

**Nikki Webber**

Professor Richard Lane

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**“A Model for the New Mind”: Modern Hamlet, Subjectivity, and the Individual Conscience**

**Presentation Topic: Hamlet as the first modern subject, where the “crisis of conscience” (Terry) brought about by the tensions between the external and internal honour codes leads to the creation of a psychologically complex character.**

In William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the titular character experiences a “crisis of conscience” (Terry “Vows to the Blackest Devil” 1081). This results as Hamlet seeks to negotiate space between medieval chivalric honour codes, and a modern code of honour which emphasizes interiority, the centralization of the individual, and a preoccupation with personal conscience and somatic subjectivity. Harold Bloom articulates the play’s emphasis on interiority when he states that in *Hamlet*, “the ever-growing inner self, the dream of an infinite consciousness has never been more fully portrayed” (416). This research essay submits that these tensions between external honour codes and internal honour codes create Hamlet’s modernity, “crisis of conscience” and psychologically complex characterization. **Drawing upon a large body of secondary research to lay a groundwork for the historical and literary context for the Renaissance’s preoccupation with interiority and personal conscience, this essay will**

**examine the rich tension between chivalric honour and modern interiority at work in *Hamlet*; of particular emphasis will be this tension at work in Hamlet's relationships with the Ghost, Gertrude, Claudius, and his immediate circle of friends, as well as the emphasis Shakespeare places on somatic subjectivity throughout the work.**

The preeminence of the individual conscience was a burgeoning and central preoccupation of the Renaissance. Reta Terry claims that “the Renaissance was a period in which the honour code underwent a significant metamorphosis. The medieval, chivalric code of honour, with its emphasis on lineage, allegiance to one's lord, and, at times, violence evolved into an honour code that was both more moral and political in that it began to emphasize the individual conscience and allegiance to the state” (“Antique Honour” i). She additionally posits that the Renaissance subject had to psychologically negotiate space within this dichotomy, stating that the honourable, European individual had to “cope with both an old, medieval code of honor and the tensions of a new one, tensions that were created, to a large degree, by the contemporary insistence on the importance of the individual conscience” (“Vows to the Blackest Devil” 1072).

As evidenced by Terry, *Hamlet* is a play which seeks to negotiate space between the external, medieval understanding of honour and an interior honour which reflects the subjective, modern state. This polarization manifested itself in various ways during the Renaissance. Margreta de Grazia posits that the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation caused a collective, Euro-centric questioning of the value of human action versus the personal internal state (495). The Renaissance was also an era of exploration and discovery, in which external honour codes were called into question as the European subject began to consider his or her own interiority and subsequent place in the natural world and Great Chain of Being (Hanson 51). Hanson claims that the “truth of conscience” is a “product of discovery” and is a significant fixation of the European

Renaissance milieu (51). Timothy Wilson additionally suggests a politic of expansion and “corresponding movement from local, feudal structures toward a centralization of the state” (1). Adding to this academic dialogue, Reta Terry posits that “Shakespeare’s representation of the evolving concepts of honour is paralleled in the discourse surrounding the Essex Revolt of 1601” (“Antique Honour” i). Terry claims that Essex justified his rebellion using an external, medieval code of honour that was increasingly at odds with the subjectivity of the late Renaissance. The Rebellion became a “sobering demonstration of the dangers of a strict adherence to the chivalric code” (i).

Indeed, the aforementioned circumstances of the Renaissance “were so unusual, extraordinary, and distinctive that they can reasonably be imagined as triggering a seismic shift in subjectivity” (Holderness 8). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “subjectivity” as “the quality or condition of viewing things chiefly or exclusively through the medium of one’s own mind or individuality; the condition of being dominated by or absorbed in one’s personal feelings, thoughts, concerns, etc” (“subjectivity”). In her monograph *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England*, Elizabeth Hanson claims that the Elizabethans had an “obsession with the discovery of the heart’s secrets” but claims this is symptomatic of an “epistemic change, of a redrafting of the terms on which the subject relates to the world” (2). Shakespeare’s Hamlet thus stands in the thin space of the medieval world giving way to a modern milieu with its insistence on subjectivity and the preeminence of individual conscience.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines interiority as “the quality or state of being interior or inward,” associating the noun as being related to a person’s character or nature, and during the Renaissance, being directly related to the processes of the physical body (“interiority”). Katharine Eisaman Maus synthesizes the intersection between the inner conscience and the

