

**Dangerous Doubles:
Puns and Language in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

Teresa Hooper

Perhaps one of the strangest critical aspects of *Hamlet* is how often Hamlet mirrors his uncle's behavior. For instance, Maurice Charney indicates that each views the other as a disease: "The doubleness of the ulcer or canker image, which Hamlet and Claudius apply to each other, makes it a part of other ambiguities in the play" (Charney 78). In addition, while Claudius commits an obvious act of incest, so does Hamlet's language: "[his] 'slanderous' play with language... leads to a continual overrunning of clear distinctions and definite meanings—a kind of incestuous game..." (Birringer 497). Hamlet also leaves a swath of death comparable only to Claudius; John Hunt claims, "In setting right two injustices, Hamlet will cause physical, psychological, moral, and political dislocations on a universal scale" (Hunt 35). What could make two such seemingly opposite characters so similar in action? The answer to that question lies in a final similarity: while Claudius chooses a doubled identity through incest, Hamlet also lives from a doubled nature. Claudius corrupts his surroundings through his multiple roles and doubled language; his poison flows and infects from his corrupted presence. In contrast, Hamlet himself is a pun, an "amulet" to counteract Claudius' poison (West 75); these two living doubles collide and cancel each other out.

With these ideas in mind, this paper will argue that Hamlet is a living "pun," forced to live in more than one ideological space at a time. Such a painful and disorienting condition directly causes his own verbal puns in his language, his confusion and delay over revenge, and finally, the outbursts of violence that lead to Polonius' murder and Ophelia's suicide. Strangely, the only way he can destroy his punned

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston

Volume 2, 2003: pp. 120-134

© 2003 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

existence is to assume another doubled nature: he must take on the role of his father in order to destroy these corrupting doubles and restore order to Denmark. While this paper will not specifically draw from Mary Douglas' theories of purity, the thesis very loosely organizes itself around her concepts of ambiguity and danger.

Linguistically, a pun is simply an instance where a single word or phrase carries more than one independent meaning in a given context. For instance, President Kennedy's famous quote, "Ich bin ein Berliner" can mean one of two things: when taken literally as Kennedy intended, it means, "I am one of Berlin." Yet, when one looks at the same phrase idiomatically, one receives the message, "I am one Berliner (a jelly pastry)." As this example demonstrates, a pun is semantically a very slippery and ambiguous form of communication: it makes a seemingly concrete and complete expression exist in more than one ideological space. Likewise, it keeps the word from occupying only one of the two contexts. Therefore it is "a symbolic device which can force us from the pragmatic reality of direct experience into the complex realm of abstractions..." (Brown 15). The pun, whether intentional or not, abstracts and subverts the intended meaning.

Moreover, when someone uses a pun *intentionally*, he or she is also being dishonest by forcing two or more meanings into a single word or phrase. As we saw in the example above, the pun robs both meanings of concrete representation; thus a pun can serve as an ambiguous answer to a direct question, rendering the response devoid of any real information. But in addition to this, the pun calls attention to the fragility and limitation of language. Since it demonstrates and flaunts fissures in the ability of words to carry meaning, "it makes us aware that words may be counterfeits" (Burckhardt 25). Since a pun demonstrably subverts, muddles and weakens the ability of language to carry meaning, it is by definition a violent form of language—both as weapon and as a sign of danger. This concept is hardly new, at least among Shakespeare critics; Sigurd Burckhardt clearly asserts this idea, saying, "[The pun] is an act of verbal violence, designed to tear the close bond between word and meaning..The pun gives the word as entity primacy over the word as sign" (Burckhardt 25).

The pun receives an unprecedented amount of space in the text of *Hamlet* and operates on many different levels; its frequency

demonstrably affects the plot and its characters. Polonius occasionally quibbles, but his language is mostly driven by a need to ornament; as such he uses puns to add color and art. Ophelia uses several puns in her madness, but she mainly expresses herself through allusion. The flower scene in 4.5 typifies Ophelia's method of communication; rather than approach a subject directly, she uses other symbols, stories or songs in their place: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance... and there is pansies, that's for thoughts" (4.5.173-74). Claudius never puns, but as Lisa Hopkins indicates, he uses the semantically similar parison in many of his speeches. Out of all the characters, only Hamlet makes the pun his primary and natural source of expression.

