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# The “To be, or not to be” Speech: Evidence, Conventional Wisdom, and the Editing of *Hamlet*

James Hirsh

SUBSTANTIAL, conspicuous, and varied pieces of evidence demonstrate that Shakespeare designed the “To be, or not to be” speech to be perceived by experienced playgoers of his time as a feigned soliloquy. Plentiful evidence within the play implies that Hamlet pretends to speak to himself but actually intends the speech itself or an account of it to reach the ears of Claudius in order to mislead his enemy about his state of mind. External evidence demonstrates that experienced playgoers of the period did indeed make the inference intended by Shakespeare. I pointed out much of this evidence in a 1981 article and further evidence in subsequent articles and in a 2003 book.<sup>1</sup> The present essay will add numerous important confirming pieces of evidence. This accumulation of evidence refutes the post-Renaissance conventional assumption that the speech is meant to represent a sincere expression of Hamlet’s thoughts. Post-Renaissance editors and commentators have ignored or dismissed this evidence and have projected post-Renaissance attitudes onto Shakespeare. The orthodox assumption leads to misunderstandings about the “To be” speech, about the character of Hamlet, about other features of the play, about Shakespeare’s artistic goals and techniques, about Renaissance dramatic practices, and about the history of subjectivity.

## **Evidence that the “To be” speech was designed as a feigned soliloquy**

(1) The content and form of the “To be” speech are radically different from the content and form of every one of Hamlet’s extended soliloquies elsewhere in the play. In each of those speeches Hamlet exhibits a passionate, obsessive focus on his personal situation—on his mother’s marriage to his hated uncle, on the Ghost’s accusation, on his desire for revenge, and on his own machinations. In each speech Hamlet uses first-person-singular pro-

nouns at a rate of at least one per four lines. In the soliloquy that ends the scene (2.2) before the one in which the "To be" speech occurs (3.1), Hamlet uses first-person-singular pronouns thirty-six times in fifty-nine lines. In sharp contrast, the "To be" speech is conspicuously impersonal. In a speech containing a long catalogue of grievances that might lead someone to contemplate suicide, Hamlet fails to mention any of the particular grievances that occupy his full attention during every one of his extended soliloquies elsewhere in the play. The omission of any reference to his personal situation is coupled with another kind of omission that makes the speech a tour de force of impersonality. In the entire thirty-four lines of the speech until he overtly addresses Ophelia, Hamlet never once uses a first-person-singular pronoun.

(2) Near the end of the scene (1.5) in which the Ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Hamlet tells Horatio and Marcellus that in future he will "put an antic disposition on"<sup>2</sup> (1.5.171). The obvious reason that Hamlet will put on an act is to mislead Claudius or agents of Claudius about his state of mind. An alert playgoer realizes that, from this moment on, whenever Hamlet knows or suspects that Claudius or anyone Hamlet regards as an agent of Claudius is present, anything Hamlet says or does may be put on.

What is an "antic disposition"? Or, more precisely, what is an "Anticke disposition" (Q2 and F)? The post-Renaissance association of this word with playfulness seriously misleads playgoers and readers about its meaning in Shakespeare's works. In Shakespeare's works its connotations included "grotesque," "macabre," and "morbid." Shakespeare repeatedly associated the word with death in general and suicide in particular. According to Richard II, "within the hollow crown" of a king "Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits" (3.2.160, 162). In *Hamlet* itself, Shakespeare associated the word specifically with suicide. The words now distinguished in both spelling and pronunciation as "antic" and "antique" were differentiated in Shakespeare's age neither in spelling (each was variously spelled "anticke," "antick," "antik," or "antike") nor in pronunciation (each was pronounced with the stress on the first syllable).<sup>3</sup> When Horatio declares his intention to commit suicide he repeats the word he heard Hamlet use in 1.5 as if its association with suicide literally went without saying: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.341, Q2: "antike," F: "Antike"). "An antique Roman" means "a person intent on committing suicide" since many famous ancient Romans committed suicide. The antic/antique disposition Hamlet repeatedly puts on for agents of his enemy is a general disgust with life so sweeping that it makes him suicidal, oblivious to the contingencies of his particular situation, and incapable of action. Like a method actor, Hamlet uses emotions he has actually felt in his fabrication of this fictional disposition. In his soliloquy in 1.2, Hamlet expressed disgust with life and a longing for death. But the contrast between that soliloquy and the antic/antique disposition he puts on

for agents of his enemy is striking and profound. In 1.2 his disgust and longing for death were provoked by an intensely personal grievance—his mother's marriage to his hated uncle. By omitting all references to his personal grievances when in the presence of agents of his enemy, Hamlet tries to convey the impression that his disgust with life is merely the result of a generic melancholy temperament, an antic/antique disposition, not any personal grievance.

(3) As a sincere expression of wholly impersonal attitudes unconnected with Hamlet's particular situation, "To be" the speech could have been located at any of numerous other points in the play, but Shakespeare chose to locate it in the midst of an eavesdropping episode. Claudius and Polonius plan to eavesdrop on an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia and take their hiding place when they hear Hamlet approach.

(4) Hamlet has been summoned to this particular location by his deadly enemy. Shortly before Hamlet arrives, Claudius explains to Gertrude, "We have closely sent for Hamlet hither" (29). Arriving at a location to which his enemy has summoned him, Hamlet would expect that agents of that enemy are present, that the walls have ears. This is precisely the kind of situation in which Hamlet will put on his antic/antique disposition.

(5) Shortly before Hamlet enters, Polonius instructs his daughter, "walk you here" (42). The obvious purpose of this instruction is to make Ophelia as conspicuous as possible (in motion as well as in plain sight) so that Hamlet will notice her as soon as he arrives. Polonius and the King of Denmark will be waiting behind the arras for the commencement of the conversation between Ophelia and Hamlet, so Polonius wants it to commence without delay. It is not credible that Ophelia flagrantly disobeys her father by hiding at the approach of Hamlet. It is not credible that, upon arriving at the place to which he has been summoned by a man whom he suspects of having already murdered one Hamlet, Hamlet would fail to look around for the presence of agents of that enemy. It is thus not credible that Hamlet would fail to notice the conspicuous presence of his former girlfriend.

(6) As Hamlet well knows, Ophelia is the obedient daughter of the chief henchman of Hamlet's enemy. She would report to her father anything Hamlet might tell her, so Hamlet cannot and does not confide in her. Hamlet would not regard her presence at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy as a coincidence.

(7) This situation contributes to a pattern established in earlier scenes. Hamlet regards his mother's marriage to his hated uncle as a betrayal. In the immediately preceding scene, Hamlet insistently pestered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about whether they were "sent for" (2.2.274, 278, 281, 288). They hesitated to answer presumably because it would have been embarrassing to tell their friend to his face that they were sent for to ascertain the cause of his insanity. But this hesitation is enough for Hamlet to regard them as

agents of his enemy. In an apostrophe in a soliloquy guarded in an aside from their hearing, Hamlet says, "Nay then I have an eye of you" (290). A man who regards former friends as enemy agents because of a momentary hesitation would feel even more deeply betrayed by a former girlfriend he encounters at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy. In Hamlet's eyes Claudius has corrupted his mother, his school friends, and now his former girlfriend.

(8) Elsewhere in the play Hamlet resents and repeatedly mocks Polonius's meddlesomeness. When Hamlet encounters the daughter of the meddlesome henchman of his enemy in the location to which Hamlet has been summoned by his enemy, he would not assume that Polonius would trust his naive daughter's *ex post facto* account of her meeting with Hamlet. Hamlet's expressed attitude toward Polonius elsewhere implies that he would suspect as a matter of course that the meddlesome Polonius is eavesdropping in the present circumstance. That Hamlet does indeed make this assumption is confirmed by evidence item 29.

(9) Throughout the play Hamlet exhibits both aptitude and zeal in devising and carrying out clever stratagems. He puts on an antic/antique disposition, attempts to catch the conscience of the King, and foils Claudius's plan to have him executed in England. Hamlet shows particular enthusiasm for devising counter-plots, for turning against his enemies the plots they have initiated against him.<sup>4</sup> He gleefully describes to Horatio how he turned Claudius's plot to have him executed into a plot to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed. Hamlet's behavior in 3.1 is a key link in the chain of this pattern. Arriving at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy and finding the daughter of his enemy's henchman walking in circles and trying to act naturally, he devises a scheme to turn against his enemies the stratagem that they have initiated against him. He pretends to be so melancholy, to be in the grip of such an antic/antique disposition, that he is oblivious of Ophelia's presence, and he launches into a feigned soliloquy to convey (ultimately) to his enemy that his mental state has rendered him incapable of taking any action. Hamlet can be sure that an account of his melancholy speech will reach Claudius. Even if the King himself is not eavesdropping in the location to which he has summoned Hamlet, the meddlesome Polonius almost certainly is. At the very least, Ophelia will dutifully report on the speech to her father, who will dutifully report it to the King.

