

“...NOW HOW ABHORRED IN MY IMAGINATION IT IS”

On Memory and the Self in *Hamlet*



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I. “STAND AND UNFOLD YOURSELF” (I.i.2)

Hamlet depicts a literal and metaphorical graveyard, burdened with objects that compel Shakespeare’s characters to remember. When Hamlet stands among the gravedigger’s panoply of bones, he finds Yorick’s skull and the memories it evokes “abhorre[nt]” (V.i.177). What exactly is this feeling of abhorrence? What is happening to the relationship between the remembered self and the present self when we hold a skull? Hamlet’s sense of revulsion reveals that a skull is not simply a piece of bone, but a catalyst for memory and self-reflection. The past is at Hamlet’s fingertips, literally, and is physically juxtaposed with the hand that presently holds it.

The questions with which the play opens—“Who’s there?,” “Say, what, is Horatio there?,” “What art thou...?” (I.i.1,18,45)—turn our attention towards the self, which must be somehow “unfolded” (I.i.2). When we encounter a physical object which induces in us a feeling of abhorrence, our very aversion suggests an answer to these questions of self. In holding or beholding an entity from the past, we experience a breach in time. The moments of our mortal lives which function like links in the chain of our identities are taken out of their proper place and exposed. Yorick is one of these “links,” he is part of the answer to who Hamlet is, even though, strictly speaking, Yorick himself is not. Through our exploration of the actual and metaphorical skulls within *Hamlet*, it will become clear that the answer to “who’s there?” (I.i.1) often lies in the thing that is not literally there at all. Throughout the play we see various kinds of skulls particular to the characters that experience them: Yorick, the Ghost, Ophelia’s letters and encounters with “mad” Hamlet, the play within a play,

¹ (V.i.177). This citation, and all subsequent citations, are from Shakespeare, William, Ann Thompson, and Neil Taylor. 2006. *Hamlet*. London: Arden Shakespeare.

and Gertrude's pictures of her two husbands. Each of these skull moments sheds new light on the question of abhorrence as it pertains to the relationship between memory and the self.

II. "THAT SKULL HAD A TONGUE IN IT AND COULD SING ONCE" (V.i.71)

"Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it." (V.i.174-178)

Through the act of contemplating Yorick in the presence of his remains, Hamlet experiences a feeling of revulsion; his "gorge rises." It is not the skull itself that Hamlet finds troubling, but the memory of Yorick "[bearing Hamlet] on his back a thousand times" (as this act is the direct antecedent of "it" in his speech). But why is it that a pleasant memory gives rise to such disgust? It seems that the Hamlet who once experienced this moment of childhood rapture is not the same Hamlet who feels Yorick's skull in his palm. The innocent memory of his jester "unfolds" (I.i.2) Hamlet; it exposes him as a being who's "time is out of joint" (I.v.186). There is something of Hamlet's disposition that has been lost since the days he played with Yorick as a boy.

While the gravedigger undertakes his task of expropriating bodies from their graves with little sentimentality, Hamlet seems captivated by the ability of a skull to signify the character of the man it once embodied. Even before the gravedigger calls attention to Yorick, Hamlet is drawn to speculate about the bygone character of these bones, labeling them "politician[s]," "courtier[s]" or "lawyer[s]" (V.i.74,77,94). Hamlet even goes so far as to draw an explicit correlation between "these bones" and his own (V.i.86-7). His attachment to assigning a role to these skulls is a direct reflection of his obsession with remembrance, pressed into the "table of [his] memory" by the Ghost (I.v.98). Indeed, the first thing Hamlet remarks when entering the graveyard is "that skull had a tongue in it and could sing once" (V.i.71).

Hamlet's fixation on the relationship between memory and the self is heightened when the gravedigger identifies the skull in Hamlet's hand as Yorick's. Unlike the other sundry skulls lying about the graveyard, Yorick's skull recalls a figure who directly impacted Hamlet's own life. The skull in his hand is not simply that of another dead man, it is also a simulacrum of his own past. When Hamlet subsequently asks the gravedigger: "How long will a man lie i'th' earth ere he rot?" (V.i.154) the implicit question is not about the physical decomposition of the corpse, but rather the decomposition of character. In other words, how long may a man be dead before all semblance of his selfhood perishes as well?

