her own overprotestations of devotion to Hamlet's father). We are also told that they are dissembling by Cordelia immediately after their speeches (lines 99–104) and then by Kent later in the scene (lines 151–4). Moreover, there was a well-known dramatic convention, which Lear apparently does not know, that in any contest the first two contestants always get it wrong and the third always gets it right, as we can see in the casket contest in acts II and III of *The Merchant of Venice* and the obedience contest in the closing episode of *The Taming of the Shrew*.[18] Finally, the two sisters dispel any possible doubt at the end of this scene when

they reveal their contempt for Lear and decide to act against him, and from then on they are just as reliably unreliable as Richard, Aaron, Iago, and Edmund.

Most of the important speeches in Shakespeare, however, belong somewhere in the middle of this scale because we are expected to believe that the characters who utter them, unlike the prologues, choruses, and *nuntii*, possess an interior dimension, including personal agendas, attitudes, and feelings, that can influence the statements they make and can therefore affect their reliability, although, unlike the outright villains, their dramatic careers are not based upon deliberate deception. This would seem to apply to the speeches of Hamlet and the Ghost examined earlier that deal with Gertrude's sexuality, and I would now like to return to these two characters and these speeches.

Although I am arguing that we are expected to believe that most of Shakespeare's characters possess an interior dimension, which is simply another way of saying that we should regard them as representations of real individuals, we are not always aware of this interiority, just as we are not always aware of the interiority of the really real individuals that we observe every day. We usually become aware of it, in the drama and in life, when these individuals exhibit some signs of internal stress or conflict, and Shakespeare, at least in his mature work, usually provides us with these signs in the more emotional speeches of the characters and especially in their asides and soliloquies, which often give us an insight into the intense, and often submerged, feelings and attitudes underlying the personas that they present to other people and sometimes even to themselves.

There cannot be any question that this applies to the portrayal of Hamlet. Indeed, many critics over many years have recognized that he is the most interiorized of all Shakespeare's characters, with the most complexly layered consciousness and personality.[19] Some of this layering can in fact be seen in the excerpt from his first soliloquy quoted at the outset, since at several points in it he interrupts himself ("Heaven and earth, / Must I remember" [I.ii.142–3], "Let me not think on't" [I.ii.146], and "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourn'd longer" [I.ii.150–1]), as if powerful emotional pressures are breaking through his conscious train of thought against his conscious will and so reveal an internal struggle between different parts or aspects of his mind. This, of course, is one of the devices employed to create the illusion that Hamlet is a real person, to whom we attribute different levels of consciousness, and it marks one of

Shakespeare's major improvements over the soliloquies in the plays of his predecessors and in his own earlier plays (Richard's first soliloquy in *Richard III*, cited above, is a good example) that were usually limited to the straightforward expression or elaboration of a single idea or emotion. And further evidence of Hamlet's multiple layers of consciousness can be found in the excerpt I quoted from his speech to Gertrude in the closet scene, where we saw that he can express—and presumably believe—two contradictory views of her sexuality.

Since Hamlet clearly is supposed to possess such a complex, multileveled interiority, we must ask if we are supposed to regard him as a reliable narrator in his statements about Gertrude. The question, I must repeat, is not whether he is engaged in a deliberate deception. We know that he can be deceptive in his dealings with Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, whom he regards as his enemies, although he seems to take more pleasure in playing mind games with them, but he cannot be deliberately deceiving Gertrude in his speech to her, or himself in his first soliloquy. Indeed, it is impossible to deceive oneself deliberately. But we know that self-deception is possible in real people, because of their real interiority with its separate levels of consciousness, and we can see a striking example of it in Hamlet's long soliloquy in II.ii.549–605 ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I"), where he shifts his focus and his line of thought several times, first attacking himself for his cowardice in failing to avenge his father by killing Claudius, then attacking Claudius for killing his father, then attacking himself for indulging in this verbal attack on Claudius instead of acting against him, and then seizing upon the plan to stage *The Murther of Gonzago* to see if the Ghost was telling the truth about Claudius killing his father.[20] Surely we are supposed to realize that Hamlet has never doubted the Ghost's words before this (in fact, when he called Claudius a murderer a few lines earlier, he must have believed what the Ghost told him), and that this new plan will not bring him any closer to his revenge than he is now. Perhaps self-deception is too strong a term to apply to this process, since the plan is perfectly logical—and, as I noted earlier, Hamlet's commitment to the belief that he is being logical is an essential aspect of his personality. Yet it obviously serves his agenda here by letting him off the hook, or rather two hooks: it justifies his delay, since now he cannot proceed against Claudius without first verifying the Ghost's accusation (which means that this delay was the result not of his cowardice but of a rational investigation), and it provides him with an action that