Since, as we have discussed, the pun is a violent form of language, Hamlet uses it as both his primary weapon and mode of defense; he directs his quibbles at nearly every character, playing a linguistic game of attack and counterattack in the Danish court. On one hand, the ambiguity of the pun gives Hamlet a way to avoid giving a definite answer. In 1.2, Hamlet very carefully and craftily sidesteps Claudius' attempts to trap him into obedience. When Claudius finally addresses him at court, he first tries to force an unwanted familial bond upon Hamlet by calling him "now my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.64). For Hamlet, however, "this is one more example of Claudius' unification of a natural duality..." (Rosenblatt 354) and he rebuffs him with the pun, "A little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.65). The comment deflects the authority of Claudius' claim and exposes Claudius's ulterior motives; he follows the same format through his entire presence before the King and equivocates on every response. As Anna Nardo analyzed the episode, "This first exchange firmly establishes Hamlet's remarkable skill at recognizing and manipulating multiple levels of communication... He does more than evade Claudius' trap; he delivers a multiple insult which... Claudius cannot answer" (Nardo 185).

As one can also see from this example, even Hamlet's defensive puns carry an edge—but his offensive puns are deadly. When Hamlet forces Claudius to drain the poisoned chalice, he kills his uncle with a pun at the ready: "Drink off this potion. Is thy union here? / Follow my mother" (5.2.268), referring at once to the pearl in the cup, Claudius' unlawful marriage, and the inadvertent murder of Gertrude

in a single word. Finally, he uses puns and indirection primarily against Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a form of subterfuge, manipulating and controlling any attempt to probe his thoughts: “the verbal hide and seek... turns what might have been a simple spy/counterspy scene into a complex study of people trying to control each other by words” (Ewbank 60). Why does Hamlet so naturally rely on puns for offense, defense and subterfuge? As I intend to prove, Hamlet himself feels semantically doubled—a living pun, so to speak—and naturally both sees and responds to the world with double vision.

It is not an easy matter to turn a couple hundred pounds of flesh, fancy and will into a walking quibble; and yet, Claudius manages to do so with relative ease. When Claudius combines his own identity with that of his murdered brother, he causes a ripple effect of crises in the personalities of everyone who defines their own role in relation to himself or the throne. As Hopkins explains, “Hideously conscious of the psyche-splitting personality, Claudius has... been attempting to elide distinctions and differences... to collapse the separate roles of prince and king, husband and brother-in-law, brother and murder, and uncle and father...” (Hopkins 155). When he makes himself “husband and brother,” he causes a problem for Hamlet, who is now both son and nephew in opposition to him.

When Claudius marries his brother’s widow, he blurs and doubles what are normally distinct lines of relationship; blurring these boundaries also creates disruption: “Gertrude... seems to Hamlet to have betrayed her vows to her dead husband... and when the two of them occupy the ruling positions of Denmark, the symbolic aspects of woman and monarch, and of the language and symbols based on them, become particularly distressed” (Gorfain 62). This may also explain, to some extent, Hamlet’s harsh ambivalence to his mother. His mother is now both mother and aunt; as such her own relationship to her son is diluted and, in response, Hamlet repeatedly calls her his “good-mother.” Jason Rosenblatt agrees that Claudius’ actions of doubling and replacement—fratricide, usurpation, and incest—directly cause Hamlet’s doubled reality: “In moments when his rage is kept under control, Hamlet names the offense more indirectly, noting that it imposes on his family a hyphenated set of mixed relations: ‘my uncle-father and aunt-mother’ (2.5.82-83)” (Rosenblatt 356). The same

complication can be seen in Hamlet's farewell to Claudius before leaving for England:

Ham. : ...Farewell, dear mother.