In light of this question, we can understand that Hamlet's attachment to the skull is not really about the skull at all. The skull lends itself to various layers of representation that ultimately contribute to Hamlet's feeling of disrelish. Before Hamlet knows the skull to be Yorick's, the skull in his hand signifies mortality. This mortality is then transformed into an image of the jester Hamlet recollects, which calls to mind the time Hamlet spent with Yorick. Memories of this time are then transmogrified into an emblem of Hamlet's childhood. Once the skull has come to signify something about Hamlet's own past, he must confront the dissonance between the Hamlet who is holding the skull and the childhood Hamlet conjured by the skull itself. The recognition of this disjunct is the ground and cause of his abhorrence. In contemplating the skull, Hamlet is moreover contemplating the loss of his childhood innocence.

How is it that a mere object can incite such contemplation? After all, the skull itself does not admit the characteristics of the being it once embodied as the provider of "jibes," "gambols," "songs" or "flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar" (V.i.179-181). Furthermore, Hamlet did not even recognize Yorick until the gravedigger made the skull's identity known to him, revealing that "this same skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick's skull, the King's jester" (V.i.170-1). When the

gravedigger refers to it as “this same skull,” it becomes clear that the skull itself does not have any meaning beyond speculation until Yorick’s name is attached to it. Therefore, it is not simply the skull that gives way to Hamlet’s self-reflection, but the unity of this skull with the name “Yorick.” The gravedigger’s act of naming the skull enlivens it, makes it a symbol of the man whose flesh once hung upon those bones.

At the same time that Yorick’s name is reunited with its skull through the gravedigger’s attribution, something of Hamlet’s self becomes “unfolded” (I.i.2). While unfold conventionally means to expose or reveal, in the case of the skull it further suggests a kind of fragmentation. In the process of revealing our selves, the self is exposed as a being in time who is, by nature, a disjointed being. In bemoaning the memory of Yorick “[bearing him] on his back a thousand times,” Hamlet is longing to relive a time of innocence. The purity of this memory stands in contrast with Hamlet’s present picture of his life as an “unweeded garden/that grows to seed” (I.ii.135-6). Can Hamlet’s childhood self be recovered through memory? In other words, can the breach between the Hamlet who holds the skull and the Hamlet recalled by the skull be repaired? It seems that if such a reintegration of past and present is attainable, it must take place through action. The kind of deed that might suffice to ameliorate the ruptured sense of self Hamlet confronts in holding Yorick’s skull, however, remains undefined.

III. “SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK” (I.iv.90)

We also encounter a number of more metaphorical skulls throughout the course of the play which, like Yorick, disturb those who behold them. The first of these is the Ghost who “trouble[s] the mind’s eye” (I.i.111) in a manner that recalls Hamlet’s horror at the sight of the physical skull. This comparison is intensified by Hamlet’s epitaph for the Ghost which echoes that of Yorick: “alas, poor

ghost” (I.v.4). Horatio is troubled by the Ghost precisely because he knows it to be the Old King for “these hands are not more like” (I.ii.211). The Ghost is a unique kind of memento insofar as it is not particular to any one person, even though it takes special interest in Hamlet. Horatio and the guards are all privy to the Ghost’s nightly walks and share the conception that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.90). In this way, the Ghost is a cultural or political relic that similarly affects most who encounter it. It seems the only one who cannot see the Ghost is Gertrude, who must be, by the Ghost’s command, “[left] to heaven” (I.v.86).

Unlike the case of Yorick’s skull, what the Ghost asks of the rememberer is not a reevaluation of self, but a rectification of the state. Before the Ghost recounts his final hours to Hamlet, he asserts “thou [art bound] to revenge when thou shalt hear” (I.v.7). He later amends this claim with a crucial hypothetical: “If thou didst ever thy dear father love...revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!” (I.v.23-5). In the second iteration of his plea, the Ghost implies that vengeance is an act of love that makes the unnatural, natural again. These commands of revenge are transformed throughout the Old King’s speech into a final injunction to “remember me” (I.v.91). It is this precept of remembrance that Hamlet clings to and reiterates in his subsequent soliloquy, echoing it three times throughout the course of his speech (I.v.95,97,111).