he can easily undertake and that has now become a necessary step in his revenge, so that the soliloquy that began with him feeling disgusted at himself because he is doing nothing to further his revenge can end with him feeling very pleased with himself (indicated in the triumphant closing couplet about catching "the conscience of the King" [II.ii.605]) because he is doing something to further it. And it seems equally clear that his statements about Gertrude, Claudius, and his father in his first soliloquy and his speech in the closet scene also serve an agenda by condemning her and Claudius and commending his father, so that we cannot assume that they must be reliable, even though they are not deliberately deceptive.

The Ghost's statement poses this same problem, but it also involves two prior problems that do not apply to Hamlet. One is the question of whether he really is a ghost. Several critics have tried to prove, often by citing evidence from Elizabethan treatises on pneumatology, that he is not the ghost of Hamlet's father but a devil pretending to be the ghost of Hamlet's father in order to entrap Hamlet.[21] This is a very serious charge because, if it were true, it would mean that he is like the deceptive villains in Shakespeare's other plays, and so his statement to Hamlet would be completely unreliable. Shakespeare, however, eliminates this possibility by voicing it twice during the early part of the play and rejecting it both times. Horatio warns Hamlet not to follow the Ghost because it may "assume some other horrible form" to drive him mad (I.iv.69–74), but this does not happen and Hamlet returns from his encounter to assure Horatio and Marcellus that "It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you" (I.v.138). Then, near the end of the soliloquy that I just discussed, Hamlet himself wonders if the Ghost "May be a devil" who lied about Claudius's crime in order to "damn me" (II.ii.598–603), but when he sees how Claudius reacts to *The Murther of Gonzago*, he tells Horatio, "I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound" (III.ii.286–7), which was a lot of money in those days; and after that we hear no more doubts about a demonic ghost. In terms of my basic assumption, therefore, we can be confident that the Ghost is not a devil because, if he were, Shakespeare would have been sure to satisfy his audience's "need to know" this essential fact or "necessary question of the play" because he wanted them to understand this play.

There is another problem with this character, for while it is clear that he is supposed to be a real ghost, it is not clear what a real ghost is supposed to be. Are we to regard him as a human

being who just happens to be dead but is otherwise unchanged, so that he retains the same personality, feelings, and limitations that he had in life, or are we to believe that after death he was transformed into a different kind of being? The difficulty can be seen in our uncertainty about whether to refer to the Ghost as "he" or "it," and in some of the awkward locutions that I had to resort to earlier. Thus when I suggested that the Ghost is invoking the stereotype of the lady and her horse keeper in order to explain why Gertrude was sexually attracted to Claudius, I felt that I should say that Claudius belongs to the same social class as "Gertrude and her husband" instead of "Gertrude and the Ghost," even though the Ghost is obviously talking about himself here (that is, about his preghostly self), because it did not seem appropriate to attribute social class to ghosts.