(10) Hamlet's feigned soliloquy is only one of a number of episodes that exhibit Hamlet's strong histrionic impulse. After the Mousetrap episode, he asks Horatio, "Would not this . . . get me a fellowship in a cry of players?" (3.2.275-78).

(11) In the long preceding scene (2.2), Hamlet repeatedly puts on his antic/antique disposition to mislead agents of his enemy.

*Polonius.* Will you walk out of the air, my lord

*Hamlet.* Into my grave. . . .

*Polonius.* My lord, I will take my leave of you.

*Hamlet.* You cannot take from me any thing that I will not more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.

(206–7, 213–17)

Immediately after identifying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as agents of Claudius in a soliloquy guarded in an aside—“Nay then I have an eye of you”—Hamlet tells them that he is overwhelmed by disgust with every aspect of the world. Hamlet’s purpose in making this speech to agents of his enemy is to convince that enemy that he poses no threat. To help playgoers make the connection between Hamlet’s speech in 1.5 about the “disposition” he will put on and the description of his mental state that Hamlet feeds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 2.2, Shakespeare even plants that particular word in the later speech: “indeed, it goes so heavily with my *disposition*, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory” (297–99, italics added).

(12) There are numerous conspicuous similarities between the “sterile promontory” speech and the “To be” speech. Like the “sterile promontory” speech, the “To be” speech expresses a philosophical melancholy that would render the speaker incapable of engaging in any kind of vigorous action. Like the “sterile promontory” speech, the “To be” speech conveys a disgust with life by means of a catalogue of examples. As in the “sterile promontory” speech, the examples in the “To be” speech are generalized and unconnected with the speaker’s actual and particular circumstances. Like the “sterile promontory” speech, the “To be” speech is eloquent. Like the “sterile promontory” speech, the “To be” speech is spoken while at least one person whom Hamlet has reason to regard as an agent of his enemy is present and visible to Hamlet.

(13) In the “To be” speech, Hamlet describes “death” unequivocally as “the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (78–79). Hamlet cannot have forgotten the most memorable experience of his life, his encounter with what appeared to be the ghost of his own father.<sup>5</sup> The passage makes sense only as a ploy to deceive the agent of his enemy in full view and ultimately his enemy. In 1.5, Hamlet repeatedly and passionately demanded that his companions swear that they will never tell anyone else about the Ghost. If news that the Ghost of the man Claudius murdered is haunting the castle did reach Claudius, Claudius would assume as a matter of course that the motive of the Ghost’s visitation was to demand that his son revenge the murder. In case someone has informed Claudius about the Ghost, Hamlet expresses, in his supposedly self-addressed speech, an utter disbelief in ghosts. This passing remark in a supposedly self-addressed speech is de-

signed to convey the impression that he has not encountered the Ghost of his father and is therefore ignorant of Claudius's murder of old Hamlet.<sup>6</sup>

(14) At the very end of the preceding scene, Hamlet exuberantly declared, "the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.604–5). In his next speech, the "To be, or not to be" passage, Hamlet declares that "we" are incapable of action without expressing regret that this incapacity in his own case will prevent him from carrying out his plan for verifying that his father was murdered by his uncle. In the scene following the "To be" scene Hamlet exuberantly pursues his plan to catch the conscience of the King without expressing relief that he has overcome "our" incapacity for action.

(15) Renaissance drama contains a vast number of eavesdropping episodes, which occur in plays of all genres and in a wide variety of circumstances. In no other period of Western drama do eavesdropping episodes occur so often in serious plays. Playgoers evidently relished eavesdropping episodes, and dramatists exercised great ingenuity in devising novel variations.

(16) Eavesdropping episodes occur in almost all of Shakespeare's plays and in a wide variety of dramatic circumstances, and many of these episodes are intricate. In more than one play, for example, Shakespeare created episodes involving concentric circles of eavesdroppers. One character (or group) eavesdrops upon a second character (or group) while a third character (or group) eavesdrops upon all the other characters.<sup>7</sup> Some of Shakespeare's most subtle, ingenious, and daring eavesdropping episodes occur in his tragedies.

(17) In one eavesdropping variation that Shakespeare used in more than one play, a character or group has reason to suspect that an eavesdropper is present and uses the opportunity to mislead the eavesdropper. Two examples of this variation occur in *Much Ado about Nothing* (in 2.3 and 3.1), written about two years before *Hamlet*.

(18) Although there are three other characters within earshot when Hamlet arrives on stage in 3.1, none of the three can see what he does as he enters. The eavesdroppers stationed behind the arras can hear him, but they cannot see him. On her father's orders, Ophelia has her eyes glued to a book. Shakespeare constructed the situation in such a way that the actor playing Hamlet could provide visual clues—the direction of his gaze, facial expressions, gestures, body language, and movements—indicating that Hamlet is alert and aware of the presence of Ophelia when he arrives at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy. As he enters, the actor playing Hamlet could halt and look directly at Ophelia for a moment before beginning to speak. These visual clues could have been calibrated to any degree of subtlety or obviousness desired by Shakespeare in consultation with Richard Burbage.<sup>8</sup>

(19) Many of the eavesdropping episodes in Renaissance drama involve

soliloquies and asides. A remarkably precise and complex set of conventions governed soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping in the period. (a) As a matter of course, all words spoken by an actor represented words spoken by the character. (b) Even soliloquies, words that a character did not intend to be heard by any other character, represented speeches (rather than interior monologues), as demonstrated, for example, by the startling number of soliloquies in Renaissance plays that are overheard by eavesdroppers. (c) A character could direct a speech to the hearing of one or more characters but guard it in an aside from the hearing of one or more other characters of whose presence the speaker was aware. (d) A character could also guard a self-addressed speech in an aside from the hearing of all the other characters of whose presence he was aware. Such a speech is a soliloquy guarded in an aside. (e) A character could not guard a speech from the hearing of another character if the speaker did not know for certain that the other character was within ear-shot. A mere suspicion that another character was present did not enable a character to guard a speech. (f) Like any other skill, guarding an aside could be performed well or badly. An aside had to be actively and continuously guarded. If a speaker became so preoccupied by what he was saying to himself that he lowered his guard, the other characters on stage would begin to hear what he was saying to himself. Such a complex set of conventions that now seem patently unrealistic could be maintained in Renaissance drama because they came into operation in the vast majority of plays of the period, and experienced playgoers were quite familiar with them. Dramatists rigorously followed these conventions because they created opportunities for complex eavesdropping episodes that evidently delighted playgoers of the period.<sup>9</sup>

(20) Shakespeare showed great ingenuity in employing these complex conventions governing soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping throughout his career and in plays of all genres. Many of these episodes violate post-Renaissance canons of verisimilitude. About half of Shakespeare's plays, for example, contain episodes in which a character's self-addressed speech is overheard.<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare constructed numerous episodes on the assumption that experienced playgoers would grasp intricate and subtle operations of these conventions. In *Julius Caesar* (1599) 2.4, for example, within six lines (39–44), Portia (1) speaks overtly to her servant Lucius ("I must go in"); (2) then speaks in a soliloquy fully guarded in an aside ("Ay, me! how weak a thing / The heart of woman is!"); (3) then, while continuing to speak to herself in a soliloquy, becomes so fixated on the hypothetical audience of her apostrophe that (as her subsequent fully guarded aside indicates) she ceases to guard her soliloquy adequately from Lucius ("O Brutus, / The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise!"); (4) then realizes that she had ceased to guard her soliloquy adequately in an aside and speaks to herself now in an adequately guarded soliloquy-aside ("Sure the boy heard me"); (5) then overtly addresses Lucius to try to explain away her insufficiently guarded

soliloquy ("Brutus hath a suit / That Caesar will not grant"); (6) then adequately guards a soliloquy in an aside ("O, I grow faint"); (7) then overtly addresses Lucius ("Run, Lucius, and commend me to my lord"). Shakespeare followed the conventions governing soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping not because he was conventional in the pejorative sense, but rather because those conventions allowed him to create daringly original dramatic episodes.