It seems the Ghost is not demanding that Hamlet perform two disparate deeds (vengeance and remembrance, respectively), but that these requests are united for the Ghost. Old King Hamlet’s prescribed remembrance is not merely the mental activity of memory, but is defined through his earlier demands as a kind of vengeance. Hamlet adopts this sentiment when he declares to the Ghost: “I with wings as swift as...the thoughts of love may sweep to my revenge” (I.v.29-31). For the Old King, when drastic actions are performed with affectionate impetus, they become deeds of memory and the past is made present through loving action. By remembering and avenging the Old King,

Hamlet can reconcile the state Denmark used to be under his father's rule with the state it has become under Claudius.

But why the Ghost? Why does the state need an observable phenomenon to catalyze its reform? It seems that, in order to know that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90), the citizens must be reminded of what Denmark once was by the "sensible and true avouch of [their] own eyes" (I.i.56-7). In this case, the reminder comes in the form of their previous ruler who bears "the very armour he had on/when he the ambitious Norway combated" and a face like the Old King who "frowned...once, when in an angry parle/he smote the sledded Polacks on the ice." (I.i.59-62). The Ghost's function to spur a restoration of state is intensified through his armed garb insofar as his warlike aspect suggests warlike action.

When Horatio then remarks "'tis strange" (I.i.63), his remark is not merely about the appearance of a ghost itself, but the experience of confronting a figure from the past in the present hour. The Ghost is not simply "strange" in and of himself, he "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.68). This "eruption" is akin to the abhorrence Hamlet faces when holding Yorick's skull; the past that the Ghost represents is "out of joint" (I.v.186) with the present and the two time frames must be somehow syncretized.

The Old King's suggestion is that this syncretization take place through revenge. Revenge attempts to transform memory into action. The Player King reminds us that "purpose is but the slave to memory" (III.ii.182); thus, as memory abates, so too does intent based on memory. When we conceive of vengeance as a kind of remembrance, the implication is that memory itself must be directed towards some purpose through which it becomes actualized. The character of the corpse will not rot as he "lie i'th' earth" if memory is made manifest through action; "where th'offence is let the great axe fall" (IV.vi.210).

Hamlet seems incapable of embracing a mode of remembrance that is dependent on action. The political rectification the Ghost calls upon Hamlet to enact is less immediate than the personal reevaluation incited in him by Yorick's skull. Unlike his intentions for Gertrude, the Ghost does not propose to leave the "thorns that in" Denmark's "bosom lodge/to prick and sting her" (I.v.87-8). When it comes to the state, the "thorns" must be removed. While Hamlet acknowledges that he has been "prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell," he also asserts that he "must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (II.ii.519-20). While the disjunct between memory and present reality can be readily identified through the experience of the skull, the resolution of this disjunct remains far more involute. Once the fragmented elements of the self or the state have been "unfolded" (I.i.2) and exposed by time, is it possible for them to be re-folded?

Even when Hamlet does murder Claudius (V.ii.311), thereby succumbing to the Ghost's command, the state has not been restored. Fortinbras is ready to assume the throne, and the Denmark which thrived under the Old King has been lost in the attempt to put the state back "into joint." Thus, even through action, the past and present states of Denmark cannot be reconciled. The tragedy that ultimately ensues as a result of this quest for vengeance reveals that drastic action is not the answer for how best to reconcile the past and the present. We are left wondering whether this reconciliation is even possible or if, perhaps, memory is an institution that forces us to recall what can never again come into being. If we are unable to reintegrate our remembered selves into our present selves, what are the consequences? What kind of madness might we be privy to should the self remain "out of joint?"

