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Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Renaissance skepticism

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SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND RENAISSANCE SKEPTICISM

by

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Abstract

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This study examines Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600-1601) in light of Renaissance traditions of skepticism. These traditions, mainly classical in origin and linked to Reformation debate, bear upon recurrent questions of knowledge and certainty theatrically raised in the play.

While some skeptical perspectives found in *Hamlet* have been associated with Florio's 1603 English translation of Montaigne's *Essais*, inadequate attention has been paid to the play's connections to other texts of skepticism in print in Renaissance England. This study examines such connections between *Hamlet* and the skeptical writings of Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, and Fulke Greville. The many skeptical ideas, commonplaces, and

modes of doubt identified in *Hamlet* by such an examination suggest broader Renaissance issues of intellectual and theological certainty framing the play's action and dialogue.

For example, the frequent questioning of physical appearances by Hamlet and other characters reflects sixteenth-century debate over the importance given sense perception in the "new science." Similarly, Hamlet's questioning of reason's moral and investigative value recalls Calvinist views of man's sin-impaired intellect. And Hamlet's perplexities with the nature of ghosts, purgatory, and providence suggest the theological quandary that Counter-Reformers claimed resulted from Protestant dependence upon individual conscience in doctrinal matters.

Hamlet's very mode of thought follows the principal convention of skeptical argument- the counterbalancing of contrary opinions. Such thought relates to his self-acknowledged delay when Hamlet considers how the ghost may either be his father's spirit or a devil, how his own death may either end his troubles or bring new ones, and how his chance to kill the king at prayer may either serve or thwart his revenge. Hamlet's identification with skeptical traditions also clarifies his dialectic

relationship with another major character in the play, Polonius, the court counsellor parodically associated with humanist traditions of received wisdom and reason. Within this dialectic of contrasting Renaissance perspectives, Hamlet's murder of Polonius may thematically suggest the skeptical eclipse of secular humanism's rational world-view.

Such skeptical traditions place Hamlet's final resignation to the mystery of providence into greater intellectual context as well. For his aquiescent posture in Act Five may be variously associated with the classical skeptics' ideal of "quietude" and the sixteenth-century Christian skeptics' attitude of fideism.

Contents

Part I - The Problem of *Hamlet* and Renaissance Skepticism

A. The Problem of Recurring Doubt in the Play

This study proposes to examine Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600-1601) in light of Renaissance intellectual traditions of skepticism. These traditions fall into at least two broad categories: (1) an epistemological skepticism as derived from classical sources, and (2) a theological skepticism informed, in part, by this epistemology. Such traditions, in bearing upon issues of knowledge and certainty theatrically raised in the play may illuminate as yet unexamined aspects of this still perplexing work, and reveal *Hamlet* as a more complex participant in the popular intellectual discourse of its time. The aspects of primary interest in this study are the particular concerns and distinct formulations of Prince Hamlet's articulated doubts.

As one Shakespeare critic has observed, the character of Hamlet is the "very personification of doubtfulness,"[1] and it has long been noted that some form of doubt or ambivalence is expressed by the character of the Prince in association with almost every considered decision he makes in the play. He questions whether or not to trust the

ghost who informs him of Claudius's regicide ("The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil,..." [2.2.594-600][2]), whether or not to commit suicide ("To be or not to be, that is the question:..." [3.1.56-81]), when to take his revenge ("Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying./ And now I'll do it. And so a goes to heaven./ And so am I reveng'd. That would be scanned:..." [3.3.73-87]), and even his own resolve to take revenge ("I do not know/ Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,..." [4.4.43-46]).

In a recent overview of *Hamlet* criticism, it has been proposed that the core of late twentieth-century response to *Hamlet* has been doubt,[3] and certainly much scholarship has been devoted to the subject of ambiguity in the play and the Prince's recurring posture of uncertainty. Yet comparatively little of this scholarship has attempted to frame this recurring uncertainty in specific and demonstrable Elizabethan terms.

It has been argued by a few scholars that members of Shakespeare's audience would have recognized in some of the Prince's repeated expressions of doubt and frustration with delay psychological conventions associated with the "Elizabethan malady," melancholia,[4] or plot conventions common to the genre of Renaissance revenge tragedy.[5] a close examination of the particular formulation of these

doubts, however, suggests more specific and more numerous associations with conventions of Renaissance skepticism.

Circumstances of setting and character in *Hamlet* would indeed seem appropriately selected to accommodate, if not underscore, the intellectual tenor of skeptical philosophy and the academic associations of its issues and conventions. Consider the scholarly identification of the Prince and his friends, and Hamlet's more specific connection to the university center of Wittenberg.

If we are to take at face value the age of the Prince as plainly indicated by the gravedigger in Act Five, that of thirty (5.1.139-157), then his interrupted university attendance ("King: For your intent/ In going back to school in Wittenberg,/ It is most retrograde to our desire." [1.2.112-114]) might suggest an advanced stage of academic study. Ophelia refers to Hamlet's "scholar's...tongue" (3.1.153), and his penchant for books is exhibited and discussed on stage ("Queen: But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading." [2.2.168]). Moreover, his three designated "friends" in the play, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, are all identified as the Prince's schoolfellows (1.2.177, 3.4.204), with Horatio specifically alluded to also as a "scholar" from Wittenberg (1.1.45, 1.2.164).[6]

This academic element in *Hamlet* and the Prince's exhibited intellectual proclivities have often been used in general and ahistorical terms to view Hamlet as a sheltered or idealistic schoolboy in a play about proverbially lost innocence. But more attention to the intellectual context of many of the Prince's statements may illuminate more historically specific meanings in these academic associations. Such associations may indeed then be viewed not as evidence for Hamlet's cloistered unfamiliarity with the "real" world, but rather as a basis for his intellectually precocious familiarity with current skeptical issues and ideas.

Hamlet's schooling at Wittenberg may by connotation also have alerted astute Elizabethan audience members to expect the Prince to exhibit more than merely an innocent academicism.[7] Such an association with this Lutheran center and symbol of Protestant heterodoxy during the first half of the sixteenth century may well have suggested a context for the play of Reformation controversy within which aspects of many of Hamlet's skeptical allusions and difficulties might be identified.[8] For example, Protestantism's formal rejection of the Catholic concept of purgatory would justify Hamlet's questioning of the ghost's claims and true nature.[9] This helps us view the

Prince's skeptical response to the spectre as a logical one (as opposed to a character flaw), based upon acknowledged debate in Shakespeare's day regarding such supernatural phenomena.

While not associated itself with the philosophy of skepticism, Wittenberg was viewed by Catholics in the sixteenth century as a center of heretical theology, and Hamlet's uncertainties about such subjects as ghosts, the afterlife, and Providence reflect theological questions directly or indirectly related to Luther and this famous university town. Lutheran teachings stressed the responsibility of individual reason and conscience in matters of faith, and Prince Hamlet, whose social and political isolation in the plot may be seen as possibly analogous to this Protestant state of psychological and spiritual solitude, repeatedly is found questioning the efficacy of such individual reason and conscience in himself and others.

Classical skepticism, per se, joined with Renaissance theological debate by the late sixteenth century when Counter-Reformers enlisted the arguments of classical skeptics to attack Protestant heterodoxical reliance upon individual rational and moral judgement. Thus, if Hamlet's education at Wittenberg may be seen as linking many of his

doubts to questions of Reformation debate, it may also indirectly link these doubts to the matter and style of the skeptical arguments which were a part of that debate in Shakespeare's day.

These aspects of Renaissance skepticism have yet to receive their full recognition as factors in the dramatic makeup of *Hamlet*. In them may lie the more specific Elizabethan fabric of Hamlet's 'inky cloak' of brooding doubt. the Prince may be construed as theatrically portraying a Christian humanist thinker who, in circumstances of personal crisis, seeks an intellectual grasp of his situation, but finds himself instead skeptically entangled in the theological and epistemological uncertainties of the Renaissance.

B. The Critical Background

Although a considerable amount of scholarship exists on the subject of the Renaissance traditions of skepticism, much less is available on the specific impact of skepticism upon Elizabethan England. Informative works on the European tradition are Richard Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (1960), Myles Burnyeat's (ed.) *The Skeptical Tradition* (1983), and Richard Popkin and Charles B. Schmitt's (eds.) *Skepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (1987). Other useful texts are Don Cameron Allen's *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (1964), Herschel Baker's *The Wars of Truth: Studies in the Decay of Christian Humanism in The Early Seventeenth Century* (1952) and Hiram Haydn's *The Counter-Renaissance* (1950).