(21) In several plays, Shakespeare created situations in which a character pretends to be talking only to himself but actually allows his speech to be heard by another character who the speaker knows or suspects is within earshot in order to mislead that character about his state of mind. One example of a feigned soliloquy occurs in 1.2 of *Lear*. Noticing the approach of his brother, Edmund pretends to speak to himself. In his feigned soliloquy he expresses a "melancholy" (135) disposition in order to give Edgar the false impression that he is incapable of action when, in fact, he has already set in motion a plot against his brother.

(22) There are striking similarities between what Edmund is doing in 1.2 of *Lear* and what so much other evidence implies that Hamlet is doing in 3.1 of *Hamlet*. Like Edmund, Hamlet pretends to be speaking only to himself but actually allows another character who is in full view to hear his speech. Like Edmund, Hamlet gives voice in his feigned soliloquy to a melancholy disposition in order to deceive someone into believing he is incapable of action when, in fact, he has already set in motion a plan of action. The situation in *Lear* is a greatly condensed version of the situation in the earlier play.

(23) Shakespeare often employed the technique of implication. Many of these implications are quite subtle and challenge the ability of playgoers to make inferences. Shakespeare was willing to take the risk that some playgoers would fail to make the appropriate inference. The first fifty-six lines of *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–97) focus on the mystery of Antonio's sadness. Neither Antonio nor his friends arrive at a satisfactory explanation. Later in the scene, playgoers learn that Antonio already knows that Bassanio wants to woo an heiress who lives at Belmont. Antonio loves Bassanio and will provide him with money to travel to Belmont. But if Bassanio marries the heiress and moves to her residence, Antonio will no longer see his dear friend on a daily basis. Shakespeare easily could have provided an explicit solution to the initial puzzle of the play but instead chose to allow playgoers themselves to put two and two together.

In *Lear* 4.6, when Oswald threatens the life of Gloucester, Edgar begins to speak in a peasant dialect: "Chill not let go, zir, without vurther cagion" (235, "I will not let go, sir, without further occasion"). The reason for this odd behavior does not become apparent until after the fact and then only by implication. After Edgar kills Oswald, he apostrophizes the corpse: "I know thee well; a serviceable villain" (252). Edgar has not yet revealed his identity

to his father but has dropped his verbal impersonation of Poor Tom. This suggests that Edgar wants the blind Gloucester to recognize who his companion is on his own. If Edgar knows Oswald well, then Oswald knows him well. If Edgar—who is no longer visibly disguised as Poor Tom—spoke in his usual manner, Oswald might recognize him and address him by name. Gloucester would learn the identity of his companion from a serviceable villain rather than on his own. So Edgar disguises his speech. Shakespeare could have given Edgar a self-addressed aside explaining his ploy but chose not to do so. The number of elements in *Hamlet* implying that the “To be” speech is a deceptive ploy far exceed the number of elements in *Lear* implying that Edgar’s use of a peasant dialect is a deceptive ploy.

Shakespeare often devised implications that depended on playgoers’ familiarity with the conventions governing soliloquies and eavesdropping. An example occurs in *King Lear* 2.2. After Kent is placed in the stocks and is left alone, he falls asleep. Edgar enters and begins a soliloquy without noticing the presence of Kent. Experienced Renaissance playgoers knew that soliloquies represented speeches by characters and that they would be overheard as a matter of course by other characters of whose presence the speaker was unaware unless there was some clearly dramatized impediment. Kent’s sleeping state is such an impediment. But why would the dramatist bring Edgar on the stage already occupied by a sleeping Kent? Shakespeare encouraged experienced Renaissance playgoers to hope and expect that Kent would awaken while Edgar was speaking and hear the remainder of Edgar’s self-addressed speech. Kent would quickly realize that Edgar is innocent of the charges against him and would presumably make his presence known to Edgar, and these two sympathetic and victimized characters, who have much in common, would join forces. When Edgar leaves without interacting with Kent, Renaissance playgoers would have suffered disappointment in response to this lost opportunity. During the course of the play, characters often have their hopes raised only to have those hopes ultimately dashed. In this episode Shakespeare created a situation in which playgoers undergo a similar experience themselves. This profound artistic effect depended on the *implicit* operation of the Renaissance conventions governing soliloquies and eavesdropping.<sup>11</sup>

A dramatist who intends to write thought-provoking plays will often use implication rather than explication. You cannot provoke people into thought if you do all their thinking for them. Ben Jonson, who was less daring in his use of implication than Shakespeare, wrote that “a writer should always trust somewhat to the capacity of the spectator.”<sup>12</sup>

(24) Shakespeare created a number of situations in which he expected playgoers to realize without any overt explanation in the dialogue that a character is feigning or has feigned a self-addressed speech. Shakespeare devised just such an episode in *Othello*, which was probably the next tragedy he wrote

after *Hamlet*. At a crucial moment in *Othello* a character (a) pretends to speak only to himself, but (b) actually speaks to be heard by another character in order to mislead that character about his state of mind, and (c) does not explain his ploy in a genuine self-addressed speech. Entering with Othello as Cassio takes leave of Desdemona, Iago pretends to speak only to himself but actually allows Othello to hear his words: "Hah? I like not that" (3.3.34). This is a lie. Iago himself has engineered the meeting of Desdemona and Cassio to arouse Othello's jealousy. But Iago does not speak these words openly and directly to Othello. Othello asks him to repeat what he said. Presuming that Othello actually did hear what he said, Iago is evasive in order to convey the false impression that he does not want Othello to know what Iago said in order to convince Othello of the sincerity of Iago's expression of unease at seeing Cassio and Desdemona together. Later in the episode it becomes evident that Iago did allow Othello to hear what he said and that it has been preying on Othello's mind. Othello brings it up: "I heard thee say even now, thou lik'st not that, / When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?" (109–10). Iago's deceptive ploy is obvious to playgoers because they know in advance that Iago plans to deceive Othello.

This situation has striking similarities to the situation in 3.1 of *Hamlet*. Iago has stated his intention to deceive Othello. Hamlet has stated his intention to put on a false disposition, presumably whenever Claudius or anyone he regards as an agent of Claudius is present. When Iago says, "Hah? I like not that," he is in the presence of Othello, the person he intends to deceive. When Hamlet speaks the "To be" speech, he is in a location to which he has been summoned by his enemy, a place where walls can be expected to have ears and where the person who is in full view can be counted on to report what Hamlet says to her father, the henchman of his enemy. Playgoers know that what Iago says in the presence of Othello is a misrepresentation of what he is actually thinking. Playgoers know that what Hamlet says in the presence of the obedient daughter of the henchman of his enemy is a misrepresentation of what is actually on Hamlet's mind. Playgoers know that Hamlet is obsessed by his personal grievances and know that he has encountered what appeared to be the ghost of his father, whereas in the "To be" speech he omits all mention of his personal grievances and declares unequivocally that death is "the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns." A playgoer capable of putting two and two together in the one case is capable of putting two and two together in the other. Indeed, Hamlet's implicitly feigned soliloquy would have posed far less of a challenge to Renaissance playgoers' powers of inference than Iago's would have posed. (a) The number of elements in *Hamlet* implying that the "To be" passage is a feigned self-address far exceed the number of elements in *Othello* implying that Iago's "Hah? I like not that" is a feigned self-address. (b) Iago's feigned self-address is only five syllables long whereas Hamlet's occupies thirty-four

lines, so playgoers at *Othello* had much less time to make the inference. Shakespeare was apparently so satisfied with the implicitly feigned self-addressed speech in *Hamlet* that he used the very same device in his next tragedy in a greatly abbreviated form.

(25) Shakespeare included an episode involving an implicitly feigned soliloquy in *All's Well That Ends Well*, also written shortly after *Hamlet*. In 1.3 the Steward reports to the Countess that he overheard an offstage self-addressed speech by Helena:

I was very late more near her than I think she wish'd me. Alone she was, and did communicate to herself her own words to her own ears; she thought, I dare vow for her, they touch'd not any stranger sense. Her matter was, she lov'd your son. Fortune, she said was no goddess, that had put such differences betwixt their two estates. (106–12)

Many details in the play imply that this account of a supposed self-addressed speech is bogus. (a) Rather than inconveniencing Helena, the purported invasion of Helena's privacy by the Steward leads directly to the precise outcome Helena desires. The Steward's report arouses the sympathy of the Countess, who gives her servant Helena approval and the necessary means to travel to Paris and thereby to cure the King, who in gratitude forces Bertram to marry Helena. If it were a pure accident that the Steward overheard Helena, it was an extremely lucky accident for Helena. (b) In a genuine soliloquy only a short time earlier in the play Helena explicitly and passionately expressed her intention to achieve her goal by taking matters into her own hands and not to rely on lucky accidents:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,  
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky  
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull  
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.