Cl. : Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Ham. : Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother. Come, for England. (4.3.51-54).

Yet this is not the only strained, ambiguous relationship under which Hamlet suffers: he is an heir supplanted, and yet heir to Claudius; he is a vassal, nephew and son to his father's murderer, an indulged favorite of the court and yet a denied courtesan; he is the child of a mother who "lives almost by his looks" (4.7.13) and yet who also rejected him to marry another man. The person "Hamlet" now carries more than one identity, dividing his personality between each relationship, but he is still contained in a single person. As a result, Hamlet becomes very like the puns discussed earlier: since he fills two conflicting roles at the same time, he can fill neither adequately. Instead, he lapses into a sort of impotent ambiguity, unable to fill completely one role without suffering from the influence of the other. Just as the pun subverts any concrete meaning, Hamlet's doubled situation subverts any clear identity; he is an abstraction, pulled out of concrete reality by the competing definitions forced upon him. If puns make us suspect that "words may be counterfeits" (Burckhardt 25), then Hamlet's doubled position calls his very identity into question. Just as his puns "assault likeness, difference and rank" (Gorfain 63), Hamlet is a danger to his surroundings and the people close to him. Finally, according to Burckhardt, making a word into a pun makes language dangerous; making a man into a pun, owing to his ability to manipulate external reality, makes him even more so.

Naturally, Hamlet's crisis of identity causes several crises in his presence. As Anna Nardo again demonstrates, a doubled situation can lead to a doubled response (Nardo 188); therefore, in terms of his language, he naturally doubles his speech and makes puns. His personal crises also manifest themselves as textual puns within the fabric of the play. The first we see is reflected in the quibble, "Not so my lord.

I am too much in the sun” (1.2.67). Hamlet announces here a complex bundle of statements to his uncle: 1) he feels a sense of discomfort in the role of son to Claudius, and 2) he feels discomfort in the shadow of Claudius’ regal authority (represented by the sun). Richard Altick points out, “what is often overlooked is that the sun is a powerful agent of corruption. Since Hamlet does not yet recognize the King’s vast influence for evil...he is characterizing the King more truly than he can, at this point, know” (Altick 168). Keeping this in mind, Hamlet is also telling Claudius that being “too much” in his presence creates disease and rottenness; he identifies Claudius’ very being as a dangerous and poisonous influence. But more importantly, the word “sun” correlates with “son,” as we see in his admonition to Polonius in 2.2:

Ham.: For if the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog,
 being a good
 kissing carrion—have you a daughter?
Pol.: I have, my lord.
Ham.: Let her not walk in the sun. (2.2.182-86).

Hamlet’s warning to Polonius, followed by advice intended to prevent Ophelia’s “conception,” contains the same ideas seen earlier; the presence of the king (or sun) is dangerous and can “breed” corruption in those who are exposed to it. Clearly, Hamlet means this to be a veiled warning to avoid Claudius’ poisonous influence, but Hamlet inadvertently gives a second warning. As we saw in his earlier pun, Hamlet clearly meant both “sun” and “son” to resonate; thus, advice to keep away from Claudius also means to keep away from himself. Hamlet, at least subconsciously, intuits some link between himself and Claudius, and sees himself as a source of danger to Ophelia’s body and intellect.

Secondly, if Hamlet “acts” insane to avoid suspicion, he cannot “act” upon his plan for revenge. Anna Nardo explains, “By nature, play is double... because play creates a context in which actions both are real and not real, serious and not serious” (Nardo 188). As she goes on to illustrate, Hamlet loves plays because he himself is a player; he has, through the safe realm of acting, assaulted and revenged himself upon Claudius several times throughout the play. Since play can only

be taken partially seriously, Hamlet can both act with serious intention and dismiss Claudius' alarm by claiming it all "false fire" and a "jest." Yet, while all this play—acting insane, acting plays, acting as a chorus—keeps him safe from harm while still feeding his need for revenge, it also keeps him from fulfilling his "almost blunted purpose"; if he acts, it abstracts him out of reality enough that he cannot act within it. One can see this in the way he jumps theatric timelines; when he tells Ophelia that his father was killed "within's two hours" (3.2.114) he cannot tell whether he is in theatric time, within which "twice two months" has elapsed, or if he is in actual time, were two hours have passed from the start of the first act. Thus, the abstraction of his own acting keeps him partially out of reality to the point that he cannot manipulate it.