IV. “HOW SHOULD I YOUR TRUE LOVE KNOW FROM ANOTHER ONE?” (IV.v.23)

“To the celestial and my soul’s idol, the most beautiful Ophelia...thus in her excellent white bosom...Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love. O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu. Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him. Hamlet.” (II.ii.108-121).

The letters Hamlet wrote for Ophelia are already out of her possession when we learn of their contents from Polonius. These letters serve as proof of Hamlet’s love, which Ophelia must “repel” and “deny” by mandate of her father (II.i.106). Not only is the physical evidence of Hamlet’s love absent for Ophelia, Hamlet, too, is absent—he has gone “mad” and insists on maintaining his facade in her presence. In fact, we do not see Hamlet and Ophelia interact in the play when he is “sane.” What may have been of their relationship is already lost to the audience and we only observe the magnitude of their love through her despair. Although Hamlet and his affection for Ophelia have not died in the same way Yorick has, his letters and his physical being have nonetheless become skulls in the presence of which Ophelia must remember. In order to believe that he “loves [her] best,” Ophelia needs to recall a past wherein Hamlet’s love was a tangible reality for her. When Hamlet has been fully transformed in Ophelia’s eyes and she no longer holds his letters, is it possible for her to remember his love well enough to “never doubt”?

When Ophelia attempts to return Hamlet’s missives at Polonius’ bidding, she asserts “I have remembrances of yours that I have longed to redeliver,” to which Hamlet responds “I never gave you aught” (III.i.92-5). In using “remembrance” euphemistically to speak of the letters, Ophelia associates her memory of Hamlet’s affection with the pieces of paper in her hands, dubbing them a memento of their love. When Hamlet subsequently dismisses the notion that he ever wrote her such letters, he is also implicitly rejecting her memories of him. Hamlet further dispels Ophelia’s memory

when he restates his love as a thing of the past (“I did love you once” [III.i.114]) and, then again, as something which never occurred at all (“I loved you not” [III.i.118]). In denying his letters and their love, Hamlet appears to be hollowing out Ophelia’s skull, as it were, and robbing it of its memories. The letters have “lost” their “perfume” (III.i.98); Ophelia’s memories of Hamlet are rid of their particularity and, thus, their meaning.

When Ophelia’s memories are negated by Hamlet, her very sense of self is affected by his rejection. Hamlet has exposed Ophelia as a woman fundamentally fragmented by time and by his assertions about their relationship; he has “unfolded” her (I.i.2). In attempting to remember Hamlet and the love they shared despite his current denial, Ophelia resorts to prayer: “O help him, you sweet heavens!...Heavenly powers restore him” (III.i.133,140). The language of restoration highlights the disjunct between the Hamlet Ophelia loved and the Hamlet she currently perceives. Ophelia characterizes this rift when she speaks of Hamlet’s “noble and most sovereign reason/like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh/that unmatched form and stature of blown youth blasted with ecstasy” (III.i.156-8).

The rupture between memory and reality, illustrated in Ophelia’s analogy of “bells jangled out of time,” compounds the problem of memory. For Ophelia, Hamlet is not simply a skull, Hamlet is a skull that talks back, dismissing her very act of remembering through his speech. For this reason, it is fitting that Ophelia does not appeal to memory itself to “restore him;” memory has already been put into question and she must turn to the heavens. When Ophelia resorts to prayer, it becomes apparent that there is something distinct about the relationship between memory and its skull when the external object to which the memory is attached is able to revise the memory in question. Ophelia acknowledges this problem when she laments: “O woe is me, t’have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (III.i.159-60). Although Hamlet has implored “Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins

remembered” (III.i.88-9), this remembrance proves tiresome—perhaps, even, impossible—when sight is contrary to memory.

Not only does Hamlet deny Ophelia the memories of their love, he also takes her origins from her when he mistakenly kills Polonius (III.iv). When Ophelia ultimately returns in the aftermath of her father’s murder, she speaks mostly in song. Claudius refers to her changed disposition as “divided from herself and her fair judgement,/without the which we are pictures or mere beasts” (IV.v.85-6). The “division” Claudius speaks of highlights what the self might look like when it has been irreparably “unfolded” (I.i.2). Ophelia is not merely disjointed, she is broken somehow.