Works by scholars dealing more with skepticism's influence upon the English Renaissance have tended to focus on the seventeenth century and upon literary figures such as Donne and Dryden. Victor Harris, for example, in *All Coherence Gone: A Study of the Seventeenth Century Controversy over Disorder and Decay in the Universe* (1966) takes his title from the much quoted phrase in Donne's *The First Anniversarie* (1611) and associates English skeptical

attitudes with contending theological interpretations of the Fall and expectations of the Apocalypse. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, in *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (1960), discusses an Elizabethan analogical view of man's place in the universe somewhat skeptically dissolving before Francis Bacon's more mechanically complex perspective. Louis I. Bredvold, in *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (1934), notes classical and patristic sources of skeptical thought arguably familiar to Dryden who, in the Preface to *Religio Laici* (1682), professed an inclination to skeptical philosophy. Margaret L. Wiley, in *The Subtle Knot: Creative Scepticism in Seventeenth-Century England* (1952), cites Bredvold's work and expands upon the former's summary of the several roots of Renaissance skepticism. She then argues for skepticism's contributions to the philosophical, scientific, and religious thought of such seventeenth-century writers as Sir Thomas Browne, Richard Baxter, Jeromy Taylor, and Joseph Glanvill. Phillip Harth, in his *Contexts of Dryden's Thought* (1968), also cites Bredvold's work, and discusses additional aspects of early seventeenth-century skepticism probably influencing Dryden.

While the works mentioned above are useful in their discussion of skeptical traditions, they detail the impact of these traditions primarily upon English writers active in the century following Shakespeare. Far less scholarship brings the illuminative potential of these same traditions to bear directly upon Shakespeare.

A frequently cited link between Shakespeare and skepticism may be found in connection with the proposal in the late nineteenth century that Shakespeare was significantly influenced (particularly in the composition of *Hamlet*) by the writing of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). (This proposed link is discussed separately in the next section). The argument for Shakespeare's specifically skeptical gleanings from Montaigne, a popularizer of classical skepticism in the Renaissance, however, remained undeveloped as mainstream scholarship resisted acceptance of the more inclusive proposal of Montaigne's direct influence. Little other scholarly attention to Shakespeare's dramatic use of skeptical thought in *Hamlet* (or his other plays, for that matter) appears to have been paid until relatively recent times. This renewed attention, however, for the most part, has been brief, or subordinated to other approaches to Shakespeare's work.

Among recent approaches to this subject, for example, Gordon Braden, in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (1985), proposes that Hamlet's character, while primarily a construction of Senecan stoicism, shifts at play's end to a Montaigne-like skepticism (218-222). Catherine Belsey, in *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), describes *Hamlet* as reflecting a characteristic "discontinuous" interiority of sixteenth-century man, but rather associates this arguably skeptical condition with a context of contending political ideologies (8-9). Timothy J. Reiss, in *Tragedy and Truth: Studies in the Development of a Renaissance and Neoclassical Discourse* (1980), recognizes a range of epistemological questions raised in *Hamlet* (162-182), but like Belsey, grounds them in ideologies other than Renaissance skepticism. Sukanta Chaudhuri, in *Infirm Glory: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Image of Man* (1981), discusses *Hamlet*'s reflection of a skeptical tradition in conflict with Renaissance intellectual self-confidence (134-146), but only briefly, and only in very broad strokes.

Another critic, Annabel Patterson, in *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (1989), acknowledges in *Hamlet* an academic context unique among Shakespeare's works,

involving "troubled intellectualism" (31), but reads the Prince's excessive cerebration more as a civic caveat against overly theoretical approaches to political problems than as an epistemological predicament central to the play.[10] Patterson interprets Hamlet's skeptical difficulties with power, privilege, education, and language as expressions of ambivalence towards conventions of social hierarchy (98) and of an evolving dramurgical populism she believes inherent in Shakespeare's later plays.

Scholars such as these have helped discuss Hamlet's intellectual anxieties in more historical terms, and reassociate aspects of Renaissance skepticism with the play. Little, however, has been done to identify adequately the conventional skeptical *topoi* to be found in the work, or to explore the impact such Renaissance skepticism may have had upon the overall structural design of *Hamlet*.[11]

C. *Hamlet* and Montaigne

A few scholars have argued, mostly in the early decades of this century, for Shakespeare's broad intellectual debt to the French essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). After Edward Capell's proposal in 1784 that Shakespeare, in writing *The Tempest* (1611), borrowed from the essay "of the Caniballes" in John Florio's 1603 English translation of Montaigne's *Essais*,[12] links between *Hamlet*, the Shakespeare play considered most reflective of Montaigne, and skepticism were made indirectly, as part of this broader case for Shakespeare's reading of the essayist.[13] The case, however, for Montaigne's *Essais* as a source-text for skeptical elements of *Hamlet* has at least two weaknesses: (1) The argument for Montaigne's overall impact upon Shakespeare has in the past fifty years lost much ground. And (2) little evidence of a pattern of explicitly skeptical correspondences between the play and the *Essais* has been presented.

Opinions such as John Sterling's in 1838, that "the Prince of Denmark is very nearly a Montaigne, lifted to a higher eminence, and agitated by more striking circumstances,"[14] and Jacob Feis's, in 1884, that "in *Hamlet* Shakespeare personified many qualities of the

complex character of Montaigne,"[15] found closely argued support most notably by scholars such as John M. Robertson and George Coffin Taylor who tallied high numbers of perceived textual borrowings by Shakespeare from Montaigne. Robertson, in *Montaigne and Shakespeare* (1897), discusses some fourteen "decisive coincidences of phrase" occurring between the 1604 second Quarto of *Hamlet* and Florio's Montaigne.[16] Taylor, in *Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne* (1925), even more emphatically stresses *Hamlet* as the site of Montaigne's "strongest and most pervasive" influence upon Shakespeare, also offering some fourteen parallels between the play and the *Essais* "so strikingly similar in phraseology as to preclude all doubt" (only one of which appears on Robertson's list). Taylor additionally suggests thirty-seven examples of less conspicuous parallels, including individual words found in Florio that initially appear in the Shakespeare canon with *Hamlet*.[17] By mid-century, however, scholars like Alice Harmon and Margaret T. Hodgen, by demonstrating the wide Renaissance currency of phrases, similitudes, and philosophical generalizations common to the two authors, argued that popular classical texts and even more popular *loci communes* gathered from them contained passages of such topical and rhetorical similarity to the "parallelisms"

found between Shakespeare and Montaigne as to undercut the case for exclusive transmission of one to the other.[18]

The related case for Montaigne's specifically skeptical influence upon *Hamlet* stands on shaky ground as well. The numerous correspondences argued by Robertson and Taylor to exist between the *Essais* and the play, which range over a wide variety of topics, have little to do with the traditional *topoi* of skepticism as found in contemporary Renaissance skeptical texts. Nor do these critics devote much time to the subject itself *of* skepticism. Robertson briefly acknowledges Montaigne's writings to be skeptical but sees this as possibly relating only to an "agnostic conclusion" to *Hamlet* (192-195). Taylor gets no more specific on the subject than to say, "It is small wonder that the general vein of skepticism and questioning running through *Hamlet* should have set students looking here first for the influence of Montaigne" (40).

In short, despite the fact that the overall skeptical "feel" of *Hamlet* has been noted as relating to the more discursively skeptical content of some of Montaigne's *Essais*, little evidence of a catalogue or pattern of skeptical correspondences between the works has hitherto been offered. Indeed, despite frequent comments and

generalizations about this same skeptical "feel" of the play, an extended pattern of explicitly skeptical *topoi* has yet to be identified clearly by scholars to exist in *Hamlet*.

One purpose of this study is to present such a pattern. No critical need exists to link *Hamlet* to Montaigne to see the play as reflecting or participating in a tradition of Renaissance skepticism, for the evidence, the play's many identifiable skeptical *topoi*, is demonstrable by examining *Hamlet* alongside the same well known skeptical texts from which Montaigne himself drew his inspiration. Neither is there a need to prove Shakespeare's direct or exclusive indebtedness to any one of these texts as a philosophical template for *Hamlet*, for many of the skeptical tropes are common to the several works to be discussed in this study. It is entirely possible that the narrower question of Montaigne's specific influence upon Shakespeare may have diverted scholars from a more comprehensive investigation of the playwright's relation to such texts, out of which skeptical *topoi* and issues found their own currency in English intellectual and literary circles before Florio's translation of the *Essais*.

In the past, reference to the skeptical writings of

such authors as Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, and Agrippa has been relatively uncommon in Shakespeare scholarship, and reference in any considerable detail to these works has been even more uncommon. This may be changing. Robert B. Pierce, in a recent article, "Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Scepticism,"[19] identifies in at least fourteen of Shakespeare's plays scattered variations on the ten categorical arguments for skepticism that are enumerated and discussed in both the works of Sextus Empiricus, the second-century compiler of the skeptical philosophy of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-270 B.C.), and also in the extensive Pyrrho entry in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (third century B.C.).

A more intensive scrutiny of such familiar texts in the Renaissance and of Shakespeare's use of their traditional skeptical conventions in individual dramas may indeed reveal multifaceted skeptical aspects to some of these plays and shed new light on their allusive and thematic meanings. In the above introduction I have framed what I believe to be specific reasons for the examination of *Hamlet* along these lines. The following study will endeavor to demonstrate just such an abundance of identifiable skeptical tropes in this tragedy and to explore their collective dramatic significance in the

workings of the play.