Third, as Paul Voss has documented, the "preyer" cannot also be the "prayer"; this double nature is most easily seen in Claudius' confession in 3.3. Up to this point, Hamlet has been meditating (or praying) so much upon the idea of revenge, sin, and Hell that he hasn't yet preyed upon Claudius' body; the one action prevents the other from taking place. Claudius mirrors the same dilemma: he has already preyed upon Hamlet's father, and now cannot pray: "Although Claudius can pray, he cannot communicate with God, providing the converse of Hamlet's dilemma... Solely because of Claudius's ostensible devotional posture, Hamlet is unwilling to exact revenge at that moment" (Voss 68). When the two finally converge in this scene, with Claudius on his knees and Hamlet with his sword drawn, neither can initiate. If Hamlet continues to meditate on the problem without drawing it to a conclusion, he will never move beyond the idea of revenge to its commission.

Finally, those who are grave in character end up in a grave. The other characters describe Old Hamlet in very serious, warlike terms; the apparition itself walks about in armor and "frowns" as he did in battle while alive. Old Hamlet, obviously, ended up in a grave after being poisoned by Claudius. In addition, note that Hamlet assumes his "antic disposition" immediately after meeting his father's ghost. After Hamlet kills Polonius, he makes the remark that Polonius in life was a "most foolish, prating knave"; upon death, however, he is now "most quiet, secret and grave," punning on his soon-to-be hidden burial.

Hamlet, then, sees his feigned madness as a defense mechanism. But at the same time, it keeps him from acting as “gravely” as his father had in life; in fact, it keeps him from acting at all.

Hamlet’s punned existence causes a host of other problems as well: he can’t keep his motives separate from the actions of his enemies. The two performances in the play—the Player’s speech in 2.2 and “The Mousetrap”—muddle the clear roles of murderer and revenger, and condemned and victim. In the monologue that Hamlet requests, the Player describes the revenger Pyrrhus in shockingly bloody terms: he is “the Hellish Pyrrhus (2.2.443) and “horribly tricked / with the blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons” (2.2.437-8). He even raises his sword and, in foreshadowing of the prayer scene, he hesitates; then, in anticipation of Hamlet’s own ideal, Pyrrhus snaps out of his delay and strikes. In contrast, his victim is the “milky” Priam, a harmless old man and King of Troy. On one hand, the parallel is obvious: the butcher Claudius is about to ruthlessly kill the old, gentle king. Yet, it must be kept in mind that *Pyrrhus is revenging the death of his father*. The revenger and murderer blend uncomfortably together, as do the murderer and the victim; this suggests that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius without, in some part, becoming like him. Hecuba’s wailing breaks in, demonstrating Hamlet’s ideal of the noble, mourning wife which his own mother never filled; Hamlet fills the role of Hecuba for her, in the prolonged mourning seen in the beginning of the play. Hamlet’s emotional response to the performance suggests that he feels split between an ambivalent, murderous revenge and impotently standing on the sideline; likewise he divides Claudius between the merciless killer and the gentle, lamb-like victim.