Ophelia’s brokenness is illustrated by her inability to produce her own speech, instead relying on lyrics to communicate her state to those around her. This mode of communication reveals that Ophelia has been reduced to an archetypal spurned lover. The songs are not particular to her, but rather communicate a general sentiment of betrayal. Hamlet has denied Ophelia two integral pieces of her story: the future represented by their love and the origins represented by her father. Hamlet’s rejection of Ophelia’s memories and murder of her father amount to a hollowing out of her selfhood. When we observe Ophelia singing, it becomes clear that she has altogether lost a particular sense of self and has become the paradigmatic woman to whom these songs might apply.

The first lyric Ophelia iterates resembles Hamlet’s experience in the graveyard: “How should I your true love know from another one? By his cockle hat and staff and his sandal shoon...He is dead and gone, lady, dead and gone” (IV.v.23-30). Just as Hamlet could not differentiate Yorick’s skull from the array of bones in the graveyard, neither can Ophelia know one true love from another. She continues a similar line of questioning as she sings “And will ‘a not come again? And will ‘a not come again? No, no, he is dead, Go to thy deathbed. He never will come again.” (IV.v.182-6). The parallels between Ophelia’s songs and the concerns Hamlet articulates in the graveyard allow us to

view Ophelia as a cautionary tale for Hamlet. If Hamlet is unable to reconcile his memory with his present circumstance, he will similarly become vulnerable to the madness that ultimately overtakes Ophelia.

In her final moments on stage, Ophelia distributes flowers to the assembled company, attributing individual meaning to each. The first flower she bestows (presumably to Laertes) is “rosemary...for remembrance,” with which she says “pray you, love, remember” (IV.v.169-70). Although it is this very remembrance and Hamlet’s denial thereof that contributed to her own insanity, she still asserts the importance of memory with this gift. It is significant that Ophelia does not simply ask Laertes to remember, but gives him the sprig of rosemary to associate this remembrance with. As we have seen with Yorick’s skull and the Ghost, memory is most potent when it possesses a tangible or visible referent in which it can live.

When Ophelia’s own skull is, as it were, hollowed out and left without the means to properly remember Hamlet or her father, her sense of sanity goes adrift. Ophelia loses access to the tangible vestiges of the one remembered and, thereby, loses access to her sense of self. These objects ground memory in the present insofar as the sensory experience of the object takes place in the present moment, even as the memory itself hearkens back to a prior time. Memory that is without an object or lacks the cognitive means to recognize the object, on the other hand, has the potential to drive us away from our selves.

When Hamlet notes that Yorick’s skull is “abhorred,” this revulsion reflects memory’s inability to resurrect the past. Memory has powers, but literal resurrection is not among them. Yorick and the childhood self his skull conjures for Hamlet are no longer alive despite Hamlet’s eulogy. This realization, while disturbing, reminds Hamlet of where he is in time. He is not a magician performing an improbable task through his memory; he is merely a man holding a skull. There is something

necessary about the disjunction between memory and reality: without it we, like Ophelia, lose a sense of ourselves in the present. In this way, Ophelia's watery death is fitting; the objects that compel us to remember serve as buoys and without them, we drown.

V. "THE THING WHEREIN I'LL CATCH THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING" (II.ii.540)

While Ophelia's madness exemplifies the consequences of an inability to reconcile memory with reality, her ruin does not directly point to what such reconciliation might look like. The guilt Claudius experiences apropos his skull, however, begins to provide an answer to this question insofar as guilt demands to be absolved in a far more pressing manner than any of the revulsions we have previously considered. For Claudius, the play within a play is his metaphorical skull: it is the thing that elicits a particular reaction, forcing him to remember his own past in its presence. Hamlet refers to the play as "the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II.ii.540). Although Claudius does not speak, "the King rises" during the play as Lucianus pours poison into the ears of his victim (III.ii.258). Claudius' physical reaction expresses abhorrence: he cannot bear to remain in the presence of the players. It is as though the King's "gorge rises," just as Hamlet's does while he holds Yorick's skull; even the language of "rising" is repeated in Claudius' reaction. Is the conscience caught in the moment of abhorrence? In other words, what is happening to our apprehension of our selves when memory seems to rupture the continuity at the heart of our notion of self?

