

## *Introduction*

To suppose, as the title of this book implies, that *Hamlet* could be considered without Hamlet is obviously absurd. After all, little would remain: Hamlet either speaks or is spoken about for most of the play. And why eliminate the most valued character in our cultural tradition?

The Hamlet this book would do without is the modern Hamlet, the one distinguished by an inner being so transcendent that it barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges.

The book would do without this Hamlet for the simple reason that, for some two hundred years, history has done so. As is frequently noted, Hamlet's deep and complex inwardness was not perceived as the play's salient feature until around 1800. Earlier generations appreciated the play, as is well documented, but – it has been said – for the wrong reasons: “Seeing they saw not.” Hamlet's singular importance passed unnoticed until a good two centuries after the writing of the play. Genius, it would appear, is always in advance of history. Shakespeare was ahead of his time and history took centuries to catch up. Only after the auroral advances of the Enlightenment was it possible to perceive the phenomenon of Hamlet's intransitive inwardness.

*Hamlet* without Hamlet maintains precisely the opposite. It was not sharper vision that brought Hamlet's complex interiority into focus. Rather, it was a blind spot. In order for Hamlet to appear modern, the premise of the play had to drop out of sight. The premise is this: at his father's death, just at the point when an only son in a patrilineal system stands to inherit, Hamlet is dispossessed – and, as far as the court is concerned, legitimately.

The promise of the patronymic is broken: Prince Hamlet does not become King Hamlet; Hamlet II does not step into the place of Hamlet I. The kingdom does not pass to the (adult and capable) only son of the dead king. This is a remarkable turn of events. In an hereditary monarchy like England's, it would have been unthinkable. Yet the critical tradition

has mainly ignored the upset, as if dispossession were of no consequence. Hamlet's bereavement at the play's start has been considered in light of his father's sudden death and his mother's hasty remarriage, but without acknowledgment of how both events have left him disoriented.

And yet surely the loss of the kingdom affects what Hamlet has within. A prince bereft of his prospective kingdom, like any man deprived of his expected estate, must feel the injury. That the blow has been dealt legally – approved by the Danish Council, consolidated by marriage to the Queen – hardly lessens the damage.

At Elsinore, Hamlet has no choice but to keep his resentment to himself: "Break, my heart, / For I must hold my tongue."<sup>1</sup> If at court Hamlet were to protest the election of another over himself, he would be guilty of the highest crime in the land: treason. Only in jest does he venture complaint, "I lack advancement" (3.2.331). Only in private does he confide that the same man who has killed his father and married his mother has "[p]opp'd in between th'election and my hopes" (5.2.65). To early readers and audiences, the evasion that has mystified so many modern critics – "I have that within which passes show" (1.2.85) – might have been quite transparent. Transparent, too, for the characters within the play. The king calls for an investigation at court to determine the cause of Hamlet's distraction; but might it not, like an open secret, be obvious to all?

When under the protection of his antic disposition, Hamlet no longer needs to hold his tongue; it is perhaps not irrelevant that, in the words of the great jurist Edward Coke, "he that is *non compos mentis* . . . cannot commit High Treason."<sup>2</sup> So immunized, he is free to hint broadly at the cause of his transformation. Time and again he refers to himself in terms of lack: he is a starving horse; a castrated capon; a thankless beggar; a hollow reed; a trapped prisoner; a disgruntled menial; a contumacious poor man, dreadfully attended, who can remunerate only with a half-pennyworth of thanks. His purse has been cut and pocketed by another man; the hands he swears by are retaliatory "pickers and stealers" (3.2.327). In the letter he writes upon return from his sea-faring voyage, he characterizes himself as "Naked" and "Alone" (4.7.42, 50, 51).

In a world in which men fight and kill for land – "A poisons him i'th'garden for his estate" (3.2.255) – the importance of the realm to Hamlet might well be a given. It does more than give substance to his state of dejection at the play's start: it knits him into the fabric of the play. The play opens with threatened invasion and ends in military occupation. Framed by territorial conflict, it stages one contest over land after another.

Fortinbras I and Hamlet I clash over crown lands, Hamlet I and Claudius over the garden kingdom, Gonzago and Lucianus over the “bank of flowers” or “estate,” Norway and Poland over a garrisoned “patch of ground,” the boy and adult companies over the commercial stage, the Crown and the Church over the churchyard, Laertes and Hamlet over the flower-strewn grave pit of Ophelia, and the actor who plays Hamlet and any other actor who challenges him over the performative arena of the stage.