Hamlet’s emotional response to the speech leads to the equally confusing roles in “The Mousetrap” in 3.2. The entire point of the play, as Hamlet informs us in his second soliloquy, is to trap the King into revealing a guilty conscience to the audience; in order to do so, Hamlet must know for a fact that Claudius reacts from a guilt and nothing else. Yet, Hamlet chooses to complicate the response to “The Mousetrap” by making the nephew in his play the murderer; again, the roles of murderer and avenger in Hamlet’s mind elide and their representation complicates Claudius’ response. To which, then, does Claudius react? One cannot be too sure, since we see for certain in

3.3 that he feels directly threatened by Hamlet and makes reference to a threat upon his life at the start of 4.7. The reaction Hamlet takes as absolute proof of guilt may actually be caused out of fear for his life.

Hamlet's punned existence also means he confuses his relationships with other people; just as other people have imposed more than one identity on him, he does just the opposite. Gertrude's apparently dysfunctional sexuality affects him so deeply, that his disgust spills over into his conversations with Ophelia; as such, many of his brutal assaults seem actually intended for Gertrude. Secondly, he mistakes Polonius for his uncle in his mother's closet, telling the corpse "I took thee for thy better" (3.4.31). As Nardo also demonstrated in her discussion of the double-bind syndrome, the conflicting demands upon a person's psyche (much like a pun) can launch a person into violence (Nardo 184); and the violence with which Hamlet meets both Polonius and Ophelia is in fact an act of transference. Since he cannot take his violence out on his uncle and mother he inflicts it on the two bystanders. In conclusion, Inga-Stinga Ewbank chronicles this entire long process of doubling, confusion and reaction as follows: "We seem in the end to be left with a long row of contradictions: Hamlet's use of language is sensitive and brutal... His speech is built on sympathy and on total disregard of other selves; his relationship with words is his greatest strength and his greatest weakness" (Ewbank 75). Due to the ongoing problem of his doubled identity, Hamlet's language, personality and interactions with others amount to one large complication and incongruity.

Hamlet, however, does not languish in his torn and doubled existence forever; his transition from indecision to decision is in fact one of the largest overarching premises of the play. The easiest way to keep a word from becoming a pun is to change its context so that only one meaning resonates; therefore Hamlet has to find an identity that allows him to occupy only one ideological space. Ironically, the only context available for Hamlet is the one that Claudius occupies because his uncle has tainted all the others; since all roles of the Danish court to some extent define themselves off of the King's presence, all are therefore corrupted. Hamlet has no choice but to assume his rightful place as king and replace his father. Since a king naturally represents both himself and the state as a whole, it also is a punned position; yet,

it is one that neither elides nor corrupts any other ideological spaces; as such, it makes a perfect foil for Claudius' poisonous doubling. Claudius currently occupies both halves of that position: he controls the physical body through murder and incest, and controls the body of state by usurping the throne. Therefore, in order for Hamlet to become a complete, fully functioning human being again, he must undo Claudius' corruption and restore the proper order of succession by untangling the confused relational boundaries of Denmark. In the last few sections of the play, Hamlet takes over in his father's footsteps, step by step, until he completely assumes that authority at the end of the play.

Hamlet's first task as his father's successor is to take control of his mother's body and end the perceived unnatural sexuality that has plagued his thoughts; this requires confronting his mother for her unacknowledged sin and ministering to her assumed spiritual depravity. As head of the familial body, the husband was traditionally seen as the guardian of his wife's purity; Ephesians 5:27 attests to his idea, urging husbands to ensure the wife's soul is without "spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (KJV). The albeit harsh, but purgative, treatment makes Gertrude discover that "there I see such black and grainèd spots/ As will not leave their tinct" (3.4.79). His next speech at line 141 then finishes his husbandly duties to his mother: he lays out the plan of salvation through confession and repentance to her, and entreats her to keep from sinning in the future. Most importantly, this action resolves and quits Hamlet's violent ambivalence against Gertrude; upon leaving her closet, he calls her "mother" in her presence for the first time (3.4.191). With this relationship restored, Hamlet nominally paves the way to admitting his true feelings about Ophelia in 5.1, though only after her bizarre death and burial.