While Claudius does not speak as he rises, he later expounds upon his reaction in his sole soliloquy. This speech solidifies the comparison between Claudius' reaction to the play and Hamlet's reaction to Yorick's skull. The play has allowed Claudius to consider his own body as a living memento of his "offence," as though he is holding it at arm's length. Claudius implicitly makes a skull of his deed when he refers to "the teeth and forehead of our faults" (III.iii.63). He further

attributes a “gilded hand” to “offence” (III.iii.58) which he associates with his own hand: “what if this cursed hand/were thicker than itself with brother’s blood?” (III.iii.43-4). It seems that guilt makes the guilty party into a living skull of his own action. Claudius’ very body forces him to remember his past.

Just as Hamlet gazes at Yorick’s skull, attempting to resurrect his past self through his memory, Claudius looks upon his own hand, wishing to erase the specific memory called to mind. The deed has become a rotting corpse—“my offense is rank: it smells to heaven” (III.iii.36)—which must be disposed of and replaced by a “new born babe” (III.iii.71). The purification Claudius craves through “repentance” (III.iii.65) is a return to a self before the murder. The appeal to “repentance” to absolve the King of his sins reveals that repentance seeks a kind of restoration of self. In Claudius’ particular conception, repentance rids the body of its misdeeds.

When Hamlet characterizes his plot to affirm Claudius’ guilt, he asserts that “guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions. For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ” (II.ii.523-9). In this formulation, the “striking” of the “soul” is synonymous with “conscience” being “caught.” In both these phrases, the verb is violent (to “catch,” to “strike”) and is alliterative with the object it acts upon. The character of the language employed suggests that the act of memory Hamlet is attempting to induce in the King is itself painful.

Furthermore, when Hamlet describes murder as a thing with “no tongue,” we are led to imagine not only the silence surrounding the action itself, but also the idea of the play as another metaphorical skull of Old King Hamlet’s murder. The play not only allows Claudius to view his own body as a residual memento of his deed, the story enacted also serves as a memento in its own right.

In this way, it is apparent that memories can be incited by storytelling, just as they are by a physical object.

“Catching” and “striking” expand upon the abhorrence Hamlet experiences in the graveyard. It is not simply that the literal or metaphorical skull makes the “gorge rise,” it does so through some metaphorical “catching” and “striking” of the conscience, as it were. While the language of “catching” the “conscience” and “striking” the “soul” applies more broadly to the troubling experience of memory, it is significant that we do not hear this language except in reference to Claudius. When his own body has become a kind of skull, Claudius can no longer avoid his self-abhorrence. The process by which the object of memory forces the beholder to self-reflect is most obvious when the body of the beholder and the object are one. However, this relationship also means that the object cannot be ignored and the need for reconciliation between the remembered self and the present self is all the more pressing.

While Claudius identifies repentance as the means for this reconciliation, we do not see him undergo any reformation before he meets his end. He is unable to give up “those effects for which [he] did the murder” (III.iii.54), be they his crown, his wife or even his own hand. In this, we learn that there is a sacrificial aspect to repentance. In order to reintegrate the remembered self with the present self, something of the present self must be given up.

VI. “THOU TURN’ST MY VERY EYES INTO MY SOUL” (III.iv.97)

“Look here upon this picture, and on this,/the counterfeit presentment of two brothers:/see what a grace was seated on this brow,/Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,/an eye like Mars to threaten and command,/a station like the herald Mercury/new-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,/a combination and a form indeed/where every god did seem to set his seal/to give the world assurance of a man;/this was your husband.” (III.iv.51-61)

Gertrude begins her encounter with Hamlet by asking “have you forgot me?” (III.iv.13), which Hamlet vehemently denies. The true question for Hamlet emerges after Polonius’ death: has Gertrude forgotten herself? Hamlet presents Gertrude with two portraits: one of the Old King and one of Claudius with the intent to “set you [Gertrude] up a glass/where you may see the inmost part of you” (III.iv.18-9). It seems he intends to make Gertrude’s “gorge rise” in recognition of her faults. In this action, Hamlet is employing memory as a tool to restore his mother to her previous self, the self that loved a godly man with “grace...seated on his brow.”