(1.1.216–19)

This is glaringly at odds with Helena's passive sorrow at the operations of "Fortune" in her supposed self-addressed speech. (c) Elsewhere in the play Helena exhibits an extraordinary determination to take matters in her own hands rather than to rely on Fortune. (d) Elsewhere in the play Helena exhibits an extraordinary facility in devising and carrying out elaborate deceptions to get what she wants. (e) Elsewhere in the play Helena enlists other characters by persuasion or bribery to help her carry out her deceptions. (f) Later in the play, the Countess chastises the Steward for his delay in giving her the letter in which Helena declares that she is going to Spain. If he had given the Countess the letter earlier, Helena could have been prevented from leaving, as the Countess remarks and as the Steward acknowledges (3.4.19–24). Like

his earlier prompt reporting of Helena's supposedly self-addressed speech, the Steward's delay in delivering Helen's letter to the Countess is an accident too good to be true for Helena. As a direct result of the Steward's delay, Helena can pursue her current project without interference from the Countess. Just as the letter delivered to the Countess by the Steward misleads the Countess about Helena's intentions (Helena is actually headed to Florence, not Spain), the supposedly self-addressed speech supposedly overheard by the Steward misleads the Countess about Helena's state of mind at that point in the play. (g) In his report to the Countess about Helen's supposed self-addressed speech, the Steward (an amateurish liar) explicitly denies the possibility that Helena was perpetrating a deception: "she thought, I dare vow for her, they touch'd not any stranger sense." If Shakespeare did not intend to imply that Helena persuaded or bribed the Steward to give the Countess a false report that he overheard a self-addressed speech in which Helena pathetically bewails her fate, Shakespeare botched the job by including so many elements before, during, and after the episode that individually and collectively point to that as the only reasonable inference.

Helena's feigned soliloquy has a very specific similarity with the feigned soliloquies of Hamlet and Edmund. In each case, the speaker, who has set in motion a plan of action, wishes to convince the target of the deception that the speaker is passive.

(26) Shakespeare was not the only dramatist of the period to construct episodes involving implicitly feigned soliloquies. An example occurs in John Fletcher's *A Woman's Prize* (1611).<sup>13</sup> In 4.2, Petruchio notices the approach of his second wife Maria and decides to eavesdrop. In a series of speeches, Maria complains that she has been prevented from tending to her sick husband by officious nurses and that Petruchio has treated her unkindly by ordering the removal of furnishings from the house. These complaints make no sense as sincere self-addressed speeches. They contradict what playgoers witnessed earlier in the play: Maria herself fabricated the rumor that Petruchio has the plague, hired the nurses who keep him confined, and ordered the removal of the furnishings. Maria's complaints in 4.2 make sense only if Maria spotted Petruchio as he took up his hiding place and decided to take advantage of the situation by misleading him about her state of mind by pretending to talk to herself. Maria never explains her ploy in a genuine soliloquy guarded from Petruchio's hearing. Fletcher expected playgoers to realize that Maria's speeches are feigned soliloquies simply on the basis of incongruities between the content of those speeches and what playgoers witness in other episodes, perhaps supplemented by visual clues conveyed by the boy actor portraying Maria. This particular example is particularly relevant to the present argument for several reasons: (a) it occurs in a play written for the King's Men during the time that Shakespeare was a leading member of the company; (b) Fletcher's play is a sequel to one of Shakespeare's own plays (*The Taming*

of the *Shrew*); (c) Fletcher would shortly become Shakespeare's replacement as the leading playwright of the King's Men and probably was already being vetted or groomed for the job; (d) Fletcher would shortly collaborate with Shakespeare on as many as three plays (*Henry VIII*, *Cardenio*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*). The implicitly feigned soliloquy in *A Woman's Prize* was obviously created with the approval of Shakespeare and his company. That approval was a forgone conclusion since Shakespeare himself had created similar situations in his own plays.

(27) After feigning a speech in order to convey the impression that he suffers from an incapacitating generic melancholy, Hamlet then pretends that he has just noticed the presence of Ophelia: "Soft you, now, / The fair Ophelia" (87–88). He pretends that he is still speaking only to himself and pretends to guard these words from her hearing but actually allows her and any eavesdroppers who may be present to hear them. Like Iago's "Hah? I like not that," Hamlet's "Soft you, now? The fair Ophelia" is a feigned soliloquy in a feigned aside.

(28) During his encounter with Ophelia, Hamlet berates her and implies that she is dishonest. The obvious cause of this outburst is Hamlet's anger at Ophelia for participating at this very moment in a plot to find out what is on his mind.

(29) In the course of this tongue-lashing, Hamlet asks a superficially incongruous question: "Where's your father?" (129). Hamlet (a) assumes that her meddling father is eavesdropping and that Ophelia is a knowing participant in the eavesdropping plot and (b) wants to humiliate the woman whom he now regards as an agent of his enemy by forcing her to tell an outright lie ("At home, my lord" [130]).

(30) Hamlet's deception becomes an element of a profound dramatic irony. After executing a magnificent thirty-four-line feigned soliloquy to mislead agents of his enemy into believing that he has no personal grievance and that he is utterly incapable of action, Hamlet becomes so enraged at Ophelia's pose of innocence while she is at this very moment participating in what Hamlet regards as a plot against him that he abandons his pretense of passivity. In the process of berating and humiliating a woman whom he regards as a betrayer, he reveals that he is angry, bitter, "revengeful" (124), and "ambitious" (124). Ironically, the situation that he momentarily turned against his enemy has ultimately revealed to his enemy that he does indeed pose a threat.

(31) At three points during his encounter with Ophelia, Hamlet says "Farewell" (132, 137, 140) but does not actually leave. The obvious explanation for this is that he hopes Polonius, who Hamlet suspects is eavesdropping and who can hear but not see Hamlet, will assume Hamlet has left and emerge from his hiding place. The Lord Chamberlain would thus be embarrassingly exposed as an eavesdropper. Hamlet elsewhere shows a zest not merely for deceiving but also for making fools of those he regards as his enemies, espe-

cially Polonius. The exposure of Polonius as an eavesdropper will also humiliate Ophelia. Her declaration only two lines before Hamlet's first "farewell" that her father is "At home" will be promptly and emphatically exposed as a lie. But the eavesdroppers cautiously stay in hiding until Hamlet has gone for good.

(32) Shakespeare often dramatizes the sad fact that eloquence is no guarantee of sincerity. Many eloquent characters in Shakespeare's plays are deceptive. In 3.1 of *Hamlet* Shakespeare pushes this theme to its limit. That the supremely eloquent "To be, or not to be" speech is a deceptive ploy drives home the point that there is no level of eloquence that guarantees sincerity.

(33) Another disturbing notion illustrated by Hamlet's deception in this episode is that in the process of combating an enemy one regards as evil, one may begin to resemble one's adversary. In the process of combating a deceptive schemer, Hamlet has become a deceptive schemer. Ironically and disturbingly, Hamlet becomes a mirror image of his enemy. Hamlet's ploy in the "To be" episode is a major element in this pattern.

(34) Yet another major theme developed in the episode also concerns Hamlet's growing resemblance to his enemy. Claudius treats other people as objects to be used or disposed of merely to serve his purposes, and so does Hamlet. Claudius has deceived Polonius and Ophelia into believing he cares about his nephew's welfare and makes use of those unwitting agents in a plot to uncover the intentions of a potential rival for his throne. In the same episode Hamlet makes use of Claudius's agents—who are no more witting of Hamlet's actual purposes than they are of Claudius's—in an attempt to mislead his enemy about his state of mind.

(35) *The Conspiracy of Charles, Duke of Byron* (c. 1607), a play by George Chapman, contains a speech (a) that is located in an eavesdropping episode, (b) that is a feigned soliloquy, and (c) that is obviously modeled on the "To be, or not to be" speech. Aware of the presence of Byron, La Fin decides to deceive him by pretending to talk to himself but actually allowing Byron to hear his speech. He describes his plan in a genuine soliloquy guarded in an aside from Byron's hearing: "A feigned passion in his hearing now, / Which he thinks I perceive not."<sup>14</sup> A dramatist's decision whether or not to have a character explain such a ploy depended on the particular circumstances. Shakespeare chose to make Edmund's deception of Edgar explicit (just barely), but he expected playgoers to infer entirely on their own that when Iago says "Hah? I like not that" the speech is a feigned self-addressed speech.