With this relationship restored, several more remain ambivalent; he still puns incessantly to the king and his cronies. Hamlet's next task is to act with a king's authority and assume a king's language. An example of this is encapsulated in his account of the sea-pirates. When he switches the letters ordering his execution, he does so with the king's name and signet-ring; he not only copies the handwriting, or uses his father's old seal, he also copies their

characteristic voice: “If Hamlet can copy the handwriting of Claudius, or more likely that of his secretary, he can also copy characteristic syntax. Both are legible and therefore forgeable...” (Cary 795). Merely assuming the script or the symbolism of the king (through the signet), grants him all the power that Claudius has—not only to undo Claudius’ plans, but also exert that authority for himself. His newfound authority must give him some confidence, as his impetuous boarding of the pirate’s ship sounds more like his father than Hamlet himself. When Hamlet takes that form of written, visual authority from his uncle, he can now address the difficulties which killing the king of Denmark might possess with a free mind to Horatio:

...He that killed my king and whored my mother...
 Is it not to be damned
 To let this canker of our nature come
 In further evil? (5.2.64-71).

As the character expressly set up to provide an objective voice for Hamlet and Denmark, Horatio agrees that Hamlet’s forgery is an act of justified usurpation; he listens to Hamlet’s tale and exclaims, “Why, what a king is this!” (5.2.63). Hamlet also takes on the name of the king after this event would have textually taken place; when he first comes again into the presence of the court, he announces himself as “Hamlet the Dane” (5.1.241-2), and rightfully recovers the title that Claudius tried so hard to claim for himself in 1.2. Subsequently, he also resolves two of his textual puns with the forgery: first, his hesitancy between acting and acting disappears, as he performs another’s role to accomplish a concrete act. Also, his meditation upon Claudius leads him to prey upon him later, rather than paralyzing him in the prey/pray scenario.

The third, and most difficult passage in Hamlet’s transformation is the confrontation with Yorick’s skull in 5.1. Here, Hamlet has to confront the frightening and inconclusive nature of death and reconcile himself to it. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet reveals that life seems unlivable, but death is an unlawful escape. In his third soliloquy, after meeting his dead father’s specter, death is now a vast unknown, which, if ventured, may not offer his badly needed release from his tortured

identity or an escape from reality. If this true, then death itself may be impotent, an ambiguity that can neither punish Claudius for his guilt, grant his murdered father rest, nor release Hamlet from his own tortured existence. Hamlet has, up until this point, treated death almost equivocally; on one hand, he deeply desires to experience death and inflict it on others, but on the other hand, he does everything possible to avoid it. He must confront his ambivalence concerning death caused by the advent of his father's ghost and move beyond it before he can finally take his father's place.

At the start of 5.1, Hamlet is noticeably shocked by the Clown's approach to death: his easygoing nature and extremely democratic grave-digging shows Hamlet that death really is "common" to all; the same suggestion from his mother in 1.2 had offended him deeply. Unlike his father's walking and talking spirit, Hamlet demonstrates with each of the three skulls that they can no longer speak; being so "chop-fallen," death has taken the organs of speech from them. By holding each of the skulls in turn, Hamlet palpably feels (and smells) the unequivocal nature of death. Upon examining the first skull, he sees something of his uncle in it; he compares it to "Cain's jawbone," and one that would "circumvent God" in his actions (5.1.71-73). The courtier's skull, then, reminds Hamlet that death will claim Claudius whether he acts or not. When holding the lawyer's skull, it is interesting to note Hamlet's furious flurry of puns: "Where be his quiddits now...? Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures?" (5.1.91-100). While he essentially asks this question of all three skulls, the sheer number of puns when talking to the lawyer reveals a certain amount of distress: here was a man who, like Hamlet, secured his existence by puns and equivocation, and yet death finally claimed him as well. Yorick's skull completes Hamlet's transformation concerning death; his skull is proof that death cannot rob one of identity, and yet that death is irreversibly final. Holding the skull of someone he knew makes death an intimate and personal experience.