The problem goes well beyond these niceties of stylistic decorum, however, because the Ghost functions as a prologuelike *nuntius* by informing Hamlet, and therefore the audience, of two crucial actions that occurred before the play begins: he says that Claudius poisoned him and that Gertrude committed adultery with Claudius. But Hamlet's father was poisoned while he was sleeping, and the adultery must have been concealed from him while he was alive, so how then did "he" (that is, the Ghost) find out about them? I am not aware that any critic has asked this question, but I believe that in itself gives us the answer, because it shows that we feel that this is, as Falstaff says, "a question not to be ask'd" (*1 Henry IV*, II.iv.408–9), and therefore that asking it would be "to consider too curiously" (V.i.205), as Horatio says, by "thinking too precisely on th' event" (IV.iv.41), as Hamlet says. After all, we do not ask how Jaques de Boys knows about the private conversation between Duke Frederick and the old religious man in the skirts of the Forest of Arden, or how Gertrude knows that Ophelia was making fantastic garlands of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples (also given a grosser name) when she fell into the weeping brook. Because of what I called the convention of the reliability of a *nuntius*'s report, we simply assume that the *nuntius* actually has the information conveyed in the report, and therefore we do not question how he or she could have acquired it. Perhaps this also applies to the Ghost's two accusations since he is serving here as a kind of *nuntius*. However, the actions that Jaques de Boys and Gertrude report did not happen to them in the same way that the poisoning and cuckolding happened to the Ghost—or rather, happened to him before he became the Ghost—so perhaps we are in the presence of another convention

that grants ghosts a kind of omniscience about the events that occurred during their former lives, which means, again, that we should adopt the policy of "don't ask." But it does not really matter in this case because both of the Ghost's accusations are later confirmed by the guilty parties themselves—Claudius explicitly admits to the murder in his aside in III.i.48–53 and again in the prayer scene (III.iii), and Gertrude tacitly admits to the adultery in the closet scene (III.iv) and again in her aside in IV.v.17–20. Therefore we can be confident that, at least on this factual level, he is supposed to be regarded as a reliable narrator.

The Ghost does not limit himself to this factual level, however, because we saw in the passage quoted at the beginning that he also interprets and judges the motivation of the adultery when he asserts that Claudius won Gertrude "to his shameful lust" (I.v.45), and that Gertrude's "lust" was attracted to and preyed on Claudius's, which she preferred to his own pure and dignified love. I argued that this account seems to have been filtered through and affected by his agenda because it makes him look as good as possible and makes Gertrude and Claudius look as bad as possible (which is much the same as Hamlet's agenda in the passages quoted from his first soliloquy and from his speech in the closet scene). Consequently, it has the appearance of a self-serving account, which led me to suggest that it could be regarded as the expression of his human—indeed, all too human—interiority. The difficulty, however, is that we do not know if we are expected to attribute an interior dimension to the Ghost. He speaks to Hamlet in long, sonorous, periodic sentences (in contrast to Hamlet's brief, nervous responses), but we cannot tell if this is supposed to be "in character" for the man when he was alive, or is supposed to indicate his new otherworldly status. Whatever the cause, the result is that the steady flow of his verse is not interrupted by sudden outbursts of feeling or abrupt shifts of focus or any of the other signs that we found in Hamlet's soliloquies and his speech to Gertrude that exposed his internal tensions. But even if the Ghost has also been given a human interiority and a human agenda that is expressed in his account of Gertrude's sexuality, this does not mean that the account must be false, any more than the fact that it comes from a ghost means that it must be true. All this means is that we cannot rely upon its reliability and therefore should try to test it by looking for other evidence within the play that might confirm or refute it.

The most obvious place to look for this evidence is in the words and actions of Gertrude, the central character of this investiga-