physical body when she notes: “People in the Renaissance knew, amazingly enough, that a person’s thoughts and passions, imagined as properties of the hidden interior, are not immediately accessible to other people” (5). Graham Holderness notes that an emphasis on the individual conscience was an uneasy fixation of Elizabethan culture when he notes: “Everywhere in Renaissance writing and culture we find the fundamental difference named by St. Augustine as the distinction between homo interior and homo exterior” (6). This is a distinction that Claudius himself makes in Hamlet, noting the difference between “th’ exterior nor the inward man” (2.2.6).

Of central importance is Wilson’s claim that there was a “shift from the development of the self as an organ of the community to the historical construction of the individual or sovereign subject with its autonomous imagination and conscience” (1). Thus, with a modern shift which centered on the interiority of the individual, Hamlet experiences an extreme existential crisis. He must exist within the tension between his external, filial ties as prince and son, and his allegiance to his own modern, Protestant, “autonomous” conscience. This cataclysmic tension and shift which characterized the Renaissance was considered dangerous indeed. In his description of the honourable man, Renaissance writer Gervase Markham notes: “his words... must pull Truth from darkness; and his Thoughts which (being ever busy in Heaven) must keep the Earth in form and true order: It is his Valour that must make all dangers assailable; his Wisdom that must make a separation betwixt good and evil...” (2). Elizabeth Hanson synthesizes this duality and apparent danger between external forms of honor and the power of “thoughts” (Markham’s interiority) when she states: “What is new and catastrophic about the Renaissance is... The usually fearful, even paranoid recognition that interiority can give the subject leverage against his world” (16).

In *Hamlet*, tensions exist between external and internal honour codes. Markham articulates Hamlet's dilemma of upstarting the preserved social order when he notes that honour "... is that which preserves Order, and knits together the body of every Commonwealth, for take away Honour, where is our Reverence? take away Reverence? what are our Laws? and take away Law, and man is nothing but a gross mass of all impiety" (4). If Hamlet murders Claudius, he will honour his father, but the murder of the king defies the Renaissance internal honour code and is a transgression upon the Great Chain of Being. Hamlet articulates this tension between the external demands of the Great Chain of Being and the pangs of his modern, interior conscience when he claims:

"Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honour's at stake. How stand I, then,  
That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood" (4.4.45-50).

The tension existing between an external code of honour and the demands of the inner conscience can be evidenced through Hamlet's encounter with the ghost of his father. Echoing a spiritual anxiety of the Reformation, Hamlet's modern existence becomes haunted by a specter of the past in an abrupt detachment between the object and conscience. The ghost's command to "remember me" (1.5.91) may appear misplaced and ironic when one considers the numinous and spectacular events of the ghost's arrival. The ghost is a specter of the past, and by definition represents an alienation and severing between the subject and the object. Thus, the ghost's command to "remember *me*" (1.5.91, emphasis mine) is essentially prescriptive to Hamlet, who

seeks to negotiate space within the tension of external honour codes and his own subjectivity.

The Catholic, armor-clad, revenge-seeking subject of the medieval past has been separated from his external physicality; his prescriptive command “remember me” thus becomes a call for Hamlet to remember his *own* interiority in a chivalric world and court consumed by external forms of honour. The encounter marks the fracturing of Hamlet’s interior identity, which he initially disavows in favour of an external code of revenge:

“from the table of my memory  
 I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records  
 All saw of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live” (1.5.98-102).