La Fin's eighteen-line feigned soliloquy has manifest and manifold resemblances to Hamlet's "To be" speech. Like Hamlet, La Fin pretends to be suffering from melancholy. Like Hamlet, La Fin expresses a longing for death. Like Hamlet, La Fin never refers to his personal situation. Hamlet's speech consists largely of a catalogue of generic miseries of life. La Fin's speech

consists largely of a corresponding catalogue of generic joys of life that have been “eclipsed” (20) from his perspective as a result of his melancholy. Like Hamlet, La Fin never once uses a first-person-singular pronoun. Hamlet refers to “that sleep of death” (65), La Fin to “the death of sleep” (17). Like the “To be” speech, La Fin’s speech is spoken while another character is in full view on stage. Chapman clearly made the correct inference that Hamlet’s “To be” speech was a feigned soliloquy.

(36) *The Broken Heart* (c. 1630) by John Ford contains a speech (a) that occurs in an eavesdropping episode; (b) that is feigned soliloquy, (c) that is not accompanied by an explanation of the ploy by the perpetrator, and (d) that conspicuously alludes to the “To be, or not to be” speech. Aware of the presence of other characters, Orgilus pretends to talk to himself but actually speaks to be heard by them in order to mislead them about his state of mind. Orgilus does not explain his ploy. Ford expected playgoers to make the inference that the speech is feigned. He provided contextual clues, including incongruities between what Orgilus says here and what playgoers otherwise know about him. An additional technique by which Ford implied that the speech is a feigned soliloquy is the inclusion of clear reminders of Hamlet’s feigned soliloquy. Orgilus pretends to engage in a philosophical debate with himself about the futility of action. Near the beginning of the speech occurs the infinitive phrase “to appease the raging sea,”<sup>15</sup> which echoes the infinitive phrase “to take arms against a sea of troubles,” which occurs near the beginning of the “To be” passage. Like Chapman, Ford realized that the “To be” speech was a feigned soliloquy.

### **Evidence that Renaissance playgoers perceived the “To be” speech as a feigned soliloquy**

The foregoing catalogue includes evidence not only that the “To be” passage was designed by Shakespeare to be perceived by playgoers as a feigned soliloquy but that it was indeed perceived as such. This evidence is of two kinds. (1) Shakespeare himself included feigned self-addressed speeches, including implicitly feigned self-addressed speeches, in no fewer than three plays (including two tragedies) in the years immediately following the first performance of *Hamlet*, and each of those speeches (Helena’s, Iago’s, and Edmund’s) has one or more specific additional similarities to the “To be” speech, as indicated above. In the cases of the implicitly feigned soliloquies perpetrated by Iago and Helena, Shakespeare included far fewer clues than in the case of Hamlet’s implicitly feigned soliloquy. Shakespeare would not have repeated this plot device if the experiment in *Hamlet* had been a failure, if he had judged that most playgoers failed to catch any of the numerous clues

that Hamlet was feigning a self-addressed speech. (2) At least two particular playgoers, the dramatists George Chapman and John Ford, recognized that the "To be" speech was a feigned soliloquy. Each designed a speech (a) that occurs in an eavesdropping episode, (b) that is a feigned soliloquy, and (c) that specifically alludes to the "To be" speech, which also occurs in an eavesdropping episode.

### **A comparison with the conventional post-Renaissance assumption**

Shakespeare included a large number of clues in the play that all point in the same direction. An individual playgoer would have to notice only one or two in order to infer that the "To be" speech is a feigned soliloquy. Shakespeare was evidently attempting to lead as many playgoers as possible to make the inference to which all these pieces of evidence point. If Shakespeare did not intend to imply that the "To be, or not to be" speech is a deceptive ploy, he bungled the job by inadvertently including so many elements before, during, and after the episode that individually and collectively point to that implication. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that a play could contain a greater number of independent clues that all point to a single implication. In addition to the many other important functions of this episode, Shakespeare was clearly using it to explore an element of his craft, to experiment with the artistic technique of implication. One should not confuse the technique of implication with the technique of leaving something open to multiple interpretations. The explanation presented here is the only one that makes sense of the relevant evidence.

Someone who adheres to the conventional assumption that the "To be" speech is a genuine soliloquy has to try to explain away *on the basis of an independent rationale* each of the pieces of evidence catalogued above. The resulting argument would be a ramshackle collection of makeshift rationalizations, such as the following. (1) When Hamlet arrives at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy, he does not notice the presence of Ophelia because he is lost in his sublime meditation on life and death. (2) When Hamlet arrives at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy, it does not occur to him that his enemy or an agent of that enemy might be in hiding. (3) Although Hamlet tells his companions in 1.5 that he will put on an act, it does not occur to him to do so in the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy. (4) Although Shakespeare's plays contain other episodes in which characters who have reason to believe eavesdroppers are present mislead the eavesdroppers and in 3.1 Hamlet has reason to believe eavesdroppers are present, Hamlet does not take this golden opportunity to mislead his enemy because it would be unseemly for a princely hero to stoop to such a low tactic. (5) Although in every one of his extended solilo-

quies elsewhere in the play, Hamlet is obsessed with his personal grievances, he fails to mention any of them in the “To be” speech because his sublime meditation has momentarily abstracted him from his personal situation. (6) When Hamlet describes “death” as “the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns,” he means that no traveler returns from death to take up permanent residence among the living. (7) Similarities between the “To be” speech and the “sterile promontory” speech, which Hamlet feeds to agents of his enemy to convince them that he suffers from a general debilitating malaise rather than any particular personal grievance, are purely coincidental. (8) When Hamlet does finally notice Ophelia, he regards the presence of the daughter of his enemy’s henchman at the location to which he has been summoned by that enemy as purely coincidental. (9) When Hamlet asks Ophelia “Where’s your father?” he does so because a moment earlier Polonius stuck his head out of the arras and Hamlet spotted him. (10) Although Shakespeare’s plays contain many subtle implications that test playgoers’ powers of inference, he would not have attempted to lead playgoers to realize on the basis of multiple conspicuous clues that Hamlet was feigning a soliloquy because Shakespeare was afraid that some playgoers might miss all the clues. (11) Although there are striking similarities between this episode and episodes involving feigned soliloquies in Shakespeare’s other plays, no situation elsewhere in his plays is identical to this one in every single respect. Iago’s implicitly feigned self-addressed speech (“Hah? I like not that”), for example, is much shorter than the “To be” speech. The length of the “To be” speech is a guarantee of its sincerity. (12) Although Shakespeare frequently dramatized the fact that eloquence is not a guarantee of sincerity, the “To be” speech is so eloquent that it must be sincere. (13) It is purely accidental that so many pieces of evidence conflict with the notion that the “To be” speech is sincere and so many pieces of evidence imply that the speech is a feigned soliloquy. (14) At no point did Shakespeare or members of his company notice that, by sheer accident, many elements in the play conflict with the notion that the “To be” speech is sincere and that many elements suggest that it is a feigned soliloquy, and so Shakespeare never altered the play to correct the misimpression inadvertently fostered by these elements. (15) Modern audiences would not be able to infer that the “To be” speech is a feigned soliloquy, so neither would Renaissance audiences. (16) It is purely coincidental that two other Renaissance dramatists designed episodes in plays written after *Hamlet* in which characters mislead eavesdroppers by means of feigned soliloquies that have conspicuous similarities to the “To be” speech, which also occurs in an eavesdropping episode.

Someone who concurs with the conventional post-Renaissance assumption that the “To be” speech is sincere unavoidably commits himself to this entire collection of makeshift propositions or to a similarly large collection of similarly makeshift propositions in order to explain away the numerous pieces of

evidence that conflict with the conventional assumption. Someone with a respect for evidence would not be satisfied with such a hodgepodge of feeble rationalizations. Nor would someone with a respect for evidence be satisfied with a defense of the conventional assumption that dealt with only a few of the many pieces of inconvenient evidence catalogued here and that simply ignored the numerous remaining pieces. If ever a situation called for Occam's razor, this is it. If a single explanation accounts for many pieces of evidence, that explanation is more likely to be correct than a series of separate, ad hoc explanations, one for each piece of evidence, even if the alternative explanations for each individual piece of evidence are equally credible.<sup>16</sup> As the number of pieces of evidence increases, the probability that the single explanation is the correct one increases exponentially. In the present case, the probability that each of the thirty-six pieces of evidence catalogued above actually has another explanation and that it is *purely coincidental* that *all* of them point to the single inference that the "To be" passage was designed as a feigned soliloquy would be infinitesimal even if the two explanations for each individual piece of evidence were equally credible.

