"Hamlet"'s Mice, Motes, Moles, and Minching Malecho
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“O\textsc{nly} \textit{Hamlet} of Shakespeare’s greatest plays,” writes Helen Vendler, who has designated this work the poem of the millennium, “is ruled by a single lyric consciousness.”\textsuperscript{1} Words compose this consciousness. They gradually quicken and spring to life\textsuperscript{2} in the poem, each one exhibiting its own idiosyncrasies and each working out vivid combinations with other words to establish fluid verbal patterns. In this process, something unusual happens. The word patterns gradually create a linguistic drama which takes on a coherent life of its own. This drama of language (as distinct from the drama of plot) resembles what Wallace Stevens, writing of his own medium in general and of the dual linguistic fields of poetry in particular, calls “the poem of the words”: “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea and the poem of the words.”\textsuperscript{3} He draws particular attention to the internal interactions of the poetry of the words: “[In poetry] the primary relation of each word . . . is to the other words, not to the things or actions they describe.”\textsuperscript{4} Between and among these words, as Professor Vendler explains, there grows a “network . . . , a referentiality that does not so much extend outward to some putative real world as horizontally to the inwardly-extensive world of terms or images. ‘Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors’ (as Stevens called it) is what all of Stevens’s poems do.”\textsuperscript{5} It is what Shakespeare’s poem does.

Referring to \textit{Hamlet} as a “poem” may strike some readers of this essay as antidramatic or extreme. To mitigate and, I hope, to disarm such concern, I offer a brief explanation, first, about Shakespeare’s use of poetry itself and, second, about the implications of this use for his audience. Shakespeare upholds the distinction of genres—no one doubts that \textit{Hamlet} is a play, a tragedy, written in blank verse—but he does not tightly constrict his usage to any prescribed generic rule. The first scene opens with no regular poetic meter but a series of staccato questions. Thereafter, dramatic blank verse builds successive cadences and becomes the predominating medium of the play within which subject matters of various subgenres of poetry emerge, as in the virtual lyrics of Marcellus’s dawn poem (1.1.162–69), Horatio’s pastoral (1.1.171–72), Gertrude’s

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elegy for Ophelia (4.7.165–82), Laertes’ epitaph for her, and the self-reflexive elegies both of Laertes (5.2.319–26) and of Hamlet (5.2.338–63). And there are real lyrics at crucial parts of the play: Hamlet’s ballad following the Mousetrap, Ophelia’s ballads and elegies (4.5.23–40), her aubade (4.5.48–66), her complaint (4.5.187–96), as well as the ballads and songs of the Clown. The blank verse accommodates these forms and maintains narrative momentum, as it did in the blank-verse plays of Marlowe. And, as in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (1593; A-text 1604, B-text 1616), where the conjuring circle, an emblem of the lyric’s inexorable spiral,9 leads into deeper and deeper layers of consciousness, so in Hamlet the blank verse assimilates unto itself the circular interiority of the lyric impulse. And there is more. There is prose. Shakespeare gave to his Prince more prose passages than he allotted to any other of his tragic heroes, and these lines often seem to be part of the poetry. As a matter of fact, 5 lines of verse in Q1 and 254 lines of verse in Q2 were printed as prose.7 The fusion into a single tragic consciousness of these two mediums, assimilative blank verse and prose, as components of Hamlet’s internal organization and network of figurative interaction, comprises the poetry of the play.

There may, however, be crucial obstacles in the reception of these different formal constituents that would seriously affect the experience of an audience. In the progression of dramatic enactment, who can detect the intricate poetic networks of figurative interaction? The most significant generic issue in responding to Shakespeare’s text may lie not so much in questioning the difference between a drama and a poem as in discriminating between seeing a drama/poem and reading it. This distinction may remain static for some, but it also may provoke a kinetic, reciprocal process by which the primary form of seen play turns into or, as would sometimes be the case, derives from the secondary form of read play. This process would be alternated and repeated by countless different play-going and reading audiences. Shakespeare would, of course, have been aware of such readers. Although various editors and critics who view his plays as exclusively performance-based carefully point out that there is no evidence that he was “interested in preserving an authoritative text” (as Jonson was),8 Shakespeare knew that his plays would be read. From the time of his birth in 1564 until he died in 1616, three hundred twelve plays were printed. In the decade preceding Hamlet, eighty-three found their way into print.9 Hamlet itself was printed in Q1 (1603) and Q2 (1604–05), with at least one more quarto (Q3, 1611) appearing while Shakespeare was alive. In fact, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, as an expert on Elizabethan manuscripts remarks, “[A]ll literary compositions judged of wide interest were turned speedily into print chiefly for the sake of dissemination.”10
Nonetheless, while the literate, play-reading theatergoers of the early seventeenth century could have enjoyed and responded with varying degrees of awareness to the internal interactions of the poetic script, it is likely that those who saw a production of *Hamlet* or who read it once would probably not apprehend the metaphoric permutations that I trace in this essay. On the other hand, on seeing or reading the play a second time, such Elizabethans or Jacobeanse—especially those with the acute literary intelligence of Shakespeare’s contemporaries (the “giants before the flood,” as Dryden would later call them)—would sense the force of the figurative network just as they would feel the resonance of its individual parts (such as the pervasive hendiadys trope examined by George T. Wright: see below). Although the order of response to the text, either in attending actual performance or in reading the words, must be arbitrary, the ideal process for audiences might consist of these three parts: first, to see and experience the predominant dramatic elements of plot and character; second, to read and identify the salient elements of metaphorical interaction; third, to meld the *read* play into the *seen* play, so that it affects an audience with terrific subliminal force.

The *read* play—that which provokes the drama of language with its thinking of relations between the images of metaphor and its directing movements of consciousness in Hamlet himself, and thus in the play/poem as a whole—conveys this force through the verbal relationships derived from the most important metaphor in the play, the double figure of the mole (1.4.24 and 1.5.170). This image has received little explicit literary/critical attention. Surprisingly, a series of philosophers, not looking directly at the literary function of the mole and thus perhaps feeling its subliminal effect all the more strongly, have turned their attention to this figure.

A recent essay by Margreta De Grazia in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1999), traces the ways that these writers have engaged the “old mole,” Hamlet’s second use of the term, his epithet for the Ghost under the stage (1.5.170). G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, A. C. Bradley, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida all, in examining the figure of the mole, use it not as an agent of lyric or dramatic consciousness but as a symbol of cultural awareness manifest through various tracts of philosophical, social, and psychological thought. Briefly, Hegel’s mole tunnels towards the goal of absolute consciousness, while Marx’s advances steadily through consciousness to revolution. A. C. Bradley, critical of the mole’s cessa-tion of work, draws censorious attention to Hamlet’s delay, while Freud transfers the cause of delay from consciousness to the molish underground realm of the unconscious. According to De Grazia, the “route,” “trajectory of desire,” and “winding paths” of Lacan’s mole illuminate the nature of the “elusive phallus,” and Derrida, whose
deconstructive methods interrelate dualisms such as life and death, values the mole-Ghost (neither life nor death) and extols the old-mole scene, “for justice emerges as the one undeconstructible term, the one and only absolute to escape the discursive” dualities. As this survey indicates, the “old mole,” for these men, becomes a cultural emblem, part of a progressive symbolism contributing to a historical allegory whose meaning and function reside outside of the verbal patterning of the play. For them, in fact, the phrase leaves the play and experiences changes dependent on a progression of ideas external to the linguistic source.