Notes

[1] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959) 74. Indeed, the whole play, in the opinion of Maynard Mack, exudes doubt. In "The World of Hamlet" in *Tragic Themes in Western Literature,* ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955) 30-58, he states, "Hamlet's world is pre-eminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed. There are questions in this play which, to an extent probably unparalleled in any other, mark the phases and even the nuances of the action, helping to establish its peculiar baffled tone. There are other questions...[that] point toward some pervasive inscrutability in Hamlet's world as a whole"(33).

[2] *Hamlet,* ed. Harold Jenkins (New York: Methuen, 1982). All line references to *Hamlet* are to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

[3] David Daniell, "Hamlet," *Shakespeare: A Bibliographical Guide,* New Edition, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 210.

[4] A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (1904; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949), discusses melancholia as a pathological condition familiar to Elizabethans and explanatory of various of the Prince's actions (108-127). Lawrence Babb, in *The Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580-1642* (1951; East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State U. Press, 1965), finds Bradley "...substantially right. All of the melancholic traits appearing in *Hamlet*...were traditional and commonplace" (107 f.n.). Babb also lists several Elizabethan sources citing melancholic symptoms of irresolution and excessive deliberation (108 f.n.).

[5] This has been argued perhaps most vigorously by E. E. Stoll. In *Hamlet: An Historical and Comparative Study* (1919; New York: Gordian Press, 1968), he frames Hamlet's self-recriminations for circumspection and delay in basic Elizabethan dramatic convention: "Here exhortation, not

damaging revelation of character, is the function of self-reproaches in [Seneca],...Kyd and Harston,...delay of some sort there is in all classical and Renaissance revenge-tragedies,...How much more it is a matter of story than of character" (17-18). Stoll also refutes Bradley's psychological interpretation of *Hamlet* as mistakenly projecting a nineteenth-century romantic sensibility over the play (72).

[6] In the 1603 First Quarto of *Hamlet*, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also identified specifically with Wittenberg (lines 966-968).

[7] Critics, while noting Wittenberg's identity as a center of Protestant thought, have attributed little more significance to Hamlet's attendance at this German university founded in 1502 than that it was a favorite school of Danes studying abroad.

[8] Though the Denmark of the original Hamlet story predates the Reformation, Shakespeare's play clearly places its protagonist in a sixteenth-century setting. Moreover, Elizabethans might have remembered that it was from Wittenberg that Christian III in 1536 brought theologians into Denmark to found a Danish Lutheran church. It was in Wittenberg, as well, that Marlowe placed his heretical academic, Doctor Faustus.

[9] J. Dover Wilson points this out in *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967) 62-63.

[10] Patterson also reads this as quite possibly a caveat addressed specifically to university audiences (31), as the title-page of the Huntington Library copy of the First Quarto states that the play was performed both at Oxford and Cambridge. Linda Kay Hoff, in *Hamlet's Choice* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), also proposes that the play's academic aspects may have been pointedly connected by Shakespeare to (in Hoff's view) the work's controversial religious themes, the better to engage the Calvinist leaning student audiences of these universities (44-45). She makes no reference, however, to

skepticism.

[11] Two recent books, Graham Bradshaw's *Shakespeare's Skepticism* (1987) and Stanley Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), do, in fact, analyze skeptical themes and patterns in Shakespeare's works. Neither, however, uses sixteenth-century thought or Classical skepticism to any significant degree as a basis for its analysis. Bradshaw focuses upon a skepticism derived from the plays' internal "poetic-dramatic thinking" (xi), while Cavell discusses Shakespeare's skepticism as anticipatory of the epistemology of Descartes (3) and subsequent thinkers, as well as bringing to bear various Freudian perspectives.

[12] *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare* (London, 1784) vol. ii, p.63. Capell (1713-1781) initiated scholarly research into Shakespeare's sources, as well as the editorial practice of collating Shakespeare's quartos and folios.

[13] It has been proposed that Florio's translation, while not published until 1603, was circulating in manuscript form by 1600, coinciding perhaps with the composition of *Hamlet*. Evidence for this may be found in a reference in the twelfth essay of Sir William Cornwallis's *Essayes* (1600) to Cornwallis's reading manuscripts of English translations of Montaigne's essays. Furthermore, it has also been conjectured that Florio, appointed in 1591 tutor to Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton and Shakespeare's patron, may have known the playwright personally, thereby increasing the likelihood of Shakespeare's having seen the manuscript.

[14] *London and Westminster Review*, July 1838, p.321.

[15] *Shakspere and Montaigne: An Endeavor to Explain the Tendency of 'Hamlet' from Allusions in Contemporary Works* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1884) 64.

[16] *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions* (1897; New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1968) 14-78.

[17] *Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne* (1925; New York: Phaeton Press, 1968) 8,13-16,29,41.

[18] Alice Harmon, "How Great Was Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne?" *PMLA* 57.4 (Dec.,1942):988-1008. Margaret T. Hodgen, "Montaigne and Shakespeare Again," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 16.1 (1952-53):23-42.

[19] *Shakespeare Survey* No. 46 (1994):145-158.

Part II - Skeptical Texts of the Renaissance

A case for Shakespeare's access to an identifiable skeptical tradition is easily made, and an understanding of the nature and uses of its representative texts helpful in viewing its relevance to *Hamlet*. Classical skepticism, as a body of philosophical ideas and arguments, entered popular intellectual debate in Renaissance England in the late sixteenth century. While not a major influence among Elizabethan scientists or theologians, this school of thought nevertheless stimulated interest and controversy among a number of well known intellectuals and writers of Shakespeare's day.

The seminal texts of classical skepticism, not just for England but for all of Europe were three: the writings of Sextus Empiricus (c. A.D. 200), the skeptical works of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.), and portions of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (early third century A.D.). Initially of interest to Italian thinkers of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, these works, by the late sixteenth century, gleaned significantly more attention in Northern Europe.[1] This would seem the result of skepticism's involvement in aspects of Reformation debate.

With these three classical sources of skepticism, I am also going to consider for the purpose of this study of *Hamlet* two Renaissance generated works of skepticism: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum declamatio invectiva* (1530) and Fulke Greville's *A Treatie of Humane Learning* (c.1605). Agrippa's work serves both as an example of Renaissance assimilation of classical skepticism, and as a controversial conduit itself for the dissemination of skeptical ideas in Shakespeare's time. Greville's work, which is more contemporary with *Hamlet*, illustrates the common receivership among authors in Shakespeare's London of skeptical *topoi* and arguments, and their popular use in English lay intellectual writing on broadly felt religious issues.

A. The Works of Sextus Empiricus

Sextus Empiricus provided the Renaissance with its most extensive and influential source for the history and doctrines of skeptical thought, developed from the teachings of its founder, Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-270 B.C.).[2] The surviving works of Sextus are: (1) *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, (or *Hypotyposes*) in three books; (2) *Against*

the Dogmatists in five books; and (3) *Against the Professors* in six books. Sextus's skepticism entered general European intellectual currency in 1562 with a Latin translation of *Outlines* in Paris by Henri Estienne; and then in 1569 with a Latin edition, in Paris and Antwerp, of all of Sextus's extant works, adding to Estienne's *Outlines*, Gentian Hervet's translation of *Adversus Mathematicos* (*Against the Dogmatists* and *Against the Professors*). Hervet, a leading French Counter-Reformer, explained in a dedicatory epistle how Sextus's skepticism served to demonstrate the uncertainty of all human knowledge compared to divine revelation, and therefore induced the humility necessary to accept the [Catholic] doctrine of Christ.[3]

Late sixteenth-century English scholarly interest in Sextus Empiricus is evidenced by a Latin translation of Sextus made by Sir John Wolley of Oxford University, Latin secretary to Elizabeth I and member of her privy council. Also a large number of skeptically oriented questions have been found among the recorded lists of disputations held twice a year at Oxford as part of the examinations of the period for the Masters of Arts in philosophy degree.[4]

On a less scholarly and more popular level, an English edition of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (no

known copies exist today) appeared in London in 1590 or 1591. Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), the satiric dramatist, pamphleteer, and possible collaborator with Shakespeare,[5] refers to this work "latelie translated into English, for the benefit of unlearned writers" in a preface to a 1591 edition of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.[6] A seventy line verse speech in Nashe's play *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (probably performed in 1592; published 1600) has been argued to come from a segment of this edition of Sextus, as well as a parallel passage in *Greene's Ghost Haunting Conycatchers* (1602), a work by another satiric pamphleteer, Samuel Rowlands (1570-1628).[7] Further evidence of the influence of this English Sextus upon Elizabethan thinkers may be found in the case made that the "Sceptick" (1651), a short summary of portions of *Outlines*, attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh (1527-1618), was derived from this same English edition as well.[8]

B. The Skeptical Writings of Cicero

Marcus Tullius Cicero's (106-43 B.C.) philosophical discussions of skepticism are primarily contained within two works, *De Academica* (46 B.C.) and *De Natura Deorum* (45 B.C.). In *De Academica*, Cicero presents contending

dogmatic and skeptical epistemological doctrines from the three historical phases of the Academy, founded near Athens by Plato in c. 387 B.C. In *De Natura Deorum*, he presents contending theological doctrines from the three prevailing philosophical schools of his own day, Epicurianism, stoicism, and Academicism.