Furthermore, in the present case the alternative explanations for many individual pieces of evidence are *not* equally credible. The *only* credible explanation for many pieces of evidence is that the "To be" speech was designed as a feigned soliloquy. For example, a strenuous act of prestidigitation is required to make the assertion that no traveler returns from the bourn of death mean anything other than what it seems to mean. It is not credible that Hamlet would find his way to the location to which he has been summoned by his deadly enemy and then forget what brought him there. It is not credible that Chapman and Ford would both model feigned soliloquies in eavesdropping episodes on a speech in *Hamlet* that also occurs in an eavesdropping episode if the passage in *Hamlet* were not also a feigned soliloquy. And so on. Any one of these pieces of evidence alone invalidates the conventional assumption about the speech. This case involves a fusillade of smoking guns. Some features of *Hamlet* are ambiguous or mysterious. This is not one of them.

The notion that the "To be" speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts resembles the notion that someone else wrote the works generally attributed to Shakespeare. In that case, the anti-Stratfordians have to explain away many substantial, conspicuous, and varied pieces of evidence from Shakespeare's age that indicate that Shakespeare was the author of those works. Someone who adheres to the conventional post-Renaissance assumption that the "To be" speech is a genuine soliloquy has to explain away the many substantial, conspicuous, and varied pieces of evidence *from Shakespeare's age* catalogued here that contradict that assumption. The assumption that the "To be" was designed as a genuine soliloquy is based entirely on *post-Renaissance* theatrical, critical, and editorial traditions that arose in the late seventeenth century.

The fact that in countless successful post-Renaissance productions of *Hamlet* the “To be” passage has been staged as a sincere expression of Hamlet’s innermost thoughts has no bearing on the case. There have also been countless successful post-Renaissance productions of *Hamlet* in which the role of Ophelia has been performed by an actress, but that does not change the fact that in Shakespeare’s theater the part was played by a boy actor. If historicist scholarship has taught us anything, it is that we should not project our own assumptions, perspectives, aesthetic tastes, or other attitudes onto earlier cultures. We should acknowledge that people of an earlier age may have had different tastes than we do. One cannot base conclusions about the attitudes of people living in an earlier given age on evidence drawn from later ages. In order to ascertain the attitudes of people in an earlier age, cultural historians must locate and analyze evidence from the age itself. Renaissance drama contains countless self-addressed speeches by characters and countless eavesdropping episodes, and a startling number of episodes that combine these elements in various ways. Renaissance audiences apparently enjoyed such episodes, and Renaissance dramatists competed with one another in creating novel variations. The fact that these episodes have seemed patently unrealistic to commentators of later ages does not change the fact that Renaissance dramatists and playgoers delighted in them.

That Shakespeare designed the “To be” episode as a feigned soliloquy does not mean that a modern acting company is obliged to stage it as a feigned soliloquy. Most of Shakespeare’s own works are themselves adaptations of earlier works, and we do not condemn him for departing from his sources, so we should not condemn modern performers for altering a feature of a play by Shakespeare. Each production should be judged on its own merits as a work of art. But we should not confuse the artistic freedom to adapt a prior work of art in the creation of a new work of art with the freedom to make false statements about the prior work. A modern company that casts an actress as Ophelia would not claim that Ophelia was originally played by a woman. That claim would conflict with plentiful evidence from Shakespeare’s age. Similarly, a modern company that stages the “To be” speech as a genuine soliloquy should not claim that Shakespeare must have designed the episode to be perceived by playgoers of his time as a genuine soliloquy. That claim would conflict with plentiful evidence from Shakespeare’s age that the speech was designed as a feigned soliloquy.

This is not an inconsequential matter. The argument presented here provides insights not only into the most famous passage in world literature, but also into numerous other important matters: the character of Hamlet, themes of the play, Shakespeare’s dramatic purposes and techniques, and Renaissance dramatic conventions. Its ramifications extend deeply into cultural history, as noted by Jeffrey Kipnis:

In a striking parallel to Hirsh's critique, Ernst van de Wetering and other art historians have raised doubts over the assumption about Rembrandt's self-portraits that prevails among scholar and layperson alike. Hirsh and van de Wetering argue that our modern sense of self is unwittingly retrojected onto premodern representations of self-address, as if the self were natural and remained constant in history.<sup>17</sup>

The cliché that the "To be" passage represents Hamlet's "innermost thoughts" distorts the history of subjectivity.

### Concealment in plain sight

How did the erroneous notion that Shakespeare designed the "To be" passage to be dramatized as a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts arise? And how is it possible that the evidence—the substantial, plentiful, conspicuous, and varied evidence from Shakespeare's own age indicating that the speech was designed to be perceived as a feigned soliloquy—could have been ignored for over three hundred years? (1) The only texts of the play with any authority lack explanatory stage directions. (2) Professional theatrical activity was banned in England for eighteen years (1642–60). By the time theatrical activity resumed, stage conditions had profoundly changed. (3) Applying new principles of verisimilitude, neoclassical critics ridiculed self-addressed speeches by dramatic characters as unrealistic, and this attitude has prevailed ever since. Instead of occurring in all or nearly all plays and in an enormous range of dramatic situations, as they did during the Renaissance, they have occurred only infrequently in post-Renaissance drama. (4) Eavesdropping episodes occur with astonishing frequency in Renaissance drama, and dramatists competed with one another in creating subtle, intricate, and novel variations, but such episodes lost their appeal after the Renaissance and occur infrequently in drama of later ages. (5) As a result of the two preceding changes, the complicated conventions that governed soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping in Shakespeare's age ceased to operate. Because these conventions were complex and violate post-Renaissance canons of verisimilitude, they have never been revived. The operations of these conventions in Renaissance drama have created difficulties for post-Renaissance performers and have confused commentators. (6) According to Colley Cibber, what did thrill playgoers of the Restoration period were the "charms of harmonious Elocution."<sup>18</sup> (7) William Davenant was given the exclusive right to stage a group of plays by Shakespeare, including *Hamlet*. Davenant relentlessly adapted Shakespeare's plays (a) to make them simpler and easier to understand and (b) to bring them into line with the dramatic conventions and aesthetic tastes of the new age, which were profoundly different from the conventions and tastes of the previous age. (8) The leading man in Dave-

nant's company was Thomas Betterton, whom Cibber singled out as the greatest practitioner of elocution: "When these flowing Numbers came from the Mouth of a *Betterton* the Multitude no more desired Sense to them than our musical *Connoisseurs* think it essential in . . . an *Italian Opera*" (1:106, italics in the original). (9) By staging the eloquent "To be" speech as a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts, Davenant and Betterton (a) turned it into a great opportunity for Betterton to show off his elocution and (b) eliminated a deceptive ploy that, as a result of the changes in conventions and tastes, would have aroused the puzzlement, laughter, or contempt of their audiences. (10) Betterton was by far the most famous and influential performer of the part of Hamlet from 1661 to 1709. (11) Betterton's performance of the "To be" speech as a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts was so impressive that at least one playgoer, Samuel Pepys, committed the passage to memory and paid a composer to set it to music.<sup>19</sup> (12) From Betterton's age to the present, the passage has been staged innumerable times as a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts. (13) From Betterton's age to the present, a vast amount of commentary has reinforced the notion that the speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts. (14) No editor of the play has ever provided readers with correct information about the conventions governing soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping in English Renaissance drama. Without such information, post-Renaissance readers cannot make the inference that the "To be" speech is a feigned soliloquy, an inference that would have been obvious to Renaissance playgoers. (15) Countless teachers have instructed countless students that the "To be" speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet's innermost thoughts. (16) Countless allusions to the passage in popular culture convey the impression that the speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts. (17) As a result of this indoctrination, long before people ever see or read *Hamlet*, they accept as a certainty that the "To be" speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts, so when they eventually do see or read the play, they ignore evidence that the speech is a deceptive ploy. (18) The fame of the speech as a sincere expression of Hamlet's thoughts grew until it became the most famous passage in world literature. Like Poe's purloined letter, the "To or not to be" speech has been concealed in plain sight. (19) Hamlet has been sentimentalized in countless post-Renaissance performances and commentaries as a sensitive, brooding hero. The chief prop for this view is the supposedly sincere "To be" speech. (20) Hamlet has been sentimentalized in countless post-Renaissance performances and commentaries as a romantically mysterious character. If Hamlet is mysterious, one need not bother trying to figure out why his "To be" speech does not make sense as a sincere expression of his thoughts in its dramatic context. (21) Sentimental attitudes toward Hamlet encouraged a yearning for direct access to his so-called innermost thoughts, a yearning supposedly satisfied by the supposedly sincere "To be" speech. (22) The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia has been sen-