In turning my attention to the drama of words rather than the drama of culture, I hope to provide a very different account of the mole, one that explores how the poem works within its own linguistic action and in particular how its metaphorical language instigates and disseminates correlative metaphors whose interactions shape the consciousness of Hamlet through four principal aesthetic activities. (1) From the first lines of the play, words stir and stretch out to other words that acquire metamorphic power and develop momentum. This significantly affects the drama of plot by directing with increasing force agents of the play’s action, such as its war imperative. Such direction, for example, necessitates the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not simply as results of narrative development but also as logical results of figurative mandate. (2) Through the use of literary allusions the linguistic process extends and illuminates the nature of Hamlet’s emotions. (3) As it does so, it presses towards primitive sources of life that traverse Hamlet’s mind and eventually alter his imagination. (4) This metaphoric process carries the play past its dramatic plot boundaries not to a progression of cultural history but to a far more impassive, inhuman celebration of metamorphic force.

Mobilization

The opening language of the play is terse and simple: “Who’s there?” “unfold,” “King,” “bed,” “bitter cold,” “sick at heart,” “mouse stirring,” “good night” (1.1.1–12). Each of these words or phrases will move, gain impetus, and add resonance as they and their implications circulate through the play. Questions proliferate; “unfolding” opens continuously; the issue of “Kingship” becomes that of empire and dynasty; the “bed” will hold seeds for gardens, will carry the animal fat of enseamed sheets, and will become a series of graves; “bitter cold” starts the slightest tang of taste and the coldness of death that spreads; “sick at heart” will become a disease that wracks not only feeling but every specimen of thought; the “mouse” will become Claudius (in the Mousetrap), Polonius
(the “rat”), and Gertrude (“call you his mouse”); and “Good night” by the end of act 5 will bring us all to tears. These words will spawn verbal offspring that grow and exfoliate as metaphors that produce more and more metaphors, “tropically,” as Hamlet will say (3.2.237). The “old mole” participates in such a process, which develops from one word. The “old mole” starts as a mouse.

In act 1, scene 1, a pattern starts to grow, guided by alliterative sound. The letter m, unobtrusive in the little mouse, joins “most like” (to describe the Ghost, the old mole to come), strengthens the resemblance between the Ghost and the majesty who died. The military m gains power in “smote the sledded Polacks,” resumes its “martial stalk,” and finally, with the royal military line fully established, the m can neglect the now well established war-related words, shed the s of “smote,” and turn to a new use, establishing a metaphor, the mote, which calls for special attention:

A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye.
In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.

(1.1.114–23)

To Horatio the appearance of the ghost becomes metaphorically a “mote,” a speck that impedes or alters vision. This comparison is unexpected because it shrinks “this portentous figure” (1.1.112) into something tiny. Yet the mote has its own dimensions of time and space containing three worlds. The first for the guards to envision as they listen to Horatio is an ancient Roman graveyard, which has thrown up its ghastly specters that rage through the Roman streets, an omen said to foretell the fall of the mightiest Julius. Horatio has integrated military elements—the martial ghost and the Roman general—into his figure, but he muddles the comparison of portents: in Rome, the supernatural phenomena foretold the fall of Caesar; in Denmark, the ghost of mightiest King Hamlet has itself become a supernatural omen, presumably intimating the fall of a figure comparable to the great Roman. But such a figure does not exist at this point in the play and will come into being only partially, in the one-dimensional soldier, Fortinbras.

The non-matching portents create disjunction, which proves to be the basis of Horatio’s second world, that of celestial chaos where stars “with trains of fire and dews of blood” disrupt the heavens. This world displays
impressive violence but still does not adequately summarize what Horatio on the cold battlement in Denmark feels to be the morbid force of the ghostly portent. Drawing back to military reference, therefore, Horatio presents a final world that combines heavenly bodies, war, and disease, a world where “the moist star,” the moon (moist with “dews of blood”) rules the sea empire of Neptune (the oceanic “flood” [1.4.69] that beckons beneath the Danish ramparts), but falls “sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.” Horatio’s moon reminds us of the powers of night, apocalypse, and especially of change, all of which grow throughout the play.

The “mote” has been asked to do a lot. Shakespeare, activating the imagination, the mind’s eye, of his audience, presents the image of an eye whose sight has been hindered by a mote, a speck. The mote itself then swells to contain a condensed, three-tiered allegory that stretches almost to the end of time. The violence raging within the mote and its range in space and time are too savage for the microscopic enclosure of a speck whose final t closes the word tightly with a hard consonant. When we next see a word used to express this principle of blight and expansion, the t will have slipped into an l, creating a “vicious mole” accorded not only the force of distortion but also a new power of locomotion.

**Momentum and Metaphor**

Hamlet, witnessing from afar the revels of Claudius’s court while he and Horatio await the Ghost, turns from disgust at Denmark’s widespread loss of reputation because of such wassailing—a distortion of national honor by motelike impediment—to speculation about how small viral force can mysteriously spread through and corrupt men:

So oft it chances in particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty
(Since nature cannot choose his origin),
By their o’ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit, that too much o’leavens
The form of plausible manners—that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being Nature’s livery or Fortune’s star,
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout
To his own scandal. (Enter Ghost)

(1.4.23–48)

Starting as a mysterious force of nature in some men, the mole has at least two modes of activity. The first proceeds by cancerlike animation and overgrowth of "some complexion" or aspect of human psychology. Gaining the force of military assault, this expansion and extension break not only over demarcations of reason, its "pales," but also over the "forts" of its defense, that which preserves and defends it as a primary faculty of human thought. An alternative view of this operation exposes, along with its force and range, the mole’s powers of insinuation, of creeping over habitual, unremarkable human conduct slowly, inexorably to "o’erleaven" or sour it, spreading a corrupting influence over or through it. In both examples the process is so strong that it overwhelms with corruption the most pure and infinite of that man’s virtues, his moral strength and masculine power (virtus). In a succinct restatement of this molezation, Hamlet, unable to forget Claudius’s nearby carousing, describes the mole as a "dram of evil," that is, a liquor-drop of "evil," which does "dout" or douse all the noble substance (what "stands" from "below" and individualizes), bringing about scandal (from skandalon, snare), that which traps and destroys honor and aspiration. Unlike the mole that contains powers of violent disruption, the mole itself becomes the agent and expression of mobility that propels such disruption.

In the next scene (1.5.148–81) it mutates into animal life, becoming the "old mole." In the cellarage, the Ghost, darting from one spot to another, orders the guards to "swear by his sword" (1.5.161), and Hamlet addresses him: "Well said, old mole. Canst work in the earth so fast? / A worthy pioner!" A pioner was originally a footsoldier who used a spade to dig, like a miner working in deep, dark holes under the earth. This mole, carrying overtones of Horatio’s military mote and dramatizing the vicious mole’s ominous, destructive mobility, here has become a digger moving underground, a "pioner," a miner or soldier, burrowing to plant explosives. As a miner setting devices to blow up the enemy, he sets in his son’s mind an image of the explosives his words will become for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As an "old mole" who is a digger, he is, of course, literally, a small mammal, the blind mole, burrowing through darkness. As he burrows for earthworms and bulbs he will become part of the food chain that obsesses Hamlet in act 5. As a digger the mole invites attention to gardens and graves as well as to underground areas of consciousness where paternal roots spread. He makes molehills like the grave-hills the slaughtered Polish and Swedish soldiers will fill in the
plot of land too small to bury them in act 4. The final command of the old mole—“Remember me”—repeated by Hamlet three times, spreads through his son’s mind, taking him back in time to personal memories that the play discloses more and more about and that, in fact, become in some ways the principal text of the poem.