The language of the play itself upholds the attachment of persons to land, human to humus. Flesh and earth repeatedly coalesce through overlaps of sound and sense, as they do in the name of the first man, called after not his father but the dust from which he was fashioned, *adamah*, the Hebrew word for clay; Hamlet plays on the primal cognomen when he refers to that clayey “piece of work” (2.2.303) as a “quintessence of dust” (2.2.308). *Mole* and *mold* are interchangeable spellings for the word designating not only loose soil, but also both a subterranean mammal and a dark skin growth. Hamlet accuses his mother of battenning on a *moor* (3.4.67), implying an appetite for both blackened flesh and wasteland. One substance can be used to repair another: holes in earthen walls are patched with the pulverized flesh of Caesar (“that earth which kept the world in awe,” 5.1.208) and pocks on the skin are smoothed over with cosmetic plaster (“an inch thick,” 5.1.187–8). The *weeds* which clothe bodies also cover turf: Ophelia falls down into the brook with her “weedy trophies” and is pulled down further, “[t]o muddy death,” by her sodden garments (4.7.173, 182). Her brother hopes her dead body will, like a flower bed, sprout violets. Men are commensurate with the acreage they possess, as if their bodies were literally extended by the tracts of land they hold by inheritance, purchase, or conquest. And however enlarged in life, even if to imperial proportions, bodies at death shrink to the size of a grave plot, or to smaller still: to the dimensions of the deed by which lands are conveyed, one stretch of parchment coterminous with another.

As Hamlet’s dispossession has been ignored, so, too, has *Hamlet’s* investment in land. The connection between character and plot has thereby disappeared: the play has been seen as a mere pretext for the main character, quite literally so when it is assumed that the play’s structure derived from an earlier revenge play, the hypothetical *Ur-Hamlet*, while Hamlet’s character issued purely from Shakespeare’s creative imagination. Scholarship has been content to treat the plot as inert backdrop to the main character who can readily leave it behind to wander into other and later works, no strings attached. Thus for the better part of its critical

history, Hamlet (to invert this book's title) has existed without *Hamlet*. Indeed one of the great sources of Hamlet's enduring cultural prominence is his free-standing autonomy. Existing independently of the play in which he appears, he glides freely into other texts, both fictional and theoretical. Nor does he stop there. In numerous allusions and accounts, he leaves his fictionalized textual provenance altogether to appear in the ranks of historical personages. Like Germany's Luther, France's Descartes, Italy's Machiavelli, and England's Bacon or Hobbes, he is accorded epochal status for inaugurating a distinctly modern consciousness.

As we shall see, Hamlet's disengagement from the land-driven plot is the very precondition of the modernity ascribed to him after 1800. Adrift from the plot, he assumes the self-determining autonomy that opens him to later projections. Yet as Chapter 1, "Modern Hamlet," demonstrates, during the first century of its production the play was deemed old-fashioned and even barbaric. Only after the turn of the eighteenth century did the play take on its modern cast, and in response to a radical critical maneuver: the main character was abstracted from the exigencies of the plot.

Chapter 2, "'Old mole': the modern *telos* and the return to dust," shows how the onset of the modern epoch was itself imagined as a disembedding or deracination. In the grand periodizing narratives of both Hegel and Marx, the affinity between persons and land must be dissolved before history can break into the modern period. For ideational Hegel, the release occurs when the Reformation severs faith from the Holy Land. For materialist Marx, it happens when Primitive Accumulation evicts peasants from the soil.

The next three chapters demonstrate how the play counteracts such narratives by affirming the attachment their historical programs would dissolve. Indeed, the temporal schema of the play will not allow for its dissolution. Chapter 3, "Empires of World History," shows how the play situates the fall of Denmark within both an imperial history of territorial transfer (ancient and modern) and Britain's own history of conquest in the eleventh century by both Danes and Normans. Chapter 4, "Generation and Degeneracy," focuses on the generational interval that organizes the devolution of estate in family history or genealogy. Chapter 5, "Doomsday and Domain," demonstrates how the lay of the land is fixed or altered in anticipation of the world's end, the consummation of salvational history.