timentalized in countless post-Renaissance performances and commentaries. This attitude would be threatened by the recognition that in 3.1 Hamlet regards Ophelia as an agent of his enemy when he finds her in the location to which he has been summoned by that enemy. (23) Eloquence is often sentimentalized, especially by people who love literature. Someone who sentimentalizes eloquence is not inclined to notice the plentiful evidence that the supremely eloquent "To be" speech is a deceptive ploy. (24) As a result of all these other factors, the assumption that the "To be" speech is a genuine soliloquy became such a deeply entrenched orthodox dogma that it can be maintained despite being at odds with the relevant evidence from Shakespeare's time. (25) The principle that any proposition, no matter how long-held, deeply entrenched, or passionately cherished, must be abandoned if it is shown to be at odds with the relevant evidence is not adhered to as rigorously in the humanities as in some other disciplines.<sup>20</sup> (26) It would not serve the practical self-interest of individual Shakespeare scholars to acknowledge that the Emperor has no clothes, to acknowledge that an assumption propped up by post-Renaissance performance history, post-Renaissance scholarly tradition, and post-Renaissance popular culture is false.

### The Scholarly Tradition

A scholar might reasonably suppose that the conventional post-Renaissance assumption about the "To be" speech would not have become so widely and so deeply held for so long if someone somewhere in the vast commentary on *Hamlet* had not made a cogent and comprehensive argument that would refute the argument presented here—even if the scholar himself has no idea who that someone was. In fact, no scholar who has adhered to the conventional assumption that the "To be" speech is sincere has ever attempted to account for more than a small selection of the evidence presented here. Adherents of the conventional assumption have never needed to present an argument. Betterton's performances in the late seventeenth century so firmly established the speech as a genuine soliloquy that from that point onward people ignored the Renaissance evidence that it was designed as a feigned soliloquy.<sup>21</sup> Most commentators on *Hamlet* have not confronted any of the evidence described above and have simply assumed as a matter of course that the "To be" speech is a genuine soliloquy. A few commentators have tried to explain away a few isolated pieces of evidence with makeshift rationalizations.<sup>22</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, explained away the "No traveller" passage as follows:

If it be necessary to remove the apparent contradiction—if it be not rather a great beauty—surely it were easy to say that no traveller returns to this world, as to his home, or *abiding-place*.<sup>23</sup>

In order explain away a passage that does not make sense if the speech is sincere, Coleridge simply added words to what Hamlet says in order to make him mean what Coleridge required him to mean. A traveler can return to a locale other than his home, as indicated by the passage in which Laertes asks Claudius for “leave and favor to return to France” (1.2.51). Evidently not satisfied with Coleridge’s “easy” rationalization, Harold Jenkins (editor of the 1982 Arden edition of the play) fabricated his own:

The truth surely is that we must not, and we do not (as Hamlet himself does not) connect the Ghost at all with this general reflection. Shakespeare allows Hamlet to utter it because it is what would occur to any well-read Renaissance man meditating upon death.<sup>24</sup>

This explains away the incongruity of the passage by turning Shakespeare into an inferior dramatist, one who gives a character a speech that makes no sense in the context of the experience of that character in order to insert into the play an irrelevant commonplace.

### The Editorial Tradition

No edition of *Hamlet* has ever alerted readers to the plentiful evidence that indicates that the “To be” speech was designed to be perceived by Renaissance playgoers as a feigned soliloquy. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, the editors of the 2006 Arden edition, dismiss in a footnote the possibility that the “To be” passage might be a feigned soliloquy:

Q2’s placing of Hamlet’s entry before 54 rather than after it has allowed editors to argue that he sees the King and Polonius ‘withdrawing’ and that this motivates his suspicion at 129 [“Where’s your father?”]. It would be very unusual for Shakespeare, or any dramatist of this period, not to clarify the situation if Hamlet is consciously directing his soliloquy or his subsequent speeches at listeners; compare, for example, the moment in George Chapman’s *The Conspiracy of Charles Duke of Byron* (1608) where La Fin signals his ‘fake soliloquy’ by beginning with the words ‘A fained passion . . .’ and later pretends shock: ‘what! Did your highness hear?’ (2.1.1–5, 24).<sup>25</sup>

This dismissal gives the erroneous impression that the only evidence suggesting that the “To be” passage is a feigned soliloquy is the location of a stage direction in Q2. The editors ignored the dozens of other pieces of evidence described earlier in the present essay, some of which are very conspicuous. For example, they suggest that the only reason Hamlet might be suspicious when he enters this scene would be if he spots the King and Polonius as they withdraw. But Hamlet has grounds more relative than this for being suspi-

scious. He was summoned to this location by his enemy, and playgoers are informed of that summons only twenty-six lines before Hamlet's entrance.

The assertion that "It would be very unusual for Shakespeare, or any dramatist of this period, not to clarify the situation if Hamlet is consciously directing his soliloquy or his subsequent speeches at listeners" does not survive scrutiny. (1) A dramatist can "clarify" a situation that is "very unusual" or even unique by clearly implying what playgoers need to know. It is very unusual for an aristocratic character in a Renaissance play to adopt a peasant dialect at the moment his father's life is threatened, but Edgar does this without any explicit rationale. What he was up to becomes clear, but only in retrospect and only by implication. (2) A great many elements clearly imply that the "To be" speech is a feigned soliloquy, and numerous elements clearly contradict the notion that the speech is sincere. (3) Perhaps Thompson and Taylor actually meant to assert that it would be unlikely for Shakespeare not to make Hamlet's ploy *explicit* in the dialogue. But, as demonstrated above, Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists did, in fact, create other situations in which a character executes a ploy similar to Hamlet's without providing an explanation of the ploy in the dialogue. Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists could confidently rely on implication rather than resorting to explication in these situations because experienced playgoers were quite familiar with intricate eavesdropping episodes and must have enjoyed novel variations, or else dramatists of the time would not have created so many variations. Indeed, that dramatists would design implicitly feigned soliloquies was an almost inevitable result of the competition among dramatists of the period to design clever and novel eavesdropping episodes. When a particular type of dramatic situation becomes popular, dramatists eventually design more complex variations, and detailed explication begins to seem superfluous and clumsy. Skillful dramatists reduce explication to a minimum and sometimes rely solely on implication.

The Arden editors cite one case in which the perpetrator (La Fin) of a feigned soliloquy explicitly describes his ploy, as if this were evidence that Shakespeare would not have constructed a situation in which he expected playgoers to infer on the basis of obvious clues that a character is feigning a soliloquy. This argument is faulty in at least four respects. (1) The fact that one kind of event occurs once does not prove or in any way suggest that a different kind of event is unlikely. (2) The feigned soliloquy in Chapman's play that occurs in an eavesdropping episode is manifestly based on the "To be" speech, which also occurs in an eavesdropping episode. Evidence the Arden editors present to dismiss the notion that the "To be" speech was feigned actually indicates that another dramatist of the period understood that the speech was feigned. (3) The Arden editors mention one case in which a character who feigns a soliloquy explains his tactic, but they fail to mention that in other Renaissance plays (by Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Ford) a char-

acter who feigns a self-addressed speech to mislead another character does not explain his or her tactic. (4) The number of contextual clues Shakespeare provided to imply that Hamlet feigns the “To be” speech far exceeds the number of contextual clues provided in any of those examples.

The Arden editors address only a small number of the many pieces of inconvenient evidence and attempt to sweep them away with makeshift rationalizations.

**No traveller returns** The Ghost has made a rather notable return, but Hamlet presumably means that under normal circumstances death is irreversible. (286)

The Hamlet imagined by the Arden editors asserts without qualification that no traveler returns from death because he has encountered only one traveler who has returned from death and that encounter does not count because it was not an everyday occurrence.