The mole and the old mole are parts of each other. The originating mole, like a virus, multiplies and spreads with force that mutates into and reprograms the mole-animal itself, making it and its metaphorical associations viral, too. The initiating of mysterious, corrosive force that the primary mole sends out not only reproduces itself (“mole,” “old mole”) but also begins to spread throughout the play, accentuating the movement of its linguistic parts.

The syllable ing, for example, begins to operate in present participles and gerunds. In act 1 alone it stretches fifty-one different words out into a final, progressive ing. A second incidental but logical emergence of the rippling into a continuous progression occurs in the pervasiveness in Hamlet of the number two, probably because one is static and two marks the beginning of movement that signifies conflict (the basic element of drama), that drives metaphor (one thing spills into a second thing), and that motivates thought itself.

“Twneness” signals expansion even as it strives for balance. Shakespeare uses a specialized figure to emphasize this feature, the trope of hendiadys: “one in two”: a single idea by means of two nouns joined by the conjunction and rather than a noun qualified by an adjective. In an award-winning essay on the prominence of this figure in Hamlet, George T. Wright identifies sixty-six specific examples, more than twice as many instances than in any other of Shakespeare’s plays.

The function of this figure in Hamlet, according to Wright, is to draw attention to the “doubleness characteristic of the whole play . . . , a stylistic means of underlining the play’s themes of anxiety, bafflement, disjunction, and the falsity of appearances” (H 178). Wright generously provides a table quoting the sixty-six examples. I find in each a successiveness, a degree of molish extension, a case of “one becoming two” rather than the strict translation of “one in two.” Here are three found by Wright. In “shot and danger of desire” (1.1.57), the firing and sharpness of a shot of hot desire lead to developments of danger. In “morn and liquid dew of youth” (1.3.41), the morn grows tangible and fluid: it spreads out and can be licked. In “Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws” (1.4.50), the image of the sepulchre with its great weight of coffin and vault, opened like a mouth after the entrance of the corpse and then slammed shut, engenders successive associations. The initial adjective, “ponderous,” suggests the heavy door of the vault and of the dirt to be shoveled. “Marble” recalls statuary, an additional weight of a
human bust with jaws containing white, hard teeth; it also suggests the skeleton, which will result from the worm’s movement of its jaws to devour the flesh.

These doublings, with the second extending the mutable implications of the first, serve several purposes. (1) They illustrate repeatedly the elusiveness of absolute balance and the tendency of words to tilt and then fall or flow into differentiation and change. (2) Through doublings Shakespeare leads his audience to perceive changes of metaphor as successive instances of expanded thought and refined statement. (3) At the same time, the “twoness” can work against expansion. It does not develop into “threeness” (there are threes in the play but never those evolving out of doubleness), but rather draws attention to the principle of arrest and frustration. The bleakness of the play derives in part from this pattern of expansion that becomes thwarted or constricted, and even more in the simultaneity and fusion of the one-two pattern, which produces something beyond bleakness: the mole’s action of generation is part of its action of degeneration.

This ebb and flow and merging provoke metaphors that themselves expand and interact with each other. The most comprehensive of these is war. War has its own flow of victory and defeat and marks the play from its first scene to its last. Military diction occupies most of the first act, and the signals of war—cannons, ordnance, kettledrums, and trumpets—sound intermittently. Within the literary references of the play, military imagery, as in the Players’ narration of the fall of Troy, figures strongly: “Priam’s slaughter,” “sable arms,” “roasted in wrath and fire,” “fell sword,” “takes prisoner,” “bleeding sword,” “falls on Priam,” “mingling sword.”

The expansive goals of war influence the genre of the play. Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, but the main character has no discernible strategy of revenge, and the revenge itself against Claudius takes place as an unplanned reflex. The prevalence of war drives towards another literary form, abridged epic. Fortinbras is the hero, as he shacks up an army under the nose of his uncle the King of Norway, beguiles money from the king, calculates a flanking maneuver that takes him through Denmark to Poland, circles back to become King of Denmark, regains land lost by his father, and adds the tributary state England. In this Norwegian history, the “emulate pride” (1.1.86) of Fortinbras’s father in originally daring King Hamlet to combat brings no tragic repercussion but stimulates instead the mole-driven, imperial energies of the son. The figure parallel to Fortinbras in the play is, of course, Hamlet. War expands strangely but inexorably not by Hamlet’s actions, as was the case with Fortinbras, but within him.

Shakespeare traces this movement to show how the impetus of act 1 develops and expands forces at first dim within the main character.
Hamlet has thought about courtly, military duties before the events of the play, as he tells Horatio, when practicing swordsmanship (5.2.206–07), but his language about warlike activity is not at first militaristic: “I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.29–31). By act 3, war language seems more natural to him. His personal meditation beginning “To be or not to be” incorporates armament as his primary metaphor: “slings and arrows,” “take arms against.” As the soliloquy progresses the war sweeps beyond specific military encounter to convey a more expansive view of human assault: “the thousand natural shocks [clash of arms] / That flesh is heir to.” Such assault accompanies “enterprises of great pitch and moment.”

When the Players arrive, Hamlet, military impulses growing, directs and helps them to utter the very words that recreate Pyrrhus’s “enterprises” of grisly execution, and he arranges and creates with them the Dumbshow and Mousetrap, controlling two more enactments of death. Before long he himself learns to kill: Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern.

As Hamlet kills, he grows closer to kingship, the military aim of war, just as war is royalty’s agent of power. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern summon Hamlet to his mother’s closet, he uses the royal plural (3.2.325), and when he leaps into the grave to confront Laertes, he proclaims his kingship: “This is I / Hamlet the Dane!” (5.1.250–51). At the moment that he narrates his use of his father’s—Denmark’s—“signet” to seal the order for the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he effectively becomes king: Horatio then exclaims, “Why, what a king is this!” (5.2.62). Hamlet becomes increasingly authoritative and assertive. His assault against Laertes in Ophelia’s grave and his subsequent duel with and fatal wounding of Laertes reflect direct, public action and give momentum to his eventual slaying of Claudius. As king of Denmark, Hamlet’s dying words, “for Fortinbras,” name a single-minded warrior heir to the throne. The final duel, the cannon and commotion of Fortinbras come “with conquest” from Poland, the warlike volley, the march of soldiers with drum and colors, and Hamlet borne “like a soldier” “with rite of war” and peal of ordnance as the soldiers shoot, all serve to center the vocabulary on Hamlet and Fortinbras together, tragic and epic threads strangely mingled. Hamlet has undergone a process of internal military expansion that effectively kills him.