The final Chapter 6, "Hamlet's Delay," circles back to the auroral breakthrough of 1800 when criticism fixed on a duration more personal

than those marked by empire, genealogy, and eschatology: the time it takes Hamlet to act. The question of his delay has driven critical inquiry deep into Hamlet's psyche where it has discovered an inexhaustible hermeneutic resource from which some of the most brilliant readings in the entire critical tradition have been fashioned. And yet irregularities – of speech, behavior, comportment – which modern readings take as symptoms of psychic disorder were once the signature stunts and riffs of the Clown, madman, Vice, and devil: all stock figures of privation and therefore suitable role models for the dispossessed prince.

*Hamlet* without Hamlet makes a sweeping claim: a 200-year-old critical tradition has been built on an oversight (and of the play's premise, no less). It supports that claim by illustrating what happens when what has been overlooked is brought back into view. This is not, it must be said, the same as retrieving *Hamlet* as intended by Shakespeare or as experienced by its first readers and audiences. (Unmodernizing the play is not the same as restoring its original meaning.) For the project is not to identify what the play was in 1600 but rather what it could not possibly be after 1800 and as long as Hamlet's interiority was taken as the vortical subject of the play. In the process, Hamlet will not lose his centrality or his complexity, but they will be a function not of his intransitive and unfathomable depth but of his worldliness as dramatized by the play's dialogue and action. What he will lose is the monadic exclusivity that alienates him from the play. "What goes on inside" Hamlet, of course, will always be a challenge in a play in which even his monosyllabic disclaimer "I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76) is fraught with ambiguity. But whether the category of the psychological will remain the best hermeneutic for meeting the challenge depends on whether it can survive the demystification. If there is any test for such a radical reconfiguring of the play, it can only be in the details of its readings. When newly contextualized, words, passages, even props passed over by the editorial and critical tradition should take on new life.

Thus in the graveyard scene amidst so much commentary on tracts of land, from graves to empires, it has not been noted that a *hide* denotes a measure of land as well as the skin of a man ("a tanner's hide") or of a beast (parchment of sheep or calves), or that *Doomsday* conjoins *domain* and *doom*, land and judgment, a pairing that twice recurs when *land* and *law* appear as textual alternatives. As might be expected, references to heraldry, the system that encodes dynastic identity, have been under-glossed. They multiply in the avenger Pyrrhus who blazes forth like a coat-of-arms, in Laertes' call for an heraldic panel to reinstate his father's honor after his

disgraceful burial, and in the armigerous boast of the grave-maker. The play's allusions to mythical and biblical women – Niobe, Hecuba, Jephthah's daughter – all pertain to the cutting off of progeny or lineage. In the Mousetrap play, the prop of *a bank of flowers* gives material form to the dynastic fantasy of a flourishing and fruitful estate; its dark double is the lethal "wharf" from which a *mountebank* has gathered the toxic weeds for the poison that wipes out the entire dynastic line. Aslant a similar bank grows the downcast willow that Ophelia drapes with weeds, in grotesque parody of the abundantly fruitful genealogical oak. Appropriately it is this play which coins a toponym, *groundlings*, for those who pay ground rent to the theater for a place to stand. Other names similarly encode relations to land: of ownership, of labor, of vagrancy.

In a play that has generated more commentary than any other, it is surprising to find any textual strains that have eluded editorial and critical scrutiny. Yet even this small sampling suggests a certain bias. Amidst so many instances of the close kinship between human and humus, man and manor, titles and entitlement, *dominus* and *domus*, even the protagonist's name begins to resonate. *Hamme*, as the earliest dictionaries establish, derives from the Germanic word for home. A hamlet is a cluster of homes: a kingdom in miniature.

## CHAPTER I

*Modern Hamlet*

No work in the English canon has been so closely identified with the beginning of the modern age as *Hamlet*. The basis of the identification is so obvious now that it hardly needs to be stated. By speaking his thoughts in soliloquy, by reflecting on his own penchant for thought, by giving others cause to worry about what he is thinking, Hamlet draws attention to what is putatively going on inside him. In recognition of his psychological depth and complexity, Hamlet has been hailed as the inaugural figure of the modern period: “the Western hero of consciousness,” “[a]n icon of pure consciousness,” “a distinctly modern hero,” providing “the premier Western performance of consciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet early allusions to *Hamlet* suggest that in its own time the play was considered behind the times rather than ahead of them. To begin with, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was a recycling of an earlier play. Even the supposed original or *Ur-Hamlet* was remembered not for its novelty but for its tired formulas and stock devices.<sup>2</sup> A remark from 1589 satirizes the play for its dependence on the ancient Senecan elements of murder, madness, and revenge, and for its studied diction fraught with commonplaces (“good sentences”) and set-pieces (“handfuls . . . of tragical speeches”).<sup>3</sup> Another reference, from 1596, indicates that the play was already so familiar that the Ghost’s injunction – “Hamlet, revenge!” – registered as a byword.<sup>4</sup>