Initially swearing allegiance to the ghost and renouncing the markers of his own interiority, Hamlet experiences a crisis of conscience which manifests itself repeatedly throughout the remainder of his short life. Certainly this conflict between exterior honour and the interior conscience can be evidenced by Hamlet’s behavior at his infamous Mouse Trap. Ironically, Hamlet plans to use the Mouse Trap in order to judge Claudius’s honour (whether he has murdered the rightful King and usurped the throne) based upon his outward countenance and actions. Hamlet states: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.566-567). In this line, Hamlet acknowledges in a relatively private setting that Claudius indeed has kingship; he further claims to “catch the conscience” – that is, the state of Claudius’s interior honour – by means of external surveillance and the strained artificiality of the metafictional play-within-a-play. The irony of the entire situation escalates when Hamlet instructs Horatio to use the honour of his *own* interiority to assess Claudius’s exterior guilt:

“when thou seest that act afoot, / Even with the very comment of thy soul / Observe my uncle” (3.2.78-80). Gervase Markham claims that part of the role of the honourable man of the Renaissance is to “... pull Truth from darkness” (2). Within the context of the Mouse Trap, Hamlet is experiencing a crisis as to how best assuage this truth between the pulls of ancient and modern forms of honour.

Hamlet’s blood ties to Gertrude and matrilineal descent represents an external, chivalric honour code that Hamlet struggles to separate himself from. Because of the tension existing between medieval and modern codes of honour, Hamlet is unable to sever the filial kinship bonds that keep him at Elsinore – primarily his bond to his mother. Early within *Hamlet*, Gertrude beseeches her son: “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet / I pray thee stay with us, Go not to Wittenberg” (1.2.118-9). With its connotations to modern culture, education, and the interiority of Protestant theology, Wittenberg acts as the antithesis of the chivalric, medieval – and Catholic – courts of Elsinore. Thus, Hamlet’s “honouring” of his mother’s request betrays his inner tension between chivalric kinship allegiance and the quintessence of modernity that Wittenberg represents.

Hamlet demonstrates the power of the chivalric code through his extreme allegiance; immediately after Gertrude’s request, Hamlet responds: “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1.2.120). Hamlet’s next words, however, betray the tension existing between the external bonds of filial honour and his own interior processes: “O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / And resolve itself into a dew” (1.2.129-30). This conflict of the “flesh” is indeed evident throughout the play. Hamlet, caught between filial – borderline Oedipal – allegiance to his mother and his own rich interiority, claims: “My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, / man and wife is *one flesh*; and so, my mother” (4.3.51-55, emphasis mine). In fact, it is only after Gertrude drinks

from Claudius's poisoned cup that Hamlet is able to overcome his hesitation once and for all, and kill his uncle. The tension between Hamlet's external bond to his mother and his individual conscience becomes a reflection of Hamlet's disjointed identity which characterizes him as a modern subject.

Hamlet thus acts as the intersection between the physical and the conscience. In *Shakespeare's Entrails*, David Hillman submits that for the Renaissance subject, the conscience was intrinsically tied to the processes of human physicality. Hillman states that "What we not call inwardness or interiority was inseparable from the interior of the body" (2). Graham Holderness synthesizes this framework in the context of the play when he submits that "in the poetic language of *Hamlet* we can see multiple possibilities of somatic subjectivity" (18). Within the play, the interior processes of the individual conscience become intrinsically tied to the unseen processes of the body. Hamlet claims to have a spiritual encounter with his father in his "mind's eye" (1.2.86). Hamlet invites Horatio to consider his own conscience and subjectivity within his "heart's core / ay in my heart of heart" (3.2.69). He claims that "the single and peculiar life" can be thought of as "bound / With all the strength and armour of the mind" (3.3.11-12); Hamlet invites his mother to consider the "inmost part" of herself" (3.4.20). The play suggests that the subject may function with the externality of a pipe (3.2.335), or assume the interiority of a sponge (4.2.18). Thus the somatic language of Hamlet was not a grandiose metaphor, but perceived as a very literal process of the inner self.

In order to honour his sacred vow to avenge his father and honour his own conscience, Hamlet must become increasingly alienated from his community, as well as negotiating his self-alienation. As Terry states, "Hamlet's honor has become as much a matter of his own conscience as of public recognition" ("Vows to the Blackest Devil" 1076). Indeed, to be honourable, Hamlet



must continually enact a performative identity, not only within the courts of Elsinore, but enact this performativity within his own inner conscience – he must continually separate his interiority from his deeds and supposed madness. As the play states:

“What I have done...  
 ... I here proclaim was madness.  
 Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.  
 If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes  
 Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.  
 Who does it, then? His madness.” (5.2.176-183).