Allusions

The mole-like military progression, a rhythm that builds into a blood march in act 4 (the death fields of Poland) and act 5 (the violent
extinction of the Danish court), works through the play in a steady fashion. The martial cadence also proceeds at a steady pace, engaging regularly in literary allusions that originate in but are not confined to military contexts, that range through high and low culture, poems and pictures, past and present, and that, in doing so, expose in Hamlet otherwise inexpressible emotions.

These allusions spread out like dreams. The words create stories that move to other words and, in doing so, intensify and illuminate the emotions within the play. They present superficial connection to the immediate context, but, more interestingly, they initiate mole-like extension in a subterranean, mole-ish way to parts of the mind that store the whole story of the allusion and its associations. The allusive words themselves, which are metaphors unfolding emotional implications of the surface context, touch off connectives that activate words within the allusion’s full context, revealing Hamlet’s otherwise undisclosed preoccupations. Shakespeare prepares his audience for a series of such allusions by using Polonius, reliable in this (and only this) context as someone with experience in the theater.24 When Polonius introduces the actors, he praises them for their multi-genred capabilities (“for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical,” and so on [2.2.393–95]) as in “scene indivisible, poem unlimited” in Seneca or Plautus (2.2.395–96), or for plays written “for the law of writ and liberty [limited by rules as well as free from them]” (note to 2.2.397). The broad meshing of genres, of invoking both drama and poetry, of Roman reference to poetry, rhetoric, and drama, and of elasticity of dramatic rules announce literary diversions to come, each of which becomes in the context of the play’s, or Hamlet’s, consciousness a complex metaphor fusing emotional, antagonistic factors. These fusions follow an almost orderly mole-like intensification, beginning with original texts which tap and merge into secondary and tertiary revisions, each of which invites interpretation.

Hamlet’s reference to Polonius as “Jephthah,” for example, draws on its biblical source in Judges 11 and its lyrical restatement in the popular Elizabethan “proper new ballad, intitled, Jepha [sic] Judge of Israel,” which Hamlet starts to sing (note to 2.2.410). In the immediate context, Hamlet, as an insult to Polonius, alludes to Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter (to win military honor), an act comparable to Polonius’s sacrifice of Ophelia (to entrench himself in Claudius’s court). Other elements of the biblical story resemble actions in the Danish court as well: Jephthah’s shame for his mother’s harlotry correlates with Hamlet’s indictments of Gertrude; Jephthah’s strife with his brothers echoes the relationship between Claudius and King Hamlet; the political glory to be won reminds us of the fierce cultural ambition of almost all the Danish
and Norweigian male characters; and the military prowess of Jephthah himself brings to mind the heroic feats of King Hamlet. Beyond this, however, there lies a reach into the consciousness of the victim, Jephthah’s daughter (the Ophelia figure, with implications for Hamlet himself), who willingly allows her own sacrifice but asks, notably in the song that Hamlet sings, for time to “beware my virginity” and “to bemoan my heaviness.” The word “heaviness” stretches out to Jephthah’s daughter’s experience in the wilderness of imagined lost passion and pregnancy and correlates to notions of amorous union and loss that Ophelia’s dreams later reveal. Hamlet’s allusion, then, exposes metaphorically major emotional strains of his own life and suggest latent powers of empathy for Ophelia.

Similarly, the warlike Pyrrhus story drawn from Virgil, the principal source of Hamlet’s request for “Aeneas’s tale to Dido” (2.2.442–43), has a clear emotional purpose in the immediate dramatic context, and this modulates into expanded signals of Hamlet’s unspoken feelings. The superficial emphasis on Hecuba gratifies Hamlet’s need to feel the contrast between the Trojan Queen’s vivid mourning for her husband and Gertrude’s hypocritical tears for hers. This emphasis, however, is itself an extension of the original text because Hecuba’s lamentation for Priam does not appear in Virgil’s text, in his sources (Homer’s Odyssey or Euripides’ Hecuba or The Trojan Women), or in the English adaptations of William Caxton, John Lydgate, George Peele, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Nashe (note to 2.2.442). What does appear in Virgil is Hecuba and Priam’s mutual mourning for their son Polites, whom Pyrrhus has stalked and slain before their eyes. Polites is, like Hamlet, caught in machinery which both sets of parents have set in motion, but he inspires from them what Hamlet poignantly lacks, namely demonstration by both parents of love for their son and grief for his suffering.

Pyrrhus in both Virgil and the Players’ lines represents a mindless battle force. In Virgil he is a snake “Which winter had kept underground,” a mole figure, both brutal and insinuating like the original vicious mole, that “batter[s],” “smash[es],” and “hew[s] out” gaps.25 Pyrrhus’s Homeric name, “Neoptolemus,” containing an anagram of “mole,” means “new warrior.” By act 5, Hamlet has become a new warrior, one of the “incensed points / Of mighty opposites” (5.2.61–62) poised and “ready” (5.2.218), but hardly with real military force, on the brink of war.

The mimetic reproductions of war within Elsinor occur in the Dumbshow and the Mousetrap, where melodramatic texts become explicit battle acts for the court itself to interpret. The allusion to “The Murder of Gonzago” by means of the Dumbshow and Mousetrap adaptations seems to refer in context to strategic devices intended to
expose Claudius’s guilt, but Hamlet’s response to Ophelia’s question about the Dumbshow, “What means this?” (3.2.135), draws on and articulates in compressed form an undercurrent of repressed communication and feeling when he answers, “This is mincing malicho” (3.2.135). This enigmatic phrase, glossed by Jenkins as “sneaking mischief, stealthy iniquity,” summons to mind the mcing of Priam’s limbs by Pyrrhus (2.2.510), and the way the gods would have “made milch the burning eyes of heaven (2.2.513) is a transformation of the mote-stars of act 1 with their “trains of fires and dews of blood” to sources of milk that becomes tears of (Hecuba’s) lamentation. The blend-word malicho reinforces the milch/milk association. Also, the spelling of the word, malecho both in traditional editions since Malone and in present ones such as the Oxford Shakespeare edited by Wells and Taylor, offers another anagram of “mole” as well as of “male.” The two-word phrase offers a dreamlike enigma, encapsulating intimations of female lactation and sorrow and of male and malevolent mole growth.

Hamlet’s reaction to Claudius’s flight from the Mousetrap is itself enigmatic. Having trapped his mouse, why doesn’t he, at the very least, expose Claudius’ guilt? Why, instead, does Hamlet sing a little song? “Why let the strunken deer go weep / The heart ungalled play, / For some must watch while some must sleep, / Thus runs the world away” (3.2.265–68). The song in context seems to refer to an assaulted female (“deer”) by an “ungalled” male (“hart”) who simply plays. Females (because of the syntax) must either be alert or on the prowl (“watch”) while the males must either relax or die (“sleep”). The references are to Gertrude and Claudius just represented in the Mousetrap, but Hamlet’s tone is not vengeful but, instead, seems wistful and resigned.

The next part of the song introduces an allusion to the two texts which reinforce and clarify the unexpected tone. “For thou dost know, O Damon dear / This realm dismantled was / Of Jove himself and now reigns here / A very, very—pajock” (3.2.275–78). The first line, Richard Edwards’s rhymed play, “Damon and Pythias” (1571), contains violence of arrest, charges of spying, threat of execution, one friend offering himself as security for the other, and an enlightened pardon for both offered by the head of state. Battle strategies here melt into yearnings for friendship and reconciliation and for a state whose king is still, like the sun of act 1, in “russet mantle clad” (1.2.171–72) rather than “dismantled of Jove himself.” Such a state would not have a king like the present profane “pajock” (peacock) whose crowing, unlike the cock in act 1, is not sacred and whose long, expanded, gaudy feathers signify male display rather than pastoral peace.

