

“A MODEL FOR THE NEW MIND”: MODERN HAMLET, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE

NIKKI WEBBER

THESIS

- I submit that the tensions between external honour codes (filial obligation and devotion to his mother, transgression of primogeniture, Claudius's kingship) and internal honour codes (Hamlet's interiority and subjectivity) create Hamlet's modernity, "crisis of conscience," and psychologically complex characterization.
- Because Hamlet is a play about the character's interior crisis of conscience, his final claim to Horatio to tell the 'occurrences, more and less/Which have solicited' (5.2.362-3) becomes an ironic commentary on the true nature of the play: modern Hamlet's conflicted, unseen subjectivity, which becomes problematic to his conscience, or internal sense of honour.
 - I will examine literary and historical context regarding the transformation of internal honour.
 - I will examine this emphasis on subjectivity and interiority, as well as its impact on Hamlet as a modern subject. I will apply this emphasis to a reading of:
 - The Mouse Trap
 - Hamlet's relationships to the Ghost, Gertrude, Horatio and Claudius
 - Various instances of somatic subjectivity
 - Hamlet's final claim to Horatio

INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE, HONOUR AND THE RENAISSANCE

- Reta Terry claims in “Antique Honour in a Modern World” 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” (i, emphasis mine).
- Terry claims in “Vows to the Blackest Devil” that “Renaissance men 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**” (1072 emphasis mine).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Thus, Terry suggests a shift to the “individual conscience”.
- As evidenced by Terry, *Hamlet* is a play which articulates the transition from a chivalric, medieval understanding of honour (external) to an increasingly polarized understanding of honour in terms of interiority and 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 questioning regarding the value of human action versus the internal state (495).
- 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.
 - Elizabeth Hanson claims that the “truth of conscience” is a “product of discovery” and is a significant fixation of the Renaissance (51).
- Timothy Wilson suggests a politic of expansion and “corresponding movement from local, feudal structures toward a centralization of the state” (1).
- “Shakespeare’s representation of the evolving concepts of honour is paralleled in the discourse surrounding the Essex Revolt of 1601” (Terry “Antique Honor” 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).

AN ORGAN OF THE COMMUNITY

- Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, 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” (Wilson 1).
- **Hamlet’s “crisis” exists in his conflict between his external, filial ties as prince and son, and his allegiance to his own “autonomous” conscience.**

GERVASE MARKHAM

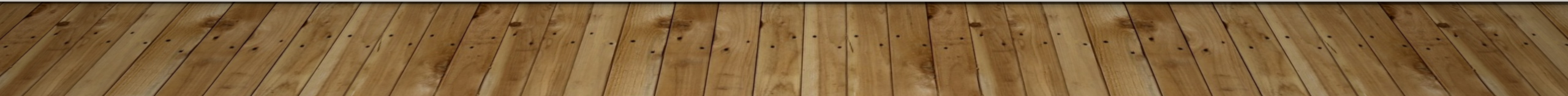
- “...his words... must pull Truth from darkness; and his Thoughts which (being ever busy in Heaven) must keep the Earth in form and true order: It is his Valour that must make all dangers assailable; his Wisdom that must make a separation betwixt good and evil...” (Markham, *Honour in His Perfection*).
- Elizabeth Hanson synthesizes this duality between external forms of honour 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).

SUBJECTIVITY AND HONOUR IN THE PLAY: THE GHOST

- The ghost is a specter of the past, and represents an alienation and severing between the subject and the object.
- His command to “remember me” (1.5.91) is indeed prescriptive to Hamlet, who seeks to negotiate space within the tension of external honour codes and his own subjectivity.
- How could Hamlet possibly forget the encounter with the ghost?
- The subject-ghost’s prescriptive command “remember *me*” (1.5.91 emphasis mine) thus becomes a call for Hamlet to remember his *own* interiority in a world and court consumed by external forms of honour.

EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR HONOUR AT WAR IN THE MOUSE TRAP

- When considering the role of a person's interior honour, it is ironic that Hamlet plans to judge Claudius's honour at the Mouse Trap based upon his outward countenance and actions:
 - “The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.566-567).
- This is even more ironic because Hamlet instructs Horatio to use the honour of his own interiority to assess Claudius's exterior guilt.
 - Hamlet tells Horatio: “when thou seest that act afoot, / Even with the very comment of thy soul / Observe my uncle” (3.2.78-80).



HAMLET AND GERTRUDE

- I submit that Hamlet's blood ties to Gertrude and matrilineal descent represents an external, chivalric honour code that Hamlet struggles to separate himself from. He finds himself unable to sever the filial kinship bonds that keep him at Elsinore – primarily his mother. Hamlet demonstrates the chivalric code through his extreme allegiance:
 - “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet / I pray thee stay with us, Go not to Wittenberg” (1.2.118-9).
 - “My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, / man and wife is one flesh; so my mother” (4.4.51-55).
 - “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1.2.120).
 - Hamlet's next words, moments later, betray the duality between the external bonds of filial honour and his own inner subjectivity: “O that this too too sullied flesh would melt / And resolve itself into a dew” (1.2.129-30).

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL AND THE CONSCIENCE

- Hamlet becomes the questioning of – and the intersection - between the physical and the conscience. This tension between internal and external honour codes and ways of being creates Hamlet’s “crisis of conscience,” and ultimately his destruction as the first modern subject.
- Graham Holderness submits that “In the poetic language of Hamlet we can see multiple possibilities of somatic subjectivity” (18).
 - The subject can be a pipe or a sponge (external or internal) (3.2.335), (4.2.18).
 - “In my mind’s eye” (1.2.86)
 - “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).
 - Hamlet invites Horatio to consider his conscience and subjectivity within his “heart’s core – ay in my heart of heart” (3.2.69).
 - Thus, the interior processes of the individual become intrinsically tied to the unseen processes of the body.

PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

- Because *Hamlet* is a play about the character's subjective, interior crisis of conscience, Hamlet's charge to Horatio to tell the "occurents, more and less / Which have solicited" (5.2.362-3) can never be realized. It becomes an ironic commentary on modern Hamlet's dueling, unseen interiority.
- Linda Charnes notes that "Whatever story [Horatio] is able to tell will necessarily exclude Hamlet's affective history. This imperative to tell Hamlet's story – and its inevitable failure – generates the real legacy of the play" (57).
- Hamlet is indeed psychologically complex; his "crisis of conscience" is brought about by the divisions between outer and inner, visible and invisible, the "exterior [and] the inward man" (2.2.6).

CONCLUSION

- Therefore, Hamlet is modern, psychologically complex, and experiencing a “crisis of conscience” which exists due to conflicting external and internal honour codes. The focus on the individual - and private, unseen subjectivity - is a hallmark of the Renaissance and modern milieu.
- Hamlet becomes the quintessence of the conflicted, modern conscience. As Frank Kermode claims, *Hamlet* is “a model for the new mind of Europe” (1136).