tion, who has been conspicuously absent from it so far. There is a good reason for this absence, however, because she does not provide an answer to the problem we are investigating. Many years ago, in one of the early feminist readings of Shakespeare, Rebecca Smith pointed out that, while many (male) critics have accepted without question Hamlet's and the Ghost's statements about Gertrude's lustful nature, she herself never gives us any sign of it.[22] Of course, this does not prove that the critics are wrong. Most of her appearances are in public scenes with other members of the Court, where she has no opportunity to say anything lustful, even if she feels it; and her one long speech in the play, her description of Ophelia's death, is another public performance that, we found, is presented as an impersonal set piece. The only speeches where she could reveal her hidden inner feelings are her responses to Hamlet in the closet scene and her one brief aside in IV.v.17–20, and while in both of them she tacitly admits her adultery with Claudius, as I just noted, she never suggests that it was driven by lust. In fact, when she tells Hamlet that "thou hast cleft my heart in twain" (III.iv.156), this implies that she really loves Claudius, just as she really loves Hamlet, and is now forced to choose between them.[23] And the only two episodes where she and Claudius are alone together (IV.i.5–32 and IV.v.75–96) are utterly sexless—we seem, rather, to be hearing the intimate conversation of a long-married couple who are sharing their problems. It should also be pointed out that Claudius never shows any sign that he is driven by lust in his relationship with Gertrude, or that he regards her as a sexual object—indeed, in his prayer scene he says that one of the reasons that he killed his brother was to be "possess'd" of Gertrude, which cannot refer to his sexual possession of her since that predated the murder; and he later tells Laertes that one of the reasons that he cannot proceed against Hamlet is that Gertrude "Lives almost by his looks," and "She is so conjunctive to my life and soul" (IV.vii.12–14) that he could not exist without her. Nor does Gertrude do anything in the play that could be attributed to her lustful nature—in fact, she does not initiate any action except to drink the poisoned wine at the end.[24] Therefore we have no way to determine if what Hamlet and the Ghost say about her lust is true.

This brings me back, finally, to my basic assumption about Shakespeare's desire to have his audience understand the play he is writing for them. How are we to reconcile this with his failure to settle the problem of Gertrude's sexuality? It is possible that he simply did not think that this was something they needed to

know, or, more likely, that he did not think that it would pose a problem for them because her adultery occurred before the play begins and therefore should be regarded as a donnée that we are supposed to accept, so that any inquiry into its causes would be another "question not to be ask'd." We do not ask why Julia fell in love with Proteus before the beginning of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or Hermia with Lysander, or Helena with Bertram, or Imogen with Posthumus before the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *Cymbeline*, or why any of Shakespeare's other heroines fall in love during the course of their plays. That is quite different, however, because a marriageable young woman falling in love with a marriageable young man (and vice versa) was considered "natural," which I place in scare quotes to show that I know it is no longer considered "natural" and has become socially constructed (not in scare quotes). It is just what they were supposed to do, especially if they were characters in a comedy or romance. But we feel that adultery is another matter and that it requires some special explanation, such as the lady/horse keeper stereotype invoked by the Ghost and Hamlet. Shakespeare could have easily settled the question by adding a brief scene between Gertrude and Claudius similar to the one cited earlier in *Titus Andronicus*, II.iii, where Tamora eagerly solicits the carnal attentions of Aaron. But he does not do anything like this, and, consequently, Gertrude's sexuality seems to be an unresolvable problem. Of course, directors of productions of *Hamlet* and actors who take the role of Gertrude do not leave it this way, since they usually feel that they should give her a coherent (and interesting) personality and a clear motivation, so many of them have opted for a sensual or even a lascivious Gertrude. I have seen productions of the play in which she crawls all over Claudius (and sometimes all over Hamlet as well).[25] There is no warrant for this in the text, as we saw, but there is no warrant against it either. Unfortunately for her, Gertrude is the victim of a bad press, not only on the stage and screen and in the critical arena, but also within Shakespeare's text, since she and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her and so must be considered hostile and therefore unreliable witnesses, while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf.

[1] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.ii.139–53. All quotations of Shakespeare, except for Quarto 1 *Hamlet*, follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). All subsequent references, apart from the Q1 *Hamlet*, will be cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number for plays, and line numbers for poetry.

[2] Compare the references to Angelo's sexual "blood" in *Measure for Measure*: the Duke says that he "scarce confesses / That his blood flows" (I.iii.51–2); Lucio says that his "blood / Is very snow-broth" (I.iv.57–8); and when his lust is aroused by Isabella, he himself is forced to acknowledge that "Blood, thou art blood" (II.iv.15). *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*, 2d rev. edn., ed. Bernice W. Kliman and Paul Bertram (New York: AMS Press, 2003), lines 1544–5.