The second allusion points to Virgil’s Eighth Eclogue, especially lines 17–61. The Damon-Story that tells of the love of two children in an
orchard, the subordination of the maiden, Nisa, to the god Amor, her marriage to the unspeakable Mopsus, Damon’s consequent recognition of the sex-crazed chaos of the world, and his preparation for suicide by drowning. These elements comprise events of prime emotional importance in Hamlet even as they blur together: Nisa is both Ophelia and Gertrude, Mopsus is Claudius, Damon is Hamlet and becomes Ophelia. Only Claudius at this point is isolated, not identified with the human-ness of another character.

In the allusion/dream sequence in his mother’s apartment, this isolation changes. Hamlet holds up pictures of his father and Claudius for his mother to see how different they are. The dreamwork of Hamlet’s ekphrastic language here initially causes his father virtually to disappear in radiant, military hyperbole and sublimation, as Hamlet compares him (as he was compared, in the Damon Story, to Jove) to Hyperion, Mars, and Mercury. Claudius, on the other hand, becomes a nightmare growing increasingly like the Ghost: he is a “mildewed ear,” comparable to that into which the poison was poured. “Blasting his wholesome brother,” he becomes a “moor” on which Gertrude can “feed and batten” as she used to do while hanging on her earlier husband “as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on” (1.3.143). Claudius and the Ghost/King Hamlet have merged. The old mole (in “wholesome,” another anagram of “mole”), or the Ghost/King Hamlet, has lost force, and become exploded (“blasted”) again, while his wife ingests (“feeds”) and becomes fat (“battens”), perhaps pregnant with the new heir. Hamlet’s reference to her advanced age (3.4.68–70) may derive from filial squeamishness about maternal sexuality, but in context it seems to be also oblique surmise about her childbearing potential with her new sire, activity that provokes his most horrified fantasies, combining metaphors about gross sexuality, bad smells, foul food, horrid growth, detonation, and disease: “rank sweat of an enseamed bed” (3.4.92), “Stew’d in corruption” (3.4.93), “honeying and making love” (3.4.93), in the “nasty sty” (3.4.94), “ulcerous place” (3.4.149), “rank corruption” (3.4.150), “mining all within” (3.4.150), “infests unseen” (3.4.151), “spread compost on the weeds” (3.1.153). These metaphors are variations of moles, full of overgrowth and fertility driving beyond expansion and extension to eruption.

Eruption, Vegetation

The mole/Ghost, of course, precipitates the eruptive force. When Horatio hears of the ghost’s appearance to the guards he feels its power: “this bodes some strange eruption to the state” (1.1.72). Later we feel in
his description of omens preceding Caesar’s death the same eerie force when corpses erupt (1.1.117), and there are “disasters [unstarring] in the sun” (1.1.120). Claudius’s own rousing the heavens till they “bruit again” is a tame echo, but when Hamlet encounters the Ghost at the guard post, he feels the irresistible pressure from the underworld: “Foul deeds will rise though all the earth o’erwhelm them” (1.2.256).

These emanations receive explicit sexual emphasis for Ophelia. The words are Laertes’, but she is their object: “nature crescent” (1.3.11), “the shot and danger of desire” (1.3.35), “calumnious strokes” (1.3.38), and “contagious blastments” (1.3.42) all threaten. Her father speaks of “blazes” (1.3.117). Such extreme diction attached to Ophelia, echoing unmistakably the eruptions of early act 1, makes her sexuality of distinct interest, while simultaneously linking it to the Ghost, an unexpected contact. In the following scene Hamlet’s wondering if the Ghost brings “airs from heaven or blasts from hell” (1.4.40) contributes to his mounting disorientation, which threatens that he “burst in ignorance” (1.4.46), and his reference to the ghost’s bones having “burst their cerements” (1.4.47–48) “horridly shak[ing] our disposition” (1.4.55) reveals the power of the subterranean force and its effect on the prince. When the Ghost alludes to a tale whose “lightest word would harrow up thy soul,” could “make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres” (1.4.15) and one’s hair stand up “like quills upon the fretful porpentine” (1.4.20), the eruptive power of the ghost grows. Its horrendous internal version features the mortal poison erupting on his skin “most lazar like,” cutting off the king “even in the blossoms of my sin” (1.4.76), swellings that seem strangely perfumed and lustful.

The sensual, eruptive phrasing continues when Polonius thinks of “the flash and outbreak of a fiery mind” (2.1.38) that he attributes to Laertes. In repressing the sensual suggestions of the Ghost and his own revulsion at the sexual union of his mother and Claudius, Hamlet becomes the Ghost himself in Ophelia’s eyes, “as if he had been loosed out of hell” (2.1.82). The explosion reaches an overwhelming climax: “a sigh . . . did seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being” (2.1.94–95). Ophelia’s violent terminology anticipates climactic diction used by Hamlet that correlates sex, disease, and the horrid eruption of squiggling new creatures, when he speaks to Polonius about the sun breeding “maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion” (2.2.181–82), “as your daughter may conceive” (2.2.185). The aggression against Polonius becomes more personal when Hamlet describes old men’s eyes not “like stars starting from their spheres,” but “purging thick amber and plumtree gum” (2.2.198), a discharge that thickens and creates stickiness. There follows reference to “old hams.” Hamlet is deriding Polonius, taunting him about his daughter’s and his sexuality in the context of
eruptive force of the purging (discharging, exuding) amber, with orgasmic performance of virile strength that has become foul and diseased.

The eruptions increase in violence with Hecuba’s “burst of clamor” (2.2.511) at Pyrrhus’s mutilation of Priam, and with Hamlet’s own sexual self-loathing: “I must like a whore unpack my heart” (2.2.581). Ophelia describes Hamlet as “blasted with ecstasy” (3.1.162), and he describes to Horatio how he will have the “engineer[s] / Hoist on their own petard,” blown to bits as he delves, like his father the “pioneer,” the “old mole,” below Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “blow them to the moon,” an eruption he coldly controls. In the graveyard of act 5, even among the dead, eruption continues as the gravedigger throws up one skull (5.1.73–74) and then another (5.1.95–96). When Hamlet smells Yorick’s excavated cranium, he starts to vomit: “my gorge rises” (5.1.181). The eruptive thrust has turned into internal, automatic reaction.

A correlative development of sexual eruption and death emerges in metaphors about vegetative growth. Hamlet early on reveals his anxiety about sexual erection when he bursts forth in act 1 about the “unweeded garden” that “grows to seed” (1.2.135–36). Here there is destruction of pattern and beauty through phallic growth and dispersal of seed. Weed terminology progresses through “midnight weeds” (3.2.251), “compost on the weeds” (3.4.153), and “weedy trophies” (4.7.173). In apparent contrast, the floral blooms of Ophelia reflect innocence and pathetic ceremony of loss. But even Ophelia’s death wreaths, her “fantastic garlands,” contain phallic growths with innate force, such as the “long purples / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name” (4.7.168–69).