Consequently, Hamlet draws several conclusions from his experience in the graveyard: first, he cannot hope to avoid danger by

avoiding clarity. Secondly, Claudius himself cannot equivocate or muddle the boundaries of death. Finally, he comes to terms with the finality and meaningfulness of death, as his “sparrow” speech in 5.2 reveals; while death in his third soliloquy remained a vast ambiguity, Hamlet now sees meaningfulness and defined identity behind death, which gives him a profound peace. With his entire view of death changed, he can now be “grave” again without fearing the “grave” awaiting him.

Finally, he has to fight for his position as his father had once done earlier—both against Claudius and in his suit against Laertes. The duel between the two sons echoes the duel that Old Hamlet fought against Old Fortinbras on the day Hamlet was born; as such, the action is an echo of his father’s authority. Before he begins the match, however, Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, and indicates an awareness of his own doubled nature:

:

Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
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 (5.2.171-74).

In winning the duel, Hamlet both enforces his position as his father’s son and seals his own fate; in the course of the confusion following Laertes’ confession and Gertrude’s collapse, Hamlet suddenly now has the ability, in his newfound position, to act resolutely and revenge his father. His last two puns occur in this scene, ending with “Is thy union here?” (5.2.268), and he effectively exposes Claudius’ doubled nature, his poisonous influence, and kills him with a final quibble. His apprehension over being like Claudius ends here; Claudius’ poison destroys the Danish court, while Hamlet counteracts that poison to an extent, and restores things to their proper order. Finally, he assumes control of the court in the dying moments, and with a king’s authority even names young Fortinbras a successor with his “dying voice” (5.2.298).

At this point, Hamlet has come full circle, back into the realm of reality and out of the realm of abstraction; he loses the violent and

ambivalent characteristics of a pun, and can again assume an identity of a rational and noble person. In his newly acquired identity as the only surviving member of the royal family, he has no competing identities or pressures to come against him. Having avenged himself upon Claudius, the corrupting influence that confused the relational boundaries in Denmark also disappears. Most importantly for Hamlet, however, he is no longer equivocal or ambiguous in his language; his final statement, "Oh, I could tell you" (5.2.279) is particularly significant because, up to this point, his own ambivalence has rendered him incapable of clearly communicating anything. The fact that death cuts him off before he can do so is, in some ways, not important; the fact that he now has the ability *is*. Hamlet seems to realize this as well: he could have used his final words to tell his story, but instead he decides to "let it be."

Works Cited

- Altick, Richard. "Hamlet and the Odor of Mortality," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5:2 (1954), pp. 167-76.
- Brown, James. "Eight Types of Puns," *PMLA* 71:1 (1956), pp. 14-26.
- Burckhardt, Sigurd. *Shakespearian Meanings* (Princeton UP, 1968).
- Carey, Louise. "Hamlet Recycled, or the Tragical History of the Prince's Prints," *ELH* 61:4 (1994), pp. 783-205.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. "Hamlet and the Power of Words," in David Scott Kastan (ed.), *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Hamlet* (Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), pp. 56-78.
- Gorfain Phyllis. "When Nothing Really Matters: Body Puns in *Hamlet*," in Katharine Young (ed.), *Bodylore: Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), pp. 59-87.
- Hopkins, Lisa. "Parison and the Impossible Comparison," in Mark T. Burnett and John Manning (ed.), *New Essays on Hamlet* (AMS Press, 1994), pp. 153-166.
- Hunt, John. "A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in

Hamlet,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39:1 (1988), pp. 27-44.

Nardo, Anna K. “Hamlet, ‘A Man to Double Business Bound,’”
Shakespeare Quarterly 34:2 (1983), pp. 181-99.

Rosenblatt, Jason. “Aspects of the Incest Problem in *Hamlet*,”
Shakespeare Quarterly 29:3 (1978), pp. 349-64.

Voss, Paul J. “To Prey or Not to Prey: Prayer and Punning in
Hamlet,” *Hamlet Studies* 23 (2001), pp. 59-74.

West, Gillian. *A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Semantic Wordplay* (The
Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).