When Hamlet introduces the contrasting portrait of Claudius, he begins with an imperative: “Look you now what follows:/here is your husband like a mildewed ear/bleasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?/Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed/and batten on the moor? Ha, have you eyes?” (III.iv.61-5). The repeated appeal to sight reveals that Gertrude lacks a kind of vision. Claudius should be, to her, a living skull of her prior marriage. Hamlet solidifies the image of Gertrude’s marriage as a skull when he decries that “such an act...takes off the rose/from the fair forehead of an innocent love” and, further, that Gertrude’s marriage is “the body of contraction” from which “such a deed...plucks the very soul” (III.iv.38-45).

Once Hamlet has presented these pictures, Gertrude experiences a moment of abhorrence herself: “O Hamlet, speak no more./Thou turn’st my very eyes into my soul/and there I see such black and grieved spots/as will leave their tinct” (III.iv.86-9). This reaction illuminates the sense of horror that such encounters with physical reminders of the past give rise to. It is not simply the skull that makes one’s “gorge rise,” it is also the act of seeing into one’s own soul, which occurs in tandem with the vision of the object at hand.

The relationship between memory and our sense of self in the present is powerful, so much so that memory can tell us things about ourselves we do not wish to hear: “O speak to me no

more!/These words like daggers enter in my ears./No more, sweet Hamlet” (III.iv.92-4). What exactly is happening when Gertrude turns her eyes into her soul? It is as though Hamlet makes Gertrude see herself as a skeleton, parsing out her body as “eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,/ears without hands or eyes smelling sans all,/...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...” (III.iv.76-83).

Is it wrong for Hamlet to coerce Gertrude into this kind of self-vision? What are the consequences of forcing another to “unfold” (I.i.2) herself? The Ghost enters shortly after Hamlet’s antic, imploring him to “step between her and her fighting soul” (III.iv.109). In separating her and her soul, the Ghost acknowledges that Gertrude, like Ophelia, is becoming “divided from herself and her fair judgement” (IV.v.85). The Ghost’s chastisement suggests that the final cause of the memories that engender such ruptures of self is not madness; we are not meant to end up like Ophelia. Instead, this kind of memory asks for something akin to Claudius’ “repentance.” Memory makes our “gorge rise” in order that we might alter ourselves, become “better.”

VII. “WHILES MEMORY HOLDS A SEAT IN THIS DISTRACTED GLOBE” (I.v.96-7)

Through these various skulls, we see that abhorrence is beneficial when it takes form as a kind of self-reproach. It is through this very revulsion that our selves are “unfolded” and brought to light in their piecemeal state. In this respect, abhorrence allows for a kind of inner sight, necessary for reflection and reform to take place. When we consider our selves within this feeling of disrelish, we see that memory is not simply a portal to a prior time, but a lens through which we can view our present selves and acknowledge their shortcomings. Hamlet’s childhood self, the reign of the Old King, Ophelia and Hamlet’s love, Claudius’ life before he killed his brother, and Gertrude’s first

marriage all must assert themselves as more appealing conditions than the state these individuals find themselves in as they confront their respective skulls.

The various instances of memory in *Hamlet* reveal that the self is not merely “unfolded” through abhorrence, but that this unfolded state is undesirable and untenable. Given the unsustainability of this condition, we must then ask how the individual is to mend his fragmented and exposed sense of self. Although the Ghost asks for revenge and Hamlet advises his mother to be abstinent, neither of these actions has great bearing on the “rotten...state” (I.iv.90) of Denmark or the state of Gertrude’s character. Nonetheless, Hamlet’s advice to Gertrude seems apt for how one might reconcile the remembered self with the present self. For Hamlet, the first step to this reconciliation is akin to Claudius’: “confess yourself to heaven,/repent what’s past” (III.iv.147-8). But Hamlet goes a step beyond Claudius’ “repentance” and further advises Gertrude to “avoid what is to come,/and do not spread the compost on the weeds/to make them ranker” (III.iv.148-50).