The reverberations of war and continuum of eruptions and floral outbursts in Hamlet touch every male in the play and attest to a preoccupation with maleness. The warclad Ghost is apprehensible only by males (Gertrude’s mind is not receptive to him in her chamber), namely the guards and Horatio in the dead of night at the play’s opening, and Hamlet both on the ramparts in act 1 and during his fury in Gertrude’s chamber in act 3. The eruptive charges that pervade the play and the sexual overtones they evoke reinforce a recurrent if underlying impression of raw male energy. Laertes’ words to Ophelia in act 1 place alarmed emphasis on habitual male assault and female vulnerability: “toy in blood”; “primy nature”; “nature crescent”; “thews and bulks”; “soil nor cautel”; “doth besmirch”; “chaste treasure open”; “shot and danger of desire”; “infants of the spring”; “buttons be disclosed”; “liquid dew of youth”; “puffed and reckless libertine.”

Hamlet’s language beginning with his first soliloquy exhibits powerful erotic suggestiveness, but its tone is morbid, unlike Laertes’ cautioning but vividly sensual terminology. The first two lines, “O that this too, too
sullied ["solid"] flesh should melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (1.2.129) express a death wish, but the words of this wish—“sullied [Quarto: “solid"] flesh,” “melt,” “dew”—intimate equally a retreat from male sexuality, a wish that his male flesh become harmless, hidden from and immune to danger. A “dew” is liquid, but it has become not the product of ejaculation but the wished-for diminishment—virtually to the point of annihilation—of the flesh itself. What becomes increasingly clear in Hamlet is that the mole flow, military expansion, eruptions, and pervasive often pornographic references point not simply to maleness as a normal, traditional agent of military aggression and sexual potency, but especially to male sexuality in and of itself as a force so strong that it seems to lie beyond even male control and therefore to produce peculiarly male anxiety. We receive glimpses of Hamlet’s attitude towards such sexuality in his relationship with Ophelia.

The raw sexual currents of the royal court and the verbal network of literary/historical allusions to women—to Jephthah’s daughter, Dido, Helen of Troy, Gonzago’s wife, Nisa—imply consummation and destruction. The exact language of the text reinforces this implication. Ophelia’s words about something “touching” Lord Hamlet and her reference to Hamlet’s “tenders” imply her physical awareness of him. That Hamlet “importunes,” that he appears before her (2.1.77–82) in physical disarray (acting in his own dumbshow about erotic assault), and that he “groans” in his letter to her and tells her that it would take a “groaning to take off my edge” all point to his sexual intensity, as do all of his remarks during the Mousetrap: “metal more attractive,” “lie in your lap,” “country [cunt-ry] matters” (3.2115). He ends these remarks with an accusation about “monsters you make of [wise men]” (3.1.139), a reference to cuckold’s horns and to his suspicion about Gertrude’s infidelity, but especially to the humiliating, unpreventable rush of bestial grimaces and groans made by men during coitus. In contrast to the male aggression of his previous sexual insults, he here assigns powerful agency to females through promiscuity but even more through their arousing males and thus turning them into ugly, helpless, copulating animals, and for laying the “swallowed bait” that leads to the perjured, murderous, bloody, savage lust of Sonnet 129. In this context, Hamlet’s expression of loathing for seductive “paintings” of women derives not so much from aversion to the artificiality of female coyness as it does to the use of cosmetics that provokes automatic male reaction and instigates the bestiality.

Hamlet does not take pleasure in sexuality. His love song to Ophelia expresses no passion and is deficient as a poem, as he acknowledges (“I am ill at these numbers” [2.2.119]). His language throughout the play is laden with sexual reference, but suggests no erotic emotion, on the one
hand, or incapacity, on the other. Rather, he worries about the compulsions of sexuality, about appetite itself, about what triggers sexual arousal and causes the fierce, irresistible surges to begin with. He is worried about the mole within himself. When the King rises during the Mousetrap, Hamlet queries, “What, frightened with false fire?” (3.2.260). False fire is blank discharge of weapons, fire without shot (note to 3.2.260). The war against Claudius, as directed by Hamlet, has lost its potency. He seems to think of himself, almost with satisfaction, as beyond desire, incapable of driving force.

Hamlet knows no sexual bliss. Nor does his father the Ghost, who refers to his former bed as “celestial” (presumably transcending erotic pleasure), who notices the pale “glow worm” with “its ineffectual fire,” and who reveals no recent memory of sexual joy. Other men of the play—the guards, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Voltemand and Cornelius, Osric, Polonius, Norway, Fortinbras, and Horatio—seem asexual. Only Claudius finds erotic delight.

By act 5, Hamlet discerns and accepts that Gertrude’s commitment to Claudius—which she confirms not by revealing Hamlet’s secret but by using Claudius’s language moments before she dies, “The Queen carouses to Hamlet”—is as inevitable as that of the Player Queen to the poisoner and his Claudian “gifts,” as that of Fortinbras to conquest, as that of Jephthah’s daughter to virginal dreams of erotic and maternal experience, as that of Ophelia to sucking the honey of Hamlet’s sweet vows, wishing for Hamlet’s “keenness” and more keenness and devilish “worse” keenness (3.2.243). The play never gives definite information about Hamlet and Ophelia’s physical relationship because what matters is their mutual attraction, which reminds Hamlet of his own sexual reactions, which he cannot put from his mind, and which, in turn, make him think of his mother’s sexual acts and of how he reacts again and again in each allusion, and how his father and uncle react and how they interact, merging, merging, merging, cousin becoming son, uncle becoming father, the father becoming mother (4.4.52), Hamlet, the nephew becoming Lucianus who will get the love of the king’s wife, Ophelia becoming Gertrude, Hamlet becoming himself female. The mole force seethes through everything—mental, physical, sexual, personal.

Hamlet’s intimations of the rampant energies of the vicious mole, of the indifferent and implacable life force, and of the eruptive, disruptive powers of the old mole, the father deep in his mind, realize themselves more and more clearly and powerfully as his play of consciousness progresses and he painfully revises his first accusatory, moral, and emotional instincts. The mole does not originate “by chance” in “particular men,” nor is it confined metaphorically to the “vicious mole”
or the “old mole” manifestations. The mole has rampant seminal power that seems essentially male, that sends emanations of its vitality and sheer force to and into women, that defies even male control, that propels and proliferates and that above all mutates and causes mutation. Its closest analogue, the means through which we understand it, is language. The mobilization that developed within and from the first words of the play gathers force to become “moles” that catapult verbal charges throughout the play.

Continuation

How far can the mole force go in a literary artifact such as a poem? How can a play that, on the one hand, intimates the natural apprehension of the infinite and proliferates in metaphor, while, on the other, it counters this movement with forces of military expansion that constrict, along with political and personal ambitions that kill, within such a play, how can these opposing, dualistic, mutually antagonistic forces play themselves out? The forces of constriction by definition naturally diminish to extinction and death, the expected, if heartrending, solution to all tragedies. These cancerous, morbid mole forces do not pose a major artistic problem for Shakespeare. But creative mole forces do.