[3] In George Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, I.i.84–6, II.i.11–3, II.iii.50–2, II.iv.20–31, and III.i.119, we learn that both Eudora and Cynthia have taken these vows, which they promptly break (ed. Ethel M. Smeak, Regents Renaissance Drama [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966]). Cynthia's actions derive from Petronius's tale of the Ephesian matron, which may be our earliest account of a wanton widow—see *The Satyricon*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Mentor, 1960), pp. 117–20. I discuss these and other examples in "Protesting Too Much in Shakespeare and Elsewhere, and the Invention/Construction of the Mind," *ELR* 37, 3 (Summer 2007): 337–59, esp. 337–9.

[4] See R. W. Dent, *Proverbial Language in English Drama Exclusive of Shakespeare, 1495–1616: An Index* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), W700.1; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, II.i.233–4; *Twelfth Night*, II.ii.31; *Measure for Measure*, II.iv.124–8; and *Cymbeline*, I.iv.91–6. The word is specifically applied to widows who remarry in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, I.ii.204, 207, III.i.184–5, and IV.i.139.

[5] In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus complains that Lysander "bewitch'd" Hermia, but this simply means that he used "cunning" (I.i.27, 36), while Titania really is bewitched by the magical potion that makes her fall in love with Bottom. On the alleged susceptibility of women to gifts, see Dent, W704; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, III.i.89–91; and Dorothy Kehler, "The First Quarto of Hamlet: Reforming Widow Gertred," *SQ* 46, 4 (Winter 1995): 398–413, esp. 407. The description of the dumb show introducing *The Murther of Gonzago* states that "*The pois'ner woos the Queen with gifts*" (III.ii.133–5), but that is after the murder.

[6] The stereotype is evoked in the speeches in which Tarquin threatens Lucrece (*The Rape of Lucrece*, lines 515–8, 670–2, 1632–7, 1644–5), Boult threatens Marina (*Pericles*, IV.vi.190–1), Beatrice attacks Margaret (*Much Ado about Nothing*, III.iv.44–51), and Antigonus defends Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*, II.i.133–9).

[7] Thomas Heywood, *Loues Mistris*, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 6 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 5:81–160, pp. 106–7. Note that this distinction assumes that the desirer is a woman.

[8] In *Titus Andronicus*, see especially II.iii.10–29, where Tamora eagerly invites Aaron to engage in their sexual "pastimes" and he coldly puts her off,

and compare the similar exchanges in the anonymous *Lust's Dominion, or The Lascivious Queen* (ed. Fredson Bowers, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, 4 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953–61], 4), I.i, between Eugenia, the titular queen, and Eleazar the Moor, and in John Mason's *The Turk* (ed. Joseph Q. Adams, *Materialien zur Kunde des Älteren Englischen Dramas* [Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1913]), III.iv and IV.i, between Timoclea, another lascivious queen, and Mulleases, the titular Turk. Stallions ("stone-horses") were symbols of unbridled lust, which presumably rubbed off on the men who handled them and made these men so attractive to ladies. The idea survives today: in both Robinson Jeffers's "Roan Stallion" and D. H. Lawrence's "St. Mawr," a horse comes to represent true masculinity, and in "St. Mawr" the horse's grooms, Phoenix and Morgan Lewis, arouse the sexual interest of their upper-class employers, Lady Carrington and Mrs. Witt.

[9] Compare Jachimo's account of "satiate yet unsatisfied desire" that "ravening first the lamb, / Longs after for the garbage" (*Cymbeline*, I.vi.48–50). These three categories could be combined in various ways. The early chapters of *The Arabian Nights* include stories about the adultery of three lovely queens, the wives of Shah Zaman, King Shahryar, and the Prince of the Black Islands, with men who are slaves, black, and hideous (*The Arabian Nights*, trans. Richard Burton [Garden City NY: De Luxe Editions, n.d.], pp. 1–4, 31–3). And in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania, the delicate fairy queen, falls in love with Bottom, who is not only a laborer but also has an ass's head, although she is compelled by a magical potion and he seems to be asexual, since he is only interested in having her fairies feed and scratch him, and then in taking a nap (IV.i.5–39).