These responses to the *Ur-Hamlet* might just as well have greeted Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when it was first staged several years later. Like its predecessor, it was set in the remote times of Nordic saga. It, too, depended on the Senecan formula of murder, madness, and revenge. It, too, was made up of old-fashioned stage conventions (the dumb show and the play-within-the-play), stiff set-pieces (like the Player’s speech), and a grab-bag of *sententiae* (for example: “all that lives must die,” 1.2.72, “to thine own self be true,” 1.3.78, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” 5.2.10).<sup>5</sup> And, of course, it retained the most archaic feature of all – a ghost returning from an old-faith

Purgatory, enjoining the retaliative (“an eye for an eye”) revenge of the Old Testament. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it might then be said, was old on arrival. Its sententious rhetoric and venerable topoi may explain why, according to Gabriel Harvey’s marginal note, the play particularly appealed to “the wiser sort.”<sup>6</sup> In all events, as the majority of the allusions from the seventeenth century indicate, it was the hoary old Ghost rather than the bright young Hamlet who stole the show.<sup>7</sup>

In 1604 one author, Anthony Scoloker, did credit the play’s popularity to the prince and wished a like fortune on his own work, “Faith it should please all, like Prince Hamlet.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the pleasure Hamlet gave derived not from what he had with *in* (“that within which passes show,” 1.2.85) but from what he had put *on*: his “antic disposition” (1.5.180). Concluding that such popularity would cost him his sanity, Scoloker reconsiders: if to “please all” is to be “moone-sicke” and “runne madde,” perhaps it would be better to have “displeased all.” Several allusions suggest that Hamlet’s lunatic racing – the physical counterpart to his “wild and whirling words” (1.5.139) – might well have been what pleased all. In two separate works, Dekker alludes to entrances by Hamlet in distracted motion: “break[ing] loose like a Beare from the stake” and “rush[ing] in by violence.”<sup>9</sup> In Chapman, Jonson, and Marston’s *Eastward Ho*, a madcap character named Hamlet makes a similarly disruptive entrance: “Enter Hamlet, a footman, in haste,” reads the stage direction, and as an attendant’s response indicates, his haste is quite frantic, “Sfoot, Hamlet; are you mad? Whither run you now . . . ?”<sup>10</sup>

These spoofs were no doubt inspired by Shakespeare’s play which explicitly calls for excited or violent motion from Hamlet. For example, he tears himself away from the clutches of Horatio and the guards in order to follow the Ghost; “By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me,” he threatens (1.4.85). So, too, he zigzags maniacally about the stage in response to the Ghost’s intonations from beneath the floorboards (1.5.156–71). He also holds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in chase when they come to fetch him for England; “Hide fox, and all after” (F 4.2.30), he taunts, as he darts wildly off stage.<sup>11</sup> Hamlet’s outrageous behavior at Ophelia’s graveside might also be included in this zany repertoire, especially his salient leap into her grave, the only detail from the play remembered in the anonymous elegy (1618) to Richard Burbage, the first actor to play the role.<sup>12</sup> In the early decades of its performance, Hamlet’s signature action may have been not paralyzing thought but frenzied motion. Like his dancing a jig and playing on a pipe after the success of the Mousetrap play (3.2.265ff.), his hyperactivity would have linked him more with the

roustabout clown of medieval folk tradition than with the introspective consciousness acclaimed by the modern period.<sup>13</sup>