Where does such energy go? Does Shakespeare simply let it die at the end of this drama, allowing it to lie dormant in his artistic consciousness until it shoots forth through some provocation to produce another poem, making the concept an allegory of his own art? Or is the mole peculiar to Hamlet? Does the mentality of this play find the mole, by its very definition within the play, incapable of cessation? If the sexual urge, prime and primal source of the energy of living, expands with insatiable appetite both to crave and abhor death and its shudder of consummation, its alteration of states of being, if this urge leads to death and more death, what then? Or, in metaphoric terms, after the mole force has spread to become an infiltration of all life and even as the mole ghost infiltrates and becomes a permanent part of Hamlet’s mind and both aspects manifest coiling eruption, imperial conquest, and rank male aggression, what beyond mechanical repetition of bodies piled on bodies is there? Where does metaphor itself go? Since it never totally becomes what it represents and since it is a continual energy of change and new imaginative life, how can it be constrained even by death, and, if not constrained, how does it work, how can Shakespeare in a limited space and time find a cessation that fulfills and exceeds tragic convention of death?

Hamlet considers the problem in two statements about the imagination.
The first tells about its boundary-passing activity, which he acknowledges when he confronts Yorick’s skull: “how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft” (5.1.181–83). The forces of sexuality and procreation operate even in death. In Hamlet’s imagination Yorick’s skull becomes “abhorred,” like a whore that stinks (5.1.194) and causes him violently to tremble (ab, from; horrene, to shudder). He experiences not only convulsion as his gorge, the contents of his stomach, starts to heave, but also sexual nausea as his gorge, that which has become distended, as of veins and organs, rises. To read here actual sexual interest between Hamlet as a child and Yorick is out of the question. But the tremors of death and sex—the instinctive, pervasive forces that the vicious mole and the subterranean, subconscious, burrowing mole activate—trigger in Hamlet’s memory simultaneously conflicting images. “Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft” joins the indelible image from act 1 of how Gertrude “did hang” (1.2.143) on his father with playful memories of Yorick’s gibes and gentleness. This now personal merging of disparate elements, like those implied in the allusions that interrelated both youthful innocence and mature appetite, is finally put into words by Hamlet himself.

Second, he expresses his realization that the creative process is itself a mole that perceives and traces continual change: “Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?” (5.1.196–98). “Stopping” with its “ing” signals part of a process that will not stop. Physically the body of Alexander, the arch agent of imperial conquest, may suffer recurrent elemental transformation, including one that composes the cork that plugs a wine cask filled with vital spirits. Metaphorically, imaginatively, this process takes place even as Hamlet speaks, the speed and associative power of the creative mind fusing imperial destruction and dust without pause.

Shakespeare finds more than death by presenting different kinds of death at the end of the play, within which is preserved the principle of movement. There is the mole-product of multiple corpses, but these bodies present not static rigor mortis but a flow of mortal activity and interaction. (1) The garden of act 1 has literally become the graveyard, where a “live” mole in the gravedigger’s song and inside the grave “Hath clawed me in his clutch” (5.1.71). (2) This mole/old mole joins the antecedent little mouse of act 1 as they both become part of a jingle that endures even today: “the cat will play, the dog will have his day” (5.1.287). These activities place the mouse at the mercy of the cat playing with him, and the mole deliciously makes the day for the dog; both enter the food chain. (3) The alluring sex force of women has, continuing from its impetus with Ophelia and Hamlet’s mother, turned
to a living skull, addressed as “Lady Worm,” the simultaneous result (bone) and cause (worm decomposition) of death. (4) The Lady Worm has lost her maiden head, her “mazzard” (head as well as wild sweet cherry, often used as grafting stock), roughly struck by the sexton’s spade. This macabre creature therefore experiences merger of both sexes, including defloration as a “Lady” and castration as a “Worm,” in addition to actual decapitation. (5) Hamlet reconsiders Yorick in the midst of his own bones, a revival causing, along with thoughts of Alexander, recollection of our mote figure from act 1, “Imperious Caesar” (5.1.206), and together they regain life in the midst of the dreadful disintegration their remains have undergone, as their bodies alter to the degree that they become us all: they undergo decomposition and shrinkage resulting in their use as dust to stop the bung hold of a beer barrel (5.1.198–205) that could hold the liquor that any of us might drink.

Hamlet’s death itself takes place several times. (1) He leaps to his death when he enters the grave with Laertes. He would feel then the soil around him even as his own shoes now trample or dance on the corpse of Ophelia. (2) He becomes disembodied from himself as he uses the third person five times in seven lines (“Hamlet wronged Laertes?”; “Never Hamlet”; “If Hamlet from himself . . .”; and so on [5.2.229–35]). (3) Hamlet’s questions, previously opening out to speculation and pain (“Must I remember?” [1.2.143]; “What may this mean . . . to shake our disposition / With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?” [1.4.51–56]) become in act 5 numerous (over fifty), literal, and answerable; they are rhetorical, inquisitive, conversational, satiric.

Feeling dies (“Has this fellow no feeling for his business?” [5.1.65–6]), becomes exaggerated (Laertes’s elegiac bombast), is prettified (Osric’s artificial jargon), or is turned into murderous indifference (Claudius’s abandonment of Gertrude). Hamlet’s passion likewise recedes almost from view not only in the virtual disappearance of evocative allusions but more ominously in his growing awareness of the imminence of passion’s death: “How ill all’s here about my heart” (5.2.208).

When Hamlet tells Horatio just before the duel scene that “If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come” (5.2.216–18), he makes his final statement about “it,” an indefinite pronoun signifying unstoppable, neuter force, including death, of course, but not limited to that word’s set configuration of letters. Hamlet no longer either seeks “it” as he had earlier in his act 3 soliloquy, as a form of serene sleep, nor resists it as a field of menacing dreams. Rather he accepts it as part of the mole continuum that does not stop. It is not death that Hamlet can accept finally but life: the mole’s definitive actions of coexistent generation/degeneration and
degeneration/generation. It belongs not only to the past but also to the future. Like the paradoxes posed by poets such as John Donne, death dies; it becomes subsumed by life. Unlike those paradoxes, death in the play becomes life not through religious ideas (such as Christian redemption) but through its own inextricable mingling with an amoral, irresistible, metamorphic life force that is presexual, premilitary, prereligious, and that only the permutations of language can follow, equal, and reproduce.

At the conclusion of the play, as the soldiers of Fortinbras release echoes of guns and peals of ordnance, the mole metaphor comes full circle. From the real and potential assaults in act 1 by both the martial Ghost and the militaristic Fortinbras, it has in a flanking movement culminated in the military rapprochement of act 5, working through progressive instances of expansion and extension in narrative, dramatic developments and turning to the impact of these on Hamlet’s mind, which creates and alters metaphors not only by making them go further but also by having them sink more and more painfully into questions of his own manhood, circling repeatedly around issues of human male psychology, examining the origin, impact, and perpetuallity of sexual action, that simultaneously, in its most widespread and destructive application, causes, justifies, and exalts the drama of military action and that, in its richest and most creative impact, propels the drama of words. When Hamlet does die and the “rest is silence,” his life through the words of the play which have comprised his consciousness and through the words that Horatio will use to tell his story in a perpetual future becomes itself a subliminal mole, spreading as read play fuses into the seen play of dramatic enactment to be part of the psyche of every audience past, present, and to come.