[10] Heywood, I.ii, p. 106.

[11] The same image is applied by Lear to the "simp'ring dame" who acts as if she has snow between her legs (*King Lear*, IV.vi.118–9), and in *Measure for Measure* Lucio says that Angelo's blood "Is very snow-broth" (I.iv.58) and "his urine is congeal'd ice" (III.ii.110–1). Compare the proverbial expression that "butter would not melt in his (her) mouth" (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3d edn., ed. F. P. Wilson [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970], 177a), and the Ward's comment on Isabella, another simpering dame, in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*: "See how she simpers it—as if marmalade would not melt in her mouth" (ed. Roma Gill, New Mermaids [London: Ernest Benn, 1968], III.ii.73–4). Hamlet's attitude may be related to the wishful fantasy of some children that after they were born their parents outgrew sex.

[12] The chorus in *Pericles* is an individual, John Gower, but since he is supposed to be the real author of the story, his statements about it are supposed to be authoritative and reliable.

[13] For a recent example, see Donald Hedrick, "Advantage, Affect, History, Henry V," *PMLA* 118, 3 (May 2003): 470–87. Roy Battenhouse even tells us that we should not rely on the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* and must "decipher" its real meaning because he does not approve of the two lovers (*Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969], p. 127).

[14] I borrow the term "reliable narrator" from Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), chaps. 6, 10, pp. 149–68 and 271–310.

[15] There are a few critics who dislike Prospero (much fewer than those noted earlier who dislike Henry V) and so have to explain away this speech. Thus John Cutts seizes on its length as evidence that it is unreliable: "Prospero is tediously striving to justify his actions to himself, to Miranda, and to the audience, and in so doing he metaphorically puts us to sleep. His oration would cure deafness if it were really persuasive" (*Rich and Strange: A Study of Shakespeare's Last Plays* [Pullman: Washington State Univ. Press, 1968], p. 88).

[16] The First Lord knows Jaques's reaction because of the dramatic convention that in a soliloquy a character is literally "thinking out loud" and so can be overheard—see James E. Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies* (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2003).

[17] This may be related to the fact that Gertrude, unlike Ophelia and Hamlet, did not witness the event she describes. In fact, we are never told how she could have acquired such a detailed knowledge of it, which contributes to the impression that she is functioning here as an impersonal *nuntius*.

[18] Compare the folk tales of the shoe-fitting contest of Cinderella and her two stepsisters, and the house-building contest of the Three Little Pigs.

[19] There are exceptions. In one of the more amusing early episodes in the new historical turn in Shakespeare criticism, Francis Barker asserted that Hamlet is trying to achieve "interiority" but fails because of its "historical prematurity," since it only came into existence when the bourgeoisie came into power some eighty years later, and therefore "[a]t the centre of Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing," although this is "doubtless unknown to him" (*The Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* [London: Methuen, 1984], pp. 36–7).

[20] I examine these shifts in greater detail in "Hamlet's Dramatic Soliloquies," in *Style: Essays on Renaissance and Restoration Literature and Culture in Memory of Harriett Hawkins*, ed. Allen Michie and Eric Buckley (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press), pp. 113–34, esp. 124–6.

[21] See, for example, Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1967), chaps. 4–5, and Battenhouse, chap. 4.

[22] See Rebecca Smith, "A Heart Cleft in Twain: The Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 194–210, esp. 200–1. She also tries to prove that Gertrude did not commit adultery (pp. 202–3), but that is not convincing.

[23] The heart was supposed to be the seat of love (compare Claudius's reference to his soul, quoted later in this essay), just as the blood, we saw, was supposed to be the seat of sexual passion.

[24] In the closet scene in Q1, unlike Q2 and F1, she agrees to help Hamlet in "What stratagem soe're thou shalt deuise" (lines 1596–7), but nothing comes of this.

[25] There are also productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that indicate that Titania and Bottom have intercourse, even though, according to the text, he shows no interest in sex (see note 9). For two notable examples, see Glenn Loney, *Peter Brook's Production of William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing, 1974), p.61a, and the 1999 movie directed by Michael Hoffman.