**closely sent** . . . When [Hamlet] appears he does not make any mention of the fact that he is responding to a message from the King, though some performers make a show of looking carefully around them. . . . This slight awkwardness may refer to the larger problem of the placing of “To be or not to be.” (281)

The Arden editors suggest that the absence of an explicit confirmation by Hamlet that he has been summoned to this location by the King somehow conflicts with (“though”) the notion that he would be wary when he arrives at the location. But there are two obvious reasons why Shakespeare did not have Hamlet explicitly mention that he has arrived at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy. (1) To do so would have been superfluous and redundant. In line 29 Claudius asserts that he has “sent for” Hamlet “hither.” When Hamlet arrives hither at line 55, a playgoer should remember what has brought Hamlet hither. (2) Hamlet has reason to suspect that Polonius is eavesdropping in this location (see evidence items 8 and 29) but does not know this for certain. According to Renaissance conventions governing soliloquies, asides, and eavesdropping (see evidence item 19), Hamlet could not have guarded a genuine soliloquy in a genuine aside from an eavesdropper in hiding on the mere suspicion that the eavesdropper was present. The Arden editors have invented a “slight awkwardness” where none exists. There is no reason to believe either (a) that Hamlet has forgotten that he has been summoned to this spot by his enemy or (b) that the placing of the “To be” speech is a “problem.”

The “problem” of the “placing” of the “To be” speech is also discussed briefly in the Introduction:

the entire speech appears in a different place in Q1, during the equivalent of 2.2, much earlier than in the other texts . . . and several modern stagings of Q2/F

Hamlet have adopted the Q1 placing as being, for their purposes, more logical than the Q2/F placing in 3.1. While Hamlet's soliloquies are among the best-known and indeed best-loved features of the play, they seem, on the basis of the earliest texts, to be movable or even detachable: there is no sign in Q1 or F of Hamlet's last soliloquy. (18)

This version of the "problem" is as flawed as the one on page 281. (1) The assertion that "the entire speech appears in a different place in Q1, during the equivalent to 2.2" conveys the erroneous impression that *only* the speech occurs in a different location in Q1 and therefore that the "To be" speech does not take place in an eavesdropping episode in Q1 as it does in Q2 and F. In fact, in Q1 the entire eavesdropping episode occurs in the earlier scene. In all three texts the "To be" speech is located in an eavesdropping episode. (2) The placement of the speech in post-Renaissance productions has no bearing on the issue of its placement in Shakespeare's design of the play. (3) The fact that one soliloquy is not included in two texts of the play does not in any way suggest that Shakespeare designed all soliloquies "to be moveable or even detachable." The Arden edition gives readers the impression that Shakespeare wrote soliloquies as lyric poems, which he then inserted into plays at random. On the contrary, a hallmark of Shakespeare's artistry is that each speech, including each soliloquy, reflects the particular personality and particular situation of the speaker. And the present essay has demonstrated that, as a feigned soliloquy, the "To be" speech is deeply embedded in its particular dramatic context. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a dramatic speech more deeply embedded in its particular dramatic context.

In order to preserve the orthodox post-Renaissance assumption that the "To be" speech is a genuine soliloquy, the Arden editors inadvertently mislead readers about aspects of the character of Hamlet, about other features of this play, about Shakespeare's artistry, and about Renaissance dramatic practices. The Arden edition does not represent an aberration from the editorial tradition. That tradition has inadvertently taken Davenant and Betterton's simple and sentimental adaptation as if it were Shakespeare's conception and have thereby eliminated Shakespeare's subtle, complex, and disturbing implication. Some editors dispose of the inconvenient evidence even more efficiently than do the Arden editors. In the Yale edition of the play, Burton Raffel altered a stage direction to prevent readers from even considering the possibility that the speech might be insincere.

*Enter Hamlet (thinking himself alone)*<sup>26</sup>

Raffel does not explain why someone who has arrived at the location to which he has been summoned by his enemy and in which his former girlfriend is conspicuously present could possibly think himself alone.

In light of the plentiful, varied, and substantial evidence presented here, what should future editors of *Hamlet* do? Although Shakespeare used implication rather than explication in his design of the “To be” episode and expected playgoers of his time to infer that the “To be” passage is a deceptive ploy by Hamlet, post-Renaissance editors cannot follow Shakespeare’s lead. The implication that would have been obvious to Renaissance playgoers has been and will continue to be very far from obvious to post-Renaissance readers because of the numerous factors described above (“Concealment in Plain Sight”). Hamlet’s play has to be explained to modern readers. Because the orthodox dogma that the speech is a sincere expression of Hamlet’s innermost thoughts is reinforced by manifold and pervasive forms of cultural indoctrination, a full and fair account of the evidence that conflicts with this dogma should be supplied so that the notion that the speech is a feigned soliloquy is not dismissed peremptorily by readers. An editor who remains fully committed to the conventional assumption can then present his or her counterargument and allow readers to make up their own minds. By taking these steps, editors will show their respect for the principle that scholarship should be based on evidence.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of Thomas Moisan, a distinguished scholar and an extraordinary friend who showed remarkable personal and professional courage.

## Notes

1. James Hirsh, “The ‘To be or not to be’ Scene and the Conventions of Shakespearean Drama,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 42 (1981): 115–36; “Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 58 (1997): 1–26; “To Take Arms against a Sea of Anomalies: Laurence Olivier’s Film Adaptation of Act Three, Scene One of *Hamlet*,” *EnterText* 1 (2001): 192–203; *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003).

2. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). *Hamlet* was probably first performed in 1600 or 1601. Dates in parentheses after the titles of Shakespeare’s other plays are probable dates of first performances.

3. According to the headnote to the entry on “antique” (1:94) in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), the words now distinguished as “antic” and “antique”

both were spelled *antik(e)*, *antick(e)* in 16th. c. . . . the identity of pronunciation remained longer; Dr. Johnson says *antique* ‘was formerly pronounced according to English analogy, with the accent on the first syllable; but now after the French with the accent on the last, at least in prose; the poets use it variously.

4. In Q2 Hamlet enthusiastically describes the thrill he derives from counter-plots: " 'tis the sport to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petard, an't shall go hard / But I will delve one yard below their mines, / And blow them to the moon" (3.4.206–9).

5. Even though Hamlet wants to confirm the authenticity of the Ghost, he would not assert unequivocally and matter-of-factly that ghosts do not exist.

6. In addition to the two characters who have sworn not to reveal that they have seen the Ghost, Hamlet knows of at least one other character (Barnardo) who has seen it. As far as Hamlet knows, other inhabitants of the castle may have seen it as well and may have reported its visitation to the King.

7. In *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–2) 5.2, for example, Troilus and Ulysses eavesdrop upon Cressida and Diomedes while Thersites eavesdrops upon all four of those characters.

8. Shakespeare designed the episode so that, in addition, Hamlet could enter in time to spot Claudius and Polonius as they take their hiding place, allowing Burbage to add an additional visual clue by directing his gaze at the backs of the actors playing Claudius and Polonius, but this would have been merely an optional confirmation of the implication that is well-established by many other factors.

9. For plentiful evidence supporting all of these points, see Hirsh, *History*, chaps. 4–6.

10. For a catalogue of such episodes, see Hirsh, *History*, 125–46.

11. This effect has been destroyed by those editors, beginning with Alexander Pope, who have designated Edgar's soliloquy as a separate scene. Readers are thus prevented from hoping that Edgar and Kent might interact and from feeling disappointment when the two maltreated characters do not join forces.

12. Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Queens* (1609), in *Selected Masques*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), lines 95–96.

13. John Fletcher, *A Woman's Prize*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et al. (New York: Norton, 2002).

14. George Chapman, *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron*, ed. John Margeson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 3.1.1–2.

15. John Ford, *The Broken Heart*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 1.3.105.

16. A similar principle in the sciences is known as parsimony. Neither Occam's razor nor parsimony means that the most *obvious* solution is best. On the contrary, according to these principles, a single explanation that accounts for a large number of pieces of evidence is preferable to a series of separate, ad hoc explanations, one for each piece, even if the ad hoc explanations are orthodox, familiar, and soothing and the single explanation is unorthodox, counterintuitive, and disturbing.

17. Jeffrey Kipnis, "Introduction: Act Two," *Written into the Void: Selected Writings, 1990–2004*, by Peter Eisenman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xxv.

18. Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber Written by Himself* (1740), ed. Robert W. Lowe, 2 vols., 1889 (rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1966), 1:105.

19. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 5:320.

20. For detailed accounts of many of these factors, see Hirsh, *History*, chap. 10.

21. No purpose would be served by supplying a list of the countless books and

articles on the play that fail to present a coherent and comprehensive counterargument to the argument presented here.

22. A genealogy/taxonomy/refutation of these rationalizations is provided in Hirsh, *History*, 325–434.

23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York: Capricorn/Putnam, 1959), 105. The italics occur in the original.

24. Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare, 2nd series (London: Methuen, 1982), 491.

25. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Thomson, 2006), 284.

26. Burton Raffel, ed., *Hamlet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 96. The entire stage direction is in italics.

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