To purify and restore oneself, one must not simply repent for one’s sins, there also must be some resolve not to repeat these sins in the future. Without this resolve, the state continues to be rotten and the “weeds,” “rank.” Hamlet intensifies this idea when he implores Gertrude to “throw away the worser part of [your heart]/and live purer with the other half” (III.iv.155-6). The most striking imperative Hamlet gives to Gertrude, however, is to “assume a virtue if you have it not” (III.iv.158). We learn that what Hamlet means by this “assumption” is not to assume a facade as an actor might, but to assume a kind of habit for “use can almost change the stamp of nature/and either shame the devil or throw him out/with wonderous potency” (III.iv.166-8).

Hamlet’s suggestion that habit can change character is an apt one, yet we do not observe any of these characters following Hamlet’s advice. In light of this, it becomes clear that there is something about the way in which memory allows us to view the rupture between past and present

that is too violent to be immediately repaired. The feeling of abhorrence reveals that the self has been “unfolded,” exposed as fundamentally disjointed, but how can the self be put back together? If habit is the means, what are the ends? The revulsion brought about by Yorick’s skull opens up space for this question, which Hamlet provides an alternate answer to in his final command to Horatio.

Hamlet frames his last request in a similar form to the Ghost’s, yet instead of pleading “if thou didst ever thy dear father love...revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!” (I.v.23-5), Hamlet adjures “if thou didst ever hold me in thy heart/absent thee from felicity awhile/and in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/to tell my story” (V.ii.330-3). It seems that the self is, to some extent, re-folded through narrative. While Hamlet has not fully reconciled the childhood Hamlet conjured by the skull with his present state, he acknowledges in this final command that both Hamlets persist when reintegrated through story.

Yet this story is not merely a vehicle through which Hamlet can preserve his past and present self. When Hamlet asks Horatio to “tell [his] story,” we may wonder if the story he’s requesting is akin to the play he puts on for Claudius.² Will it similarly “strike” one’s “soul” or “catch” one’s “conscience?” Perhaps, in his final moments, Hamlet is asking for Horatio to construct a verbal skull for him so that all who listen can ultimately partake in his memory. If it is the case that the play itself is a kind of skull of Hamlet, what should the audience make of it? Should we abhor it? And, if we do, why is it worth watching or reading? This query of worthiness takes part in our general question about the abhorrence of memory. Anyone who has looked into a casket or turned over in their hands

² It is unclear whether Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* itself is the story Hamlet is requesting on his deathbed. After all, it seems that Horatio could not rightly recount the whole play as it is written because he is not present for all the action, much less Hamlet’s soliloquies. But, using his imagination or “mind’s eye”, he could perhaps reconstruct most of the play we read. Because of his propensity for this kind of imagination in reference to the Old King, it seems fitting that Horatio would enact the same remembrance for his friend.

a trinket from a past lover or friend can attest to the bittersweet activity of remembering in the presence of an object. Yet, to “turn[...our] very eyes into [our] soul[s]” (III.iv.97) seems a noble task.

This is a play with many casualties. It is not merely the manifold deaths that litter the stage at the close of the final act, but the utter chaos and collapse of these characters’ world which illustrates that they cannot persist in their “unfolded” state. While we are rightly tempted to view this ending as tragic, it is also apparent that the “unfolding” these characters experience is necessary if they are to repent, to reform themselves. The acknowledgement that something essential and beneficial to their sense of self has been lost must precede any restoration of self. The fact that Hamlet tries to induce abhorrence in both Claudius (with the play) and Gertrude (with the pictures) illustrates that abhorrence is in the service of something higher than itself. The tragedy of *Hamlet* does not suggest that we should shy away from such abhorrence, from such unfoldings, but rather that these moments provide critical opportunities for us to re-fold ourselves anew.

Work Cited

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