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**NOTES**

1 Helen Vendler, *New York Times Magazine*, 18 April 1999, p. 123. Professor Vendler’s books, essays, reviews, and lectures on poetry show “how each verse doth shine” (Herbert) even as they reflect her power of conceiving, as would a theorist, “of the whole of lyric poetry and of telling us about it from the center of [her] immense perspectives” (Wallace Stevens describing theorists, *Opus Posthumous* [New York, 1989], p. 286). Her published work in general and *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997) in particular, her public lectures, her master classes at Union College, and her generous conversations have made possible for me ways of responding to poetry otherwise quite beyond my hopes.

2 Poets have long enjoyed the stir and mobility of words, which not only reflect but also actually experience movement. Catullus (in the translation of Horace Gregory) rallies his troops: “Come to me, my poems, all my far flung armies / Marching out in time with eleven bitter syllables” (*Latin Poetry in Verse Translation from the Beginnings to the Renaissance*,...


7 Milton Crane, Shakespeare's Prose (Chicago, 1963), Appendix I, pp. 198–99.


9 W. W. Greg, A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration, vol. 1 (London, 1939). Entries from 1564 (beginning with no. 38) to 1616 (no. 349) are on pages 114–92; from 1590 (no. 95) through 1600 (no. 175) are on pages 170–282.

10 Michelle P. Brown, A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600 (Toronto, 1990), p. 3.

11 R. W. Dent questions Neville Coghill’s identification in 1964 of the “old mole” with the devil and the subsequent acceptance of this reading by Eleanor Prosser (1967) and Roy Battenhouse (1969) in Notes and Queries, 215 (1970), 128-29. Battenhouse defends the “old mole/devil” reading, Notes and Queries, 216 (1971), 145–46. Richard Mallette’s article, “From Gyves to Graces: Hamlet and Free Will,” Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy, 93 (1994), comments on the “vicious mole” passage (1.2.25–38) as indication that Hamlet’s thought is “severely dichotomized” between “a human propensity for sin” and “elements for humanity that argue for essential freedom” (346). Other references to the mole are passing. The opening chapter on Hamlet in Barbara Rogers-Gardner’s Jung and Shakespeare (Wilmette, Ill., 1992) vividly treats Jungian conflict, mentioning the “vicious mole of nature” in Hamlet himself that deterministically drew him to death because he could not “grow up and split with the parental death grip” (38).

12 Margreta De Grazia, “Theology, Delay, and the ‘Old Mole,’” Shakespeare Quarterly, 50 (1999), 251–67. I offer special thanks to Ilana Eck, a delightful and invaluable student and research assistant at Union College, for finding and making available for me Professor De Grazia’s essay as well as scores of others, many of which I use in this paper.


17 "Mole" denotes a small growth on human skin or stain on cloth. It also means (by 1600) cakes strewn on victims at sacrifices as well as false abortive conception in the womb, meanings that surface later in the play, especially in the allusion to Jephthah’s daughter. The "old mole" to come (1.5.170) denotes a blind mammal who burrows under the earth and eats insects and worms.

18 Jenkins’s choice for "eale," the most famous crux in Shakespeare.

19 Mole metaphors spread continuously: 1.3.11–16, 1.3.37–38, 1.4.19–22, 1.4.52–54, 1.4.90, 1.5.36–38, 1.5.62–73, 2.1.40–41, 2.1.94–96, 2.2.181–82, 2.2.348–49, 3.1.161–62, 3.1.166–69, 3.2.251–54, 3.2.380–81, 3.3.2, 3.3.36–38, 3.4.64–65, 3.4.89–90, 3.4.147–50, 4.1.21–23, 4.1.40–45, 4.3.69, 4.4.27–29, 4.7.113–14, 4.7.122, 4.7.139–43, 5.2.69.

20 There are many examples: (1) the words “two” and “twice”: 51 times; “double”: 5 times; “both” and “second”: 5 times; “twin,” “pair,” “two-fold,” “either,” “couples,” “two-thousand,” “twenty thousand”; at least 1 time each. (2) repetitions (“all in all,” “aboard aboard,” “shadow’s shadow,” “hille, ho, ho; hille, ho, ho,” “to be or not to be,” “ear and ear,” etc.) (3) pairs of characters, of siblings, of nephews, of pictures; parallels of rank, motivation, deed, and status. (4) abstract dualisms of every sort—religious, moral, philosophical, etc. (5) issues of sexual coupling that affect almost everyone.

21 George T. Wright, "Hendiadys and *Hamlet*," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 168–93; hereafter cited in text as H. Professor Vendler drew my attention to this article.


23 Eric P. Levy, like many critics, reads this statement as evidence that Hamlet is “identifying through a purpose beyond himself [that] enables him to achieve authentic self-assurance. His sense of identity is no longer bounded in the nutshell of the first-person paradigm” (“‘Nor th’ Exterior not the Inward Man’: The Problematics of Personal Identity in *Hamlet*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 68 [1999], 724). To the contrary, Hamlet’s life-language, the single lyric consciousness of the play, has experienced dynamic range until he succumbs, as he does here, to irresistible war/regal forces. It is at this point that his identity becomes bounded when, as it does in act 5, his language becomes increasingly public, royal, deterministic.

24 “I did enact Julius Caesar” (3.2.102).


26 Astronomers tell us that the star Bernard tells of was, in fact, the explosion of the nova, Cassiopeia. See R. L. Doescher, Don Olson, Marilynn Olson, “The Stars of *Hamlet*,” *Sky and Telescope*, 96 (1998), 68.

27 “Unpregnant of my cause” (2.2.563), “gives me the lie in the throat / As deep as to the lungs” (2.2.569–79), “like a whose unpack my heart” (2.2.581), “like a very drah” (2.2.582).

28 See 1.4.34; 2.2.255; 2.2.304; 5.1.179.

29 Phillipa Berry, “Hamlet’s Ear,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 501 (1997), reveals the enormous elasticity of sound puns throughout *Hamlet*. "The chief interest of Hamlet’s quibbling lies not in his semantic puns . . . but in his richly suggestive use of homophonemic resemblances between words [such as “abhorre,” “whore”] in order to expand their significance” (57). Charlotte F. Otten (“*Hamlet* and the Secret Miracles of Nature," *Notes and Queries*, 239 [1994], 40) confirms the grave/sex/stink association when she compares the stench of the graveyard to Leominus’s description of the effects of venereal disease.
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30 See 5.1. 66, 79, 85, 96, 98, 101, 103–6, 106–8, 108–10, 112, 185, 186, 115–16, 126, 130, 138, 141, 145, 148, 151, 153, 155, 158, 163, 170, 176, 191, 196–98, 201, 248–50; 5.2. 2, 27, 37, 63–68, 68–70, 82, 122, 122–23, 127, 141, 151, 161, 167, 219, 229, 233, 262, 288, 314, 31. The bearers of lyric consciousness in Shakespeare’s poetry speak from emotion. As Vendler puts it in writing of Sonnet 97, “for the mind there is no eventual point of rest, since mental frames, driven by feeling, are engaged in continual corrective replacement of each other” (Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, p. 417). Hamlet has ceased to make such corrective replacement, the surest mark Shakespeare can give us that Hamlet is losing his capacity for feeling and thus for his own poetic life.