Hamlet appeared old for different reasons after 1660 when Charles II upon returning from exile in France reopened the commercial theaters – after a hiatus of almost twenty years – with the formation of two theatrical companies. When the stock of extant English plays was divided between them, the plays of Shakespeare, consisting of “antiquated manners, morals, language and wit,” were considered more old-fashioned than those of Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shirley. John Evelyn after seeing a performance in 1661 jotted in his diary that he found *Hamlet* tediously outmoded: “the old playe began to disgust this refined age.”<sup>14</sup> In the “refined age” of the Restoration, *Hamlet*, like all Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, belonged to the cruder previous period or “last age” before the great interregal divide separating Charles I from Charles II.<sup>15</sup> English letters during this period were deemed backward or even barbarous, as Samuel Johnson noted: “The *English* nation, in the time of *Shakespeare*, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity.”<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare, according to David Hume, was the product of such benighted times: “born in a rude age, and educated in the lowest manner, without any instruction, either from the world or books.”<sup>17</sup> The basis of the later period’s contempt for the earlier was clear. Before the Interregnum, the English stage had largely lacked or ignored the civilizing canons of Aristotle, Horace, and their sixteenth-century Italian and seventeenth-century French redactors. The playhouses were imagined to have followed their own rustic native traditions, those of the medieval artisanal guilds, the “Carpenters, Cobblers and illiterate fellows,” who had performed the early mysteries and miracle plays.<sup>18</sup> Written without the benefit of classical models, these earlier dramatic efforts were considered *gothic*: in the manner of the Goths, the barbarian hordes who had destroyed the Roman Empire. A minority insisted that Shakespeare was perfectly capable of having written *Hamlet* in the classical style; it was his regrettable desire to satisfy vulgar taste that drove him back to the “old Gothic manner.”<sup>19</sup> Pope concluded the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare by comparing Shakespeare’s works to “an ancient, majestick piece of *Gothick* Architecture” in contrast to “a neat Modern building” based on classical models, like Wren’s St. Paul’s Cathedral.<sup>20</sup>

Thus *Hamlet*, timeworn on arrival, was regarded after the Restoration and well into the eighteenth century as *antiquated*, *old*, *barbarous*, and *gothic*. So when did the play, or rather the main character of the play, acquire this historically precocious modernity?

In what may be our earliest reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play is classified as "modern." In a marginal note made sometime after 1598, Gabriel Harvey discusses the best works in English, "auncient & moderne": Chaucer and Lidgate represent the ancient, while *Hamlet* along with other works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries make up the modern.<sup>21</sup> In this earlier and still current sense of the word, *Hamlet* was "modern" at its inception.<sup>22</sup> Our frequent use of "modern" to designate a period concept with defining features tends to obscure the term's original main usage. The word's primary function was deictic: its signification, like that of "today," "now," "at present," "within recent memory," depended on the time of its enunciation. In 1555 Mary was the "queen moderne," but only until succeeded by Elizabeth in 1558.<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, Shakespeare like all his contemporaries was once modern, at least temporarily. From the other side of the epochal watershed of the Interregnum, however, Shakespeare showed signs of age. In catalogues of English authors after the Restoration, he was considered "our old Dramatick Poet," in contrast to such dramatists as Dryden, Congreve, and Rowe.<sup>24</sup> By the early 1700s, quartos printed in Shakespeare's time were thought "*ancient*" and in need of restoration by "*modern*" editions like those of Pope and Theobald. Indeed Shakespeare's earliest claim to the rank of *classic* came with the recognition that his works, like those of Homer or Horace, had decayed with time. Rife with obsolete vocabulary, forgotten allusions, unfamiliar diction, and errors of transmission, their state "resembled that of a corrupt *Classic*."<sup>25</sup>

In another sense, however, Shakespeare's status as modern was more stable. Throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, whenever the age-old rivalry between ancient and modern authors cropped up, Shakespeare was chosen to represent the moderns. In a 1699 treatise, *The Antient and Modern Stages Survey'd*, Sophocles is set against Shakespeare, "the Proto-Dramatist of England."<sup>26</sup> In this sense, however, any contemporary might have qualified as modern as long as he or she wrote in the vernacular: in a modern language rather than Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. But Shakespeare's particular claim to being modern resided in his ostensible independence from the ancients. As the front matter to the 1623 Folio edition of his plays emphasized, his literary achievement was to be credited to nature not art, to his native gifts rather than his acquired learning.<sup>27</sup> Ben Jonson's pronouncement that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek" underscored his rival's casual relation to the ancients. Shakespeare's reputation for "rudeness" extended to the Continent; English theatre was said to receive "From all their neighbors, the reproach of barbarism," especially