Skepticism, the dominant philosophy of the Academy's second phase, and the one consistently championed by Clcero,[9] first arose in the school with its leader in the mid-third century B.C., Arcesilas (c. 316-241 B.C.). Academic skepticism in its most sophisticated form is associated with the school's head a century later, Carneades (c. 213-129 B.C.), who argued against the dogmatic claims of both the early Academic Platonists nd contemporary stoics that some knowledge of the true nat e of things was possible.

European commentary on and debate of Cicero's skeptical texts, (primarily *De Academica*) seems to begin with a 1536 Italian volume of annotations on the work. Numerous similar works followed, and by mid-sixteenth century, *De Academica* served as a primary source for widely discussed skeptical elements of religous debate, e.g., probabilism and suspension of judgement. In France, Omer Talon's *Academica* (Paris 1547, 1550), a polemical

study of Cicero's *De Academica*, proved instrumental in the Ramist liberalizing of French university curriculum.[10] Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* appeared in the upper forms of some Elizabethan grammar school curricula.[11]

C. Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Diogenes Laertius's discussions of skepticism in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (early 3rd century A.D.) are found in the sections devoted to Pyrrho (c. 360-270 B.C.) and his disciple Timon of Phlius (c. 320-230 B.C.), and to the early leaders of the new Academy, Arcesilas (c. 316-241 B.C.), Lacydes (c. 242-216 B.C.), Carneades (c. 213-129 B.C.), and Clitomachus (c. 186-110 B.C.).[12] Almost all of the skeptical philosophy presented by Laertius, including the various "modes of doubt" (epistemological considerations blocking the perception of absolute truth), is located in the Pyrrho entry, which is roughly equal in length to those of the other five skeptical philosophers combined.

The *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* became widely known and circulated in Europe after its translation into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari in the 1430's.[13] Like Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, it was also found in the forms of some

Elizabethan grammar school curricula.[14]

D. Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum...*

The controversial reputation in European sixteenth-century thought of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) proceeded from two of his works, *De occulta philosophia* (1533), a widely read compilation of mystical doctrines and philosophies, and *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum declamatio invectiva* (1530), a skeptical treatise upon the inadequacy of human reason in the arts and sciences, resulting from original sin.

Agrippa's popular association with the occult may be seen reflected in Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* (c.1588), when Faustus, about to strike his bargain with Mephistopholis, aspires to "be as cunning as Agrippa was,/ Whose shadows made all Europe honour him" (1.1.116-117).[15]

De incertitudine..., Agrippa's most widely circulated work, afforded his skeptical doctrines no less public attention. In 1531, the year after its first publication in Antwerp, and with second editions appearing in Paris and Cologne, Eustace Chapuys, Genevan ambassador to England, wrote to its author that the treatise was praised

by all learned men in London. A letter to Agrippa from Erasmus the same year similarly noted how the work had everyone talking about him.[16] This treatise stridently advocated a "bare Faithe" style of Christian fideism reminiscent, in part, of late medieval Ockhamist thinking which denied the competence of reason in matters of faith. While neither as systematic nor as exhaustive as the arguments of the classical skeptics, this work aroused much controversy in its broad skeptical attack upon rational theology and philosophy, sense based science, astrology, rhetoric, and humanist and scholastic learning.[17] Even before the Counter-Reformers appropriated the skeptical arguments of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, and before the popularity of Montaigne's essays, Agrippa brought to the sphere of public debate the subversive perspective of all-inclusive doubt.

Following its first English translation in 1569 by James Sanford (reprinted in 1575), almost fifty years after its initial appearance, Barnabe Rich made special mention of the sustained popularity of *De incertitudine...* in his *Allarme to England* (1578). He noted how it was studied by those socially ambitious courtiers who desired "to be curious in cavilling, propounding captious questions, therby to shew a singularitie of their

wisdomes...[and be] able to dispute of all things, but indeede to knowe nothing."[18] And Sir Philip Sidney, in his well-known *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), refers to *De incertitudine...*, along with Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, as an example of earnest wit: "Agrippa will be as merry in showing the vanity of science as Erasmus was in commending of folly."[19] Agrippa's impact upon the works of other Elizabethan writers has been noted as well, for example, Thomas Nashe.[20]

E. Fulke Greville's *A Treatie of Humane Learning*

Fulke Greville, first Baron Brooke (1554-1628), favored courtier of both Elizabeth I and James I, playwright, poet, and biographer of Sir Philip Sidney, may be counted among the group of lay intellectuals of Shakespeare's day who reflected in their own writing the skeptical thought found in the works of Sextus Empiricus and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. Much of Greville's long philosophical poem *A Treatie of Humane Learning* (c. 1605),[21] like Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum declamatio invectiva* (1530), catalogues means and areas of human knowledge and declares them fundamentally suspect based upon the theological premise

of man's Fall-debilitated reason.[22]

> But I would know how first man's minde did fall,
> How great it was, how little now it is, (33)[23]

> These Arts, moulds, workes can but express the sinne,
> Whence by man's follie, his fall did beginne. (47)

Greville is not noted by scholars for the originality of his ideas, but rather as a representative Calvinist thinker of his day. His skepticism, therefore, can be viewed as one reflection of intellectually popular Elizabethan thought. His *A Treatie...* may also be seen as an example, ironically, of how Calvinists, against whose theological positions Counter-Reformers like Gentian Hervet initially enlisted classical skepticism's arguments, themselves adapted the handy discursive tool of skepticism in their own critique of human vanity.

That the recognition or influence of the classical and Agrippan skeptical texts discussed in this chapter may be seen reflected in the writings of such diverse authors as Greville, Rich, Nashe, Rowlands, Raleigh, and Sidney would suggest a reasonable currency of skeptical ideas in

the Elizabethan intellectual milieu of Shakespeare's day. We shall examine next the appearance of such ideas in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Notes

[1] C. B. Schmitt's article "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism" in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1983) 225-251, more fully discusses the early resurfacing and circulation of these texts.

[2] Richard H. Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (1960; Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1979) is perhaps the best book in English on the general development of Renaissance skepticism. References to Sextus's leading impact appear in several places (1,19,33).

[3] Sextus's work appeared in an earlier but less generally well known defense of divine revelation. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, in *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium* (1520), used Sextus's skepticism to attack belief in Aristotle's sense based epistemology as compared to Scriptural certainty. Gentian Hervet's use of Pyrrhonian argument, enlisted to refute Calvinist claims to religious certainty based upon individual conviction, became part of a larger Counter-Reformation position known as "the sceptical defense" of the Catholic rule of faith. See Popkin (1-6,14-15).

[4] Charles B. Schmitt, in "Philosophy and Science in Sixteenth-Century Universities: Some Preliminary Comments" in *The Cultural Context Of Medieval Learning*, eds. John Emery Murdoch and Edith Dudley Sylla (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1975) 485-530, notes this translation and comments on what he sees as a "pressing concern with the sceptical question" at Oxford in the late sixteenth century (501).

[5] J. Dover Wilson has argued that Nashe is the author of several sections of the three *Henry VI* plays, and possibly collaborated with Shakespeare on an early version of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

[6] *The Works of Thomas Nashe* 8 Vols., ed. Ronald B. McKerrow (1904-1910; New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1965) III, 332-3.

[7] McKerrow argues this in *Nashe* III, 254-256; IV, 428-431; V, 120.

[8] S. E. Sprott, in "Ralegh's 'Sceptic' and the Elizabethan Translation of Sextus Empiricus," *Philological Quarterly* 42.2 (April, 1963): 166-175, makes this assertion based upon a comparative assessment of parallel instances of content, organization, and vocabulary found in the Nashe, Rowlands, and Raleigh works (170,174). Ernest A. Strathmann, in *Sir Walter Ralegh: A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism* (1951; New York: Octagon Books, 1973) does not agree with Sprott that there is sufficient evidence to tie the "Skeptick" to a preexisting English translation of *Outlines*. He does, however, acknowledge it as a translation of *Outlines*, and mentions the possibility that Raleigh may himself have been the author of the 1590-91 English Sextus (224,227-228). Strathmann, citing the skeptical arguments brought to bear upon religion in Raleigh's preface to his *History of the World* (1614), identifies Raleigh among those fideist Christians who used the Pyrrhonic system to defend the singular nature of faith-derived certainty by attacking worldly human learning (131-132).