Hamlet must alienate himself from community. But like his specter-father, Hamlet must also separate his interiority from his outward objectivity (particularly in the production of his feigned madness). Thus, by satisfying the demands of his conscience and choosing an interior honour code, Hamlet enacts a sort of continual community *and* self-alienation that creates his psychological complexity and ultimate existential crisis. Theodor Adorno addressed this theme of community and self-alienation as it relates to modern subjectivity when he states:

“At the beginning of the self-reflection of the modern, self-emancipating subject, however... the divergence between the insight and the act is paradigmatically displayed. The more the subject becomes an existent for itself and distances itself from an unbroken accord with pre-established order, the less are the deed and consciousness as one” (quoted in Leithart, n. pag).

Hamlet's psychological complexity and self-alienation – his crisis of conscience - can be evidenced through his letter to Horatio in Act IV Scene VI. Through a narrated letter, Hamlet

recounts to Horatio the events of his exile, exposing Claudius's order for his execution, and Hamlet's own manipulation of those orders to end the lives of Rosencratz and Guildenstern. This passage is indeed significant in understanding Hamlet's psychological complexity. Hamlet is alienated from his larger community (the courts of Elsinore) through his exile. But he is also experiences an alienation of the self: his thoughts are filtered through the voice of Horatio, stripping Hamlet of a degree of agency. Additionally, Hamlet must negotiate the tension between an external honour code (avenging his father) and the demands of his own conscience when cunningly sending his friends Rosencratz and Guildenstern to their deaths. His description of the betrayal is passive: "Rosencrantz and / Guildenstern hold their course for England. Of them I / have much to tell thee" (4.6.25-27). Hamlet's passive description of the fates of his friends - and the active *reflection* of the events of his letter - suggest Hamlet's psychological complexity, continual alienation, and his "crisis of conscience" as he seeks to negotiate two competing codes of honour.

Because *Hamlet* is a play about the character's subjective, interior crisis of conscience, Hamlet's charge to Horatio to tell the "occurrences, more and less / Which have solicited" (5.2.310-311) can never be realized. Rather, it becomes an ironic commentary on modern Hamlet's dueling, unseen interiority. Remarking upon this scene, Linda Charnes notes that "Whatever story [Horatio] is able to tell will necessarily exclude Hamlet's affective history. The imperative to tell Hamlet's story – and its inevitable failure – generates the real legacy of the play" (57). Hamlet is indeed psychologically complex; like ancient, Catholic Elsinore itself, his "crisis of conscience" is brought about by the divisions between the outer and inner, visible and invisible, the "exterior [and] the inward man" (2.2.6).

Based upon a historical interpretation of honour codes and a direct application of modern subjectivity in the play, this research essay submits that Hamlet is modern, psychologically complex, and experiencing a “crisis of conscience” which exists due to conflicting external and internal honour codes. As Harold Bloom states, “Shakespeare created him [Hamlet] to be as ambivalent and divided a consciousness as a coherent drama could sustain” (416). Disjointed Hamlet’s character thus represents the articulation of an allusive psychology which resists formulaic categorization. Commenting upon this categorization, Margreta de Grazia notes Hamlet’s fluid modernity and interiority when she states:

“Hamlet remains perennially in the critical forefront as new (and newer still) explanations emerge to account for his singular interiority. The *modern* by definition must always look new, up-to-date, or, better yet, a bit ahead of its time, and Hamlet – once severed from plot and internally configured – remains open indefinitely to future modernization” (499).

As Philip Fisher synthesizes, Hamlet’s “irony, his layers of feeling, his self-distance, his afterthoughts and reversals are all features of a psychology in which the self is no longer self-identical” (n.pag). The focus on the individual – and his or her private, unseen subjectivity – is a hallmark of the Renaissance and modern milieu. Hamlet thus becomes the quintessence of the conflicted, modern conscience. As Frank Kermode claims, *Hamlet* is “a model for the new mind of Europe” (1136).

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