[9] In his youth in Rome, Cicero studied under the heads of all three leading schools. At the age of twenty-seven, he withdrew from public life and again studied with the current heads of these schools in Athens and Rhodes. Although generally associated with ethical stoicism, Cicero consistently declared himself a follower of the New Academy (the Academy's second phase) by virtue of his acceptance of the tenet that man was incapable of reaching absolute or certain truth. Of Cicero's two Academic teachers, Cicero defended his earlier, Roman teacher Philo's more skeptical doctrines over his Athenian teacher (Philo's successor and leader of the Academy's third phase) Antiochus's return to dogmatism.

[10] See Charles B. Schmitt's *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of*

the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972) 58-59,81-83.

[11] See T. W. Baldwin's *William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* 2 Vols. (Urbana, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1944), I, 310; II, 590.

[12] The probable source for Laertius's information on Pyrrho and several other philosophers is believed to be an earlier *Lives* written by Antigonus of Carystus (c. 290-239 B.C.). See R. D. Hicks's translation of *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2 Vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), I, xxiii.

[13] See C. B. Schmitt's "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in modern Times," in Burnyeat's *The Skeptical Tradition*, 233.

[14] See T. W. Baldwin, Vol I, 540; Vol. II, 27. Neither of these citations, however, connects Shakespeare to this work.

[15] *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, ed. John D. Jump (1962; London: Methuen, 1968). Agrippa was credited by some as having the power to call up the "shadows," or spirits of the dead.

[16] Charles G. Nauert Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965) 108-109. Nauert's excellent study examines the development of Agrippa's work and its reputation during the sixteenth century.

[17] See Nauert, 106, and Richard H. Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 23.

[18] Rich's 1578 edition of *Allarme to England* (London: Henrie Middleton for C.B.), a call for military preparedness in peacetime England, is not paginated. This quotation is found in the third chapter, entitled "Of the time," in which he discusses, among other things, the shallowness of some courtiers. Rich cites Agrippa elsewhere in the work as well.

[19] *Critical Theory Since Plato* Revised edition, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992) 154.

[20] Merritt Lawlis, editor of *Elizabethan Prose Fiction* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1967), commenting on Nashe's praise for Agrippa in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), proposes *De incertitudine...* as an important source for specific elements in Nashe's work, and an inspiration for his satiric debunking spirit (484 f.n.).

[21] Geoffrey Bullough, editor of an edition of Greville's works, proposes that internal evidence suggests that the skeptical *A Treatie...* was possibly prompted by Francis Bacon's optimistic study of man's intellectual potential, *Advancement of Learning* (1603-5). See *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke* 2 Vols. (1938; New York: Oxford University Press, 1945) Vol. 1, Introduction, 54. Others, however, such as G. A. Wilkes, argue on other grounds that *A Treatie...* comes much later in Greville's career. See "The Sequence of the Writings of Fulke Greville," *Studies in Philology* lvi (1959): 489-503.

[22] Bullough cites Agrippa's *De incertitudine...* and the works of Sextus Empiricus as demonstrable sources of Greville's skepticism in *A Treatie...* (Vol. 1, Introduction, 56-7). Richard Waswo suggests the possible influence as well of Montaigne's skeptical treatise "An Apologie of Raymond Sebond," found in Florio's English translation, *Essayes* (1603). See *The Fatal Mirror: Themes and Techniques in the Poetry of Fulke Greville* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972) 15-17.

[23] *Works of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke* 4 Vols., ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1870; New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966) Vol. 2, 19. All parenthetical references for *A Treatie...* are to stanza numbers.

Part III - *Hamlet* and the Questions of Skepticism

A. *Hamlet* and the Works of Sextus Empiricus

Connections between Shakespeare and the writings of Sextus Empiricus, the greatest source of skeptical philosophy and ideas in the Renaissance, seem for the most part unrecognized by scholars,[1] and yet many elements of Sextus's work would appear to correspond with a range of questions, both central and peripheral, raised in *Hamlet*.

1. The Stages of Skeptical Thought

In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus describes skepticism as

> a mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements...with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of "unperturbedness" or quietude.[2]

The term "appearances" is defined by Sextus as "objects of sense perception" (9), and the elusiveness of any final or complete understanding of such perception is

skepticism's primary tenet. The interpretation of appearances is a recurrent issue in *Hamlet* (See the following section on Cicero for the "Question of Appearances"), introduced as a thematic key in the opening scene with the debate over the ghost,[3] and then reiterated in the Prince's first few lines in the play:

> Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
> For they are actions that a man might play;
> But I have within which passes show,
> These are but the trappings and the suits of woe.
> (1.2.76-86)

"Equipollence," defined by Sextus as "equality of probability" among conflicting interpretations of sense perceptions (7,9,111), proceeds from "the main basic principle of the Sceptic system...that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition" (9). The application of this principle and the resulting

equipollence provides a rough cognitive model for Hamlet's thinking in at least three dramatic cruxes of the play. The first example of counterposed propositions occurs when Hamlet rethinks the possible meaning of the ghost at the end of the second act. Against his earlier belief that "It is an honest ghost" (1.5.144), he poses the belief that the ghost "May be a devil" (2.2.595) manipulating appearances "to damn" him. The resulting equipollence forces the Prince to postpone his intended revenge and devise the climactic "Mousetrap" test of Claudius.

A second instance of such proposition balancing appears in the Prince's much analyzed soliloquy in which he contemplates death:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. To die- to sleep,
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consumation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream- ay, there's the rub:

> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause-
>
> (3.1.56-68)

Against the theory that death provides an end to suffering, Hamlet poses the theory that death precipitates ills "we know not of" (3.1.82). Although the Prince judges his own passivity in the face of these conflicting propositions in moral terms ("Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" [3.1.83]), the cognitive process involved, nevertheless, would seem a skeptical one.

A third example of counterposed propositions resulting in Hamlet's inaction or delay takes place when the Prince, in finding Claudius alone, is offered an unexpected opportunity to enact his revenge:

> Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying.
> And now I'll do't. [Draws his sword.]
> And so a goes to heaven;
> And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:
> A villain kills my father, and for that
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
>
> (3.3.72-78)

Against the proposition that with his sword he may now

punish the King, Hamlet poses the proposition that his sword may, on the contrary, benefit Claudius by sending him to heaven. Again, Hamlet, with a characteristic response of "this must be scanned," skeptically pairs contradictory interpretations, resulting in doubt and deferment. Such thought induced delay may also thus illuminate an irony in the Prince's initial promise to the ghost in Act One, that he will sweep to his revenge "with wings as swift/ As meditation" (1.5.29-30).

"Mental suspense" is explained by Sextus as "a state of mental rest owing to which we neither deny nor affirm anything" (9). It is in a state akin to this, it may be argued, that Hamlet calmly chooses to forego further speculation upon his suspicions of the proposed duel with Laertes in Act Five:

> Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my/ heart; but it is no matter.
>
> (5.2.208-9)

Hamlet's composure here (even though it is not, strictly speaking, in reaction to a sense perception, but to a premonition) contrasts pointedly with his earlier much more agitated thoughts of Claudius. Thus his skeptical responses would seem roughly to evolve along the lines of Sextus's proposed model.

Similarly, the state of "unperturbedness" or "quietude" discussed by Sextus as the skeptical philosopher's goal, (9,19,21) in some ways seems to correspond to the equanimity with which Hamlet freely walks into Claudius's final trap.[4] The Prince's calm acceptance of his own mortal suspicions,

> ...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. The readiness is all...
>
> (5.2.216-218)

possibly reflects the "moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable" that is developed, according to Sextus, by the mature skeptic (19). Hamlet's non-judgemental "readiness" at this point in the play may also be seen as similar to that of the skeptical philosopher who, because he "determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad, neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed" (19). Likewise, the Prince's brief adoption, in the last scene, of normal courtly manners towards the King and Laertes can be viewed as the mature skeptic's decision to live "a life comfortable to the customs of our country" (13) and "in accordance with the normal rules of life" (17).

While the Prince's acknowledgement of a Christian providence (5.2.215-216) may on the surface dissociate the character from a classically Pyrrhonian "quietude," nevertheless, coming as it does at the end of his play-long feverish intellectual activity, it yet aligns him with aspects of the Pyrrhonian-influenced anti-rational fideism to which Sextus's writings led those like Montaigne,[5] who in his essay "An Apologie of Raymond Sebond" argued

> The care to encrease in wisdome and knowledge was the first overthrow of man-kinde: It is the way whereby man hath headlong cast himselfe downe into eternalle damnation...
>
> It is not by our discourse or understanding, that we have received our religion, it is by a forreine authority, and commandement...
>
> ...the profession of the Pyrrhonians is ever to waver, to doubt and to enquire; never to be assured of anything,...Now this situation of their judgement...leads them unto their Ataraxie; which is the condition of a quiet and settled life, exempted from the agitations which we

> receive by the impressions of the opinion and knowledge we imagine to have of things;...[6]

2. The Questions of Day, Night, and Time

Correlations with more particular skeptical *topoi* in the *Outlines* may be found in *Hamlet* as well. For example, Polonius, in his introduction to the King and Queen of his theory of the Prince's madness, cites the following as unnecessary or self-evident arguments:

> My liege and madam , to expostulate
> What majesty should be , what duty is,
> Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
> Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
>
> (2.2.86-89)

Yet these philosophical issues devalued by the politically minded Polonius may bear some dramatic significance and make ironic use of a common skeptical *topos*. Just as many members of Shakespeare's audience might have noted with irony that Prince Hamlet *does* question what majesty should be and what duty is, the more astute members might also have remembered that the skeptics discussed quite seriously the definitions and attributes of day, night,

and time. In Sextus's discussion on the limits and liabilities of proofs derived by syllogistic reasoning, he repeatedly uses as examples arguments concerning the logical associations of day and night with light, dark, and each other:

> ...some things are unable to co-exist- take, for instance, if you like, day and night- both the conjunctive negation "Not day exists and night exists" and the disjunctive "Either day exists or night exists" might be considered to be valid. But they consider that their non-co-existence is established both by the negative of the conjunctive and by the disjunctive, arguing "Not day exists and night exists; but in fact night exists; day therefore exists not"; and "Either it is day or it is night; but in fact it is night; therefore it is not day," or "it is not night, therefore it is day." (281)[7]

The subject of time, also dismissed by Polonius, may link *Hamlet* indirectly to aspects of skeptical argumentation as well. For the Prince's shifting perceptions of time demonstrate the Pyrrhonist's subjective experience of things. An example may be found in Hamlet's ironic comment on his father's death to

Ophelia, reflecting his emotionally affected sense of time:

> Ham.: ...For look you how cheerfully my mother looks and my father died within two hours.
>
> Oph.: Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.
>
> Ham.: So long?...
>
> (3.2.124-127)

While Hamlet's view of time is, as his view of death, mostly a moral one, another skeptical element may be detected in his movement between contradictory perspectives. In Act One, the Prince associates time with an acute sense of personal ethical responsibility:

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right.
>
> (1.5.196-7)

But by Act Five, Hamlet's perception of time as an onerous taskmaster has disappeared, and he now identifies it with a Christian providence, the workings of which are neither comprehensible to him nor dependent upon his willed actions:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will-
>
> (5.2.10-11)

> There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow....
>
> (5.2.215-216)

Although Sextus attaches no moral dimension to his discussion of time, he does argue the inability to truly understand time by demonstrating the logical contradictions inherent in conventional ways of thinking or talking about it:

> For if we depend on appearances, time seems to be something, but if we depend on the arguments about it, it appears unreal. (419)

3. The Question of the Art of Living

The skeptical *topos* found in Hamlet's statement "there is nothing / either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-250) has been associated most with corresponding sentiments found in Montaigne.[8] Montaigne's own source for this however, *Outlines*, contains the more extensive discussion on ethical relativism, devoting two chapters (XXII and XXIII [441-453]) of the third book to the argument that "nothing is by nature either good or evil or indifferent" (447). This denial of natural good and evil

leads into the last chapters of *Outlines*, which take issue with the propositions that there exists any verifiable "art of living" (a self-evident set of social beliefs and values, effecting a happy life), that any virtues can be taught or learned, or that such virtues can indeed benefit their possessor. These questions would seem to have some special relevance for *Hamlet*, a play featuring a student prince who finds events, people, and himself all contradicting his idealized expectations, and a pedantic court counsellor whose counsel proves to be of dubious value.

In the chapter entitled "What is the so-called Art of Living?" Sextus presents a range of contradictory cultural mores to demonstrate the relativistic nature of social beliefs. Variations on several of these contradictions are reflected in *Hamlet* in the form of opposing opinions among different characters or in comments by Hamlet. For example, as different societies, according to Sextus, maintain opposing views on incest (465), so Hamlet condemns his mother's remarriage to her brother-in-law as "incestuous" (1.2.157), in contrast, it seems, to its general acceptance by the others at the Danish court.

Similarly, as Sextus points out the wide variety among different cultures of proper burial rites (477), the issue

of Ophelia's appropriate burial rites is raised in *Hamlet* by Laertes's objections to the abreviated ceremony allotted her interment ("What ceremony else?...What ceremony else?" [5.1.216-218]). As in the case of Hamlet's view of incest, Laertes's perspective contrasts with that of the others present who apparently accept the ceremony.

Sextus also notes that "Piracy...is with us illegal and criminal, but with many of the barbarians it is not disapproved" (469). Hamlet's warm regard for the pirates who have returned him to Denmark ("They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy...These good fellows will bring thee where I am" [4.6.18-19,24]) may be seen as drawing ironically upon this social contradiction.

Sextus mentions in the matter of blood sacrifice, how "...with most of us it is sinful to defile an alter of a god with human blood,...[but] some sacrifice a human victim to Cronos, just as the Scythians sacrifice strangers to Artemis; whereas we deem that holy places are defiled by the slaying of a man" (467). Correspondingly, Laertes offers "To cut his [Hamlet's] throat i' th' church" (4.7.125) in apparent contrast to Hamlet's reluctance to kill Claudius while at prayer.

Sextus describes the contrasting opinions held among different peoples as to what happens after death, and

whether death is to be judged good or bad (479). Correspondingly, Hamlet ponders this question and arrives at no definite conclusion either in his soliloquy on death,

> ...To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream- ay, there's the rub:
> (3.1.64-5)

Thus, as Sextus concludes, "It is plain...that there can be no art of living" (485), So Hamlet's world, too, dramatically demonstrates the existence of irreconcilable perspectives as well as irresolvable eschatological questions.

4. The Questions of Teaching and Learning

Sextus's polemical doubting of the teaching (493-495), learning (503-507), and benefits (507-511) of the art of living, while in itself perhaps more semantic and facile than persuasive, nevertheless may also be arguably reflected in *Hamlet* in the form of a motif suggesting the critical limits of received wisdom. Such a motif may be seen at work in the student Prince's disoriented response to the morally topsy-turvy world in which he suddenly

finds himself after his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. The appearance of the ghost additionally signals to the Prince that the parameters of this new world are physically as well as morally "unnatural" and beyond the scope of his earlier schooling. "There are more things in heaven and earth," he acknowledges, "...Than are dreamt of in...[Horatio's and, as a fellow student, presumably his own] philosophy" (1.5.174-175). This revelation provided by the ghost not only devalues but arguably supplants Hamlet's commonplace book learning of received knowledge about the world and people. For he proposes,

> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmix'd with baser matter.
>
> (1.5.98-104)

Thus the student Prince begins his education again, but the first (and it would seem only) lesson is a skeptical one, that appearances are ambiguous:

> My tables. Meet it is I set it down

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain-

(1.5.107-108)

Similarly, as the play progresses, the value of Hamlet's fundamental humanist tool of reasoning also diminishes in his estimation, as he repeatedly disparages his own deliberative activity:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

(3.1.83-85)

A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part
wisdom
And ever three parts coward-

(4.4.42-43)

...let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serve us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should
learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will-

(5.2.7-11)

The counsellor Polonius also may be seen as participating in this skeptical motif, as a parody of the

aged wise man. His self-proclaimed wisdom,

> And thus do we of wisdom and of reach
>
> ...find direction out.
>
> So by my former lecture and advice
>
> Shall you...
>
> (2.1.64-68)
>
> Hath there been such a time- I would fain know
>
> that-
>
> That I have positively said "Tis so',
>
> When it prov'd otherwise?
>
> (2.2.153-155)

would seem to beg judgement by the play as to the utility (if not validity) of his sagacity to those he counsels and to himself. As, however, Sextus declares in *Outlines* that "nothing is taught" (495,497), so the pedantic Polonius seems ironically to demonstrate this in the two advisory functions that he assumes in the play. First, his didactic theories provide his king with no insight into the apparent madness of the Prince. And second, the paternal counsel that he bestows upon both of his own children, essentially that of prudence, proves insufficient or irrelevant in the face of the tragic events that overtake them.

This virtue of prudence, "whereof the Stoics dream,"

states Sextus, and which he acknowledges "to be more convincing [as a basis for an art of living] than all the rest" (485) is featured by Sextus in his argument to show how such virtues are unteachable:

> The imprudent man does not grasp what is said or done by the prudent. And, as fails to grasp, he will not be taught by him, especially since, as we have said above, he cannot be taught by ocular evidence or by means of speech" (507)

Prudence is also the theme of Polonius's famous set piece, his precepts speech to Laertes:

> And these few precepts in thy memory
> Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
> Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.
> Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar;
> Those friends thou hast,and their adoption tried,
> Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
> But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
> Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd courage. Beware
> Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
> Bear't that th'opposed may beware of thee.
> Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;

> Take each man's censure, but reserve thy
> judgement.
> Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
> But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
> For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
> And they in France of the best rank and station
> Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
> Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
> For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
> And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
> This above all: to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow as the night the day
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.
> (1.3.58-80)

This long catalogue of standard homilies[9] would seem to have no noticeable impact upon Laertes's subsequent behavior or fate, and its significance in the play may, therefore, lie not in its much debated abstract sagacity, but precisely in its *absence* of dramatic effect.[10] For as a representative sample of conventional received knowledge, it joins in the dialectical structure of *Hamlet* with other ostensible sources of intelligence- empirical knowledge (from direct observation) and preternatural knowledge (from ghosts, omens, etc.), which initially

promise, but ultimately fail, to provide their recipients with sufficient ability to understand or control either events around them or their own destinies. Laertes hears Polonius's *prudentia* yet behaves imprudently, and then dies in the coils of circumstances beyond his ken. Polonius believes himself to be *most* prudent, yet also dies subject to the same circumstances and similarly ignorant.

Thus, in *Outlines*, while Sextus may use as the bases for his skeptical conclusions on pedagogy various sophistic arguments *not* offered in *Hamlet*, nevertheless, these same skeptical conclusions, that

> The so-called art of living is not imparted to anyone...by means of learning (507)

and that

> The art of living...brings no benefit to its possessors (511)

are reflected in the argument of Shakespeare's tragedy in the form of dramatic demonstrations of received wisdom's failure.

5. The Question of Evidence

How much of Sextus Empiricus's *Against the Dogmatists*

and *Against the Professors* was available in English to Elizabethans is unknown, although Gentien Hervet's 1569 Latin edition of all of Sextus's works became a well known intellectual resource for debate among the Counter-Reformers.[11] Nevertheless, as in the case of *Outlines*, a number of correspondences between skeptical arguments, *topoi*, and *exempla* in these two works and elements of *Hamlet* would seem to present themselves.

In Book One of *Against the Dogmatists*, Sextus presents a theory of probability ascribed to the Academic skeptic Carneades (c. 213-129 B.C.), based upon the principle of cumulative supporting evidence:

> ...no presentation is ever simple in form but, like links in a chain, one hangs from another...So when none of these presentations disturbs our faith by appearing false, but all with one accord appear true, our belief is the greater.[12] (95-97)

In a like manner, Polonius builds his case before Claudius and Gertrude for his theory of Hamlet's love-sickness, by adding to the fact of the Prince's love letter the corroborative evidence of a sequence of pathological stages presumably exhibited by Hamlet:

> And he, repelled- a short tale to make-

> Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
> Thence into a watch, thence into a weakness,
> Thence into a lightness, and, by this declension,
> Into the madness wherein now he raves.
>
> (2.2.146-150)

But just as Sextus goes on to refute the validity of Carneades's probability theory, so too do we see in *Hamlet* that despite whatever chain of medical evidence Polonius may use to support his own theory, it remains incorrect. In fact, in Book Two of *Against the Dogmatists*, Sextus also refers to the specific issue of indeterminacy in the diagnosis of medical symptoms, stating

> ...thus in medicine, for instance, the same appearances are signs of one thing to this man... but of another to that man...and of another to a third. (337)

In his discussion of problems of evidence related to the Stoic's criterion of truth (i.e., an "apprehensive presentation...[with] no obstacle [counter-evidence]"), Sextus includes from Greek mythology an example of an obstacle-contradicted presentation in Admetus's initial disbelief in the return of his wife Alcestis from the dead. Admetus's grounds for disbelief are the accepted notions that the dead never rise again and that "certain

daemons do rove about at times" (137). Hamlet finds himself in a corresponding evidential bind, doubting the nature of the ghost of his father on similar grounds.

6. The Questions of Speech and Rhetoric

In passages found in the first two books of *Against the Dogmatists*, Sextus rejects the belief that accuracy and truth reside in the act of speech:

> ...the means by which we indicate [existent things] is speech, and speech is not the real and existent things; therefore we do not indicate to our neighbors the existent things but speech, which is other than the existing realities. (45)

> ...we must allow ordinary speech to make use of inexact terms, as it does not seek after what is really true but what is supposed to be true. (305)

> ...the argument of those who place them [truth and falsehood] in speech is not satisfactory... the true does not reside in speech. (307)

Correspondingly, while serious questions about the use

of language are raised in many of Shakespeare's plays, the ambiguities of speech would seem no more repeatedly and variously emphasized than in *Hamlet*. From the ghost's initial ominous withholding of speech,

> Hor.: Stay, speak, speak, I charge thee speak.
>
> (Exit Ghost.)
>
> Mar.: 'Tis gone and will not answer.
>
> (1.1.54-55)

to Hamlet's final termination of speech,

> Ham.: ...the rest is silence. (Dies.)
>
> (5.2.363)

the speech act itself in this tragedy is very much associated with mysteries, puzzles, and deception. Characters repeatedly tell Hamlet that they do not understand what's being said to them as the Prince deliberately encodes his suspicions and accusations into a private language of innuendos and non sequiturs:

> Hor.: These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.
>
> (1.5.139)
>
> Oph.: What means your lordship?
>
> (3.1.104)
>
> King: I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet.
>
> (3.2.95)

Guil.: Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame and start not so wildly from my affair.

(3.2.300-301)

Ros.: I understand you not, my lord.

(4.3.21)

King: What does thou mean by this?

(4.3.29)

The Prince's puns and equivocations again and again demonstrate the slippery, contextual relativism of the meaning of words:

Pol.: ...What do you read, my lord?

Ham.: Words, words, words.

Pol.: What is the matter, my lord?

Ham.: Between who?

Pol.: I mean the matter you read, my lord.

(2.2.191-195)

Pol.: ...Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Ham.: Into my grave?

Pol.: ...Indeed, that's out of the air.

(2.2.206-207)

Ham.: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Oph.: No, my lord.

Ham.: I mean my head upon your lap.

Oph.: Ay, my lord.

Ham.: Do you think I mean country matters?

Oph.: I think nothing, my lord.

(3.2.110-116)

To underscore perhaps even further this motif of speech's refusal to confirm any one reality, Hamlet himself is given a dose of his own verbal mystification by the gravedigger, who engages the Prince in a game of puns and precise usage:

Ham.: ...Whose grave's this, sirrah?

Grav.: ... Mine, sir...

Ham.: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

Grav.: You lie out on't sir, and therefore 'tis not yours.
For my part, I do lie in't, yet it is mine...

Ham.: What man dost thou dig it for?

Grav.: For no man, sir.

Ham.: What women then?

Grav.: For none neither.

Ham.: Who is to be buried in't?

Grav.: One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead.

> Ham.: How absolute the knave is. We must speak by the card or equivocation will undo us. (5.1.115-134)

In *Against the Professors*, Sextus continues his attack upon dogmatic assumptions about language by skeptically challenging the efficacy and value of rhetoric. Citing Plato's disparagement of rhetoric as a thing "persuasive, not instructive"(189)[13] and "a base artifice rather than an art" (195), Sextus extends this position, proposing

> to show rhetoric an unreality as an art or science of speech, or productive of persuasion. (193-195)

and that

> in their [rhetoricians] desire to give out their well-rounded periods and concluding clauses... they preclude themselves from expounding things at once clearly and precisely. Therefore it does not belong to rhetoric to produce fine phrasing and good speaking. (217)

Rhetoric, claims Sextus, indeed has no purpose other than self-perpetuation:

> Rhetoric is nothing else than the discovery of appropriate words; accordingly, he who states this "end" is virtually stating that rhetoric is

the end of rhetoric. (229)

In *Hamlet*, Elizabethan humanist admiration for the classical rhetorical arts would seem the object of parody in the character of the court counsellor Polonius,[14] who provides at least two extended examples of highly stylized but unpersuasive and uninstructive oratory. The first, Polonius's famous precepts speech to Laertes, as discussed earlier, for all its rhetorical formality and arguable gravity, neither demonstrably persuades nor usefully instructs his son. Polonius's other expressly rhetorical speech, his preamble and expostulation on Hamlet's madness to the King and Queen in Act Two, provokes Gertrude's impatience with precisely its tedious embellishment:

> Pol.: My liege and madam, to expostulate
> What majesty should be, what duty is,
> Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
> Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
> Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
> And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,

I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it, for to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
But let that go.

Queen: More matter with less art.

Pol.: Madam, I swear I use no art at all.

(2.2.86-96)

In that Polonius's ensuing theory on Hamlet's illness is no less erroneous for its stylized presentation, and that the counsellor's rhetorical disclaimer of "tediousness" belies itself, so it may appear that both the value and utility of rhetoric is hereby comically doubted.[15] In fact, Sextus's remark in *Against the Professors* upon the superfluousness of rhetoric,

> ...we need no art to be persuaded that "now it is day... (221)

would seem almost ironically echoed in Polonius's superfluous preamble above.

Other fussy rhetorical business by Polonius in the play, such as his commentary to the King and Queen on the aesthetics of Hamlet's word choice in his love letter to Ophelia,

> Pol.: (Reads) *To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most/ beautified Ophelia*- That's

> an ill phrase, a vile phrase,/ 'beautified' is a vile phrase....
>
> (2.2.109-111)

and his intermittent critique of Hamlet's and the First Player's rendition of Aeneas's tale to Dido,

> 'Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion....This is too long....That's good.
>
> (2.2.462-500)

further suggest the dubious utility of such verbal refinement. A symbolic, if macabre, correspondence may even be observed to connect the act of Hamlet's killing, however accidentally, the "foolish prating" counsellor (3.4.217) and Sextus's report in *Against the Professors* of how lawmakers in Crete and Sparta punished or expelled rhetoricians (199).

7. The Question of Preternatural Knowledge

In *Against the Professors*, Sextus devotes a book of skeptical arguments to refute the hypothetical basis and practical utility of astrology:

> ...it is not reasonable that life is ordered according to the motions of the stars; or if it

> is reasonable, certainly it is beyond our comprehension. (365)

He cites a range of ambiguities inherent in determining precise times of inception and birth, and the simultaneity of celestial signs, both theoretically crucial to astrological calculation (345-359). He further argues the inconsistency of astrological prognostications, as demonstrated by the diversity of fates experienced by people born at the same time (361-363). And even if astrological predictions *were* to be found accurate, Sextus asserts,

> Their forecasts are useless in practice; for it is impossible to avert what happens by necessity, for that must take effect whether we like it or dislike it. (343)

While astrology by itself is not a central issue in *Hamlet*, it is referred to by Horatio in the play's first scene in his discussion of the ghost:

> 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.
> And even the like precurse of fear'd events,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen.
>
> (Enter Ghost.)
>
> (1.1.117-128)[16]

And it is linked with the "portentous figure" of the ghost (1.1.112) as both being sources of preternatural intelligence, a general issue which the play does seem to meaningfully explore.

In addition to the above sampling of necromancy (divination by communication with the spirits of the dead), Hamlet experiences, as well, psychomancy (divination by men's souls, affections, or wills: "O my prophetic soul!" [1.5.41]) and a kind of augury (divination by the behavior or entrails of birds: "We defy augury." [5.2.215]).[17] These superstitious forms of intelligence, along with aspects of other more rational Renaissance avenues of knowledge such as the "new" empiricism and humanist pedagogy are tested by the Prince and events in the play and are ultimately found lacking, if not in their ability to reveal the truth, then in the

uselessness of the truth they do reveal. This testing or questioning of all these means of intelligence in *Hamlet* would seem reflected in an extended motif of skeptical themes, arguments, *topoi*, and *exempla*, many of which, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, may be associated with, and possibly derived from the works of Sextus Empiricus, the storehouse of sixteenth-century skeptical thought.

B. *Hamlet* and the Skeptical Works of Cicero

While links between Shakespeare and certain works of Cicero have been noted and discussed,[18] his possible connections to Cicero's works on skepticism apparently have not. Yet evidence of corresponding skeptical elements in *Hamlet* and Cicero may be found. As with the other Renaissance skeptical works examined in this dissertation, such evidence primarily appears neither in matching lines of text nor in the demonstration of complete skeptical arguments. Rather it is in the number and repetition of similar skeptical sentiments, issues, and *topoi*, adapted to Shakespeare's own dramatic purposes.

In *De Academica* and *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero's skeptical discussions cover the three general areas of Greek philosophy after Aristotle: Logic, Physics, and Ethics, addressing three basic questions: (1) How do we know the world? (2) What is the nature of the world? (3) How are we to live in the world so as to achieve happiness? These questions are raised, albeit in no systematic way, in *Hamlet* as well.

1. The Question of Appearances

In the matter of the first question, on how we know the world, much of Cicero's skeptical argument in *De Academica* and portions of *De Natura Deorum* focus upon the problem of distinguishing between true and false appearances, and by extension, between very similar appearances. Cicero states:

> There are four heads of argument intended to prove that there is nothing that can be known, perceived or comprehended, which is the subject of all this debate: the first is that there is such a thing as a false presentation; the second, that a false presentation cannot be perceived; the third, that of presentations between which there is no difference it is impossible for some to be able to be perceived and others not; the fourth, that there is no true presentation originating from sensation with which there is not ranged another presentation that precisely corresponds to it and that cannot be perceived. (*Acad.* 571-573)[19]
>
> ...in respect of the mind's assent there is no difference between true presentations and false

ones. (*Acad.* 581-583)

> Our position is not that we hold that nothing is true, but that we assert that all true sensations are associated with false ones so closely resembling them that they contain no infallible mark to guide our judgement and assent. (*Nat.* 15)

In *Hamlet*, the careful scrutiny and mistrust of appearances by major and minor characters alike is emphasized repeatedly, with the imperative form of the verb "mark" (as in "observe") occurring more than in any other Shakespearean play.[20] The distinction between true and false appearances, or "presentations," is also a recurrent issue in *Hamlet*, and one to which the Prince passionately refers. He remarks at length upon the difference between the outward "trappings and suits of woe" and the inner experience of his grief (1.2.74-86), upon Claudius's ability to "smile, and smile, and be a villain" (1.5.108), and upon the player's skill at feigning unfelt passion (2.2.545-551). The Prince's obvious fascination with the players, and his instructions to them on how "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.21-22) would seem a variant reflection of this same issue, as well. Moreover, the alternation of Hamlet

between asserting his ability to distinguish between appearances ("I can tell a hawk from a handsaw" [2.2.375]) and then doubting it ("The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil, and the devil hath power/ T'assume a pleasing shape, yea and perhaps,/ Out of my weakness...Abuses me" [2.2.594-599]), mimics the dialectic format of thesis and counter-thesis used by Cicero.

With regard to this issue of appearances, Cicero makes repeated use of the term "verisimilitude" (Latin: *veri similia*), or the appearance of *probable* truth, upon consideration of which skeptics beginning with Carneades and including Cicero claimed to base their actions. A possible etymological allusion to this term may exist in *Hamlet* in the repeated expression "very like." The phrase, used only eight times in the entire Shakespearean canon, appears four times in *Hamlet* alone, the other instances occurring in four different plays.[21]

More specific examples of Shakespearean parallels with Cicero's work may also appear in the play. In a discussion in *De Academica* concerning the problem of discriminating between like presentations, we find cited a common skeptical *topos,* that of the "matter of twins":

> For suppose that the famous Servilius twins of old days did resemble each other as completely as

> they are said to have done: surely you do not think that they were actually identical? Out of doors they were not known apart, but at home they were; they were not by strangers, but they were by their own people. (*Acad.* 537-539)

This issue of sibling physical resemblances may, in part, be recast in *Hamlet* to frame questions of moral skepticism, expressed in the Prince's remarks upon his mother's inability to discriminate between two siblings, her current and prior husbands. Hamlet, in his first soliloquy, passionately contrasts his father to his uncle as "Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.140), and describes his uncle as "my father's brother - but no more like my father/ Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152-3). In the Queen's closet scene, he returns to this argument, enlisting the aid of miniature portraits to more vividly make the point to his mother:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentement of two brothers.
> See what a grace was seated on this brow,
> Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,...
> This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
> Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear

> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
>
> (3.4.53-65)

Yet Hamlet's strident insistence upon the manifest differences between the two kings conversely hints at the skeptical implications in his mother's hasty substitution of Claudius for his father- the relativity of moral perceptions, or, as Hamlet observes elsewhere, "there is nothing/ Either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-250).

Another seeming parallel with Cicero may be found in Hamlet and Polonius's discussion of cloud formations in Act Three. In *De Academica* the constantly changing aspects of natural phenomena are offered in argument to support the skeptics' proverbial withholding of absolute assent in matters of appearance:

> Yonder sea that now with the west wind rising looks purple, will look the same to our wise man, though at the same time he will not 'assent' to the sensation, because even to ourselves it looked blue just now and tomorrow it will look grey, and because now where the sun lights it up it whitens and shimmers and is unlike the part immediately adjoining, so that even if you are able to explain why this occurs, you nevertheless

> cannot maintain that the appearance that was presented to your eyes was true. (*Acad.* 603)

The Prince, in leading Polonius through the string of zoological similes,

> Ham.: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
>
> Pol.: By th'mass and 'tis- like a camel indeed.
>
> Ham.: Methinks it is like a weasel.
>
> Pol.: It is backed like a weasel.
>
> Ham.: Or like a whale.
>
> Pol.: Very like a whale.
>
> (3.2.367-373)

may not only be playing with the courtier's obsequiousness, but also with the above skeptical *topos* of unstable or equivocal physical appearances in nature and the mutability of opinion.[22]

Cicero offers another example of ambiguous physical appearances in citing the theory

> That the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and in short all things on high are stationary, and that nothing...is in motion except the earth, which by revolving...produces the same results as...if the earth were stationary and the heaven in motion. (Acad. 627)

Hamlet, in his letter to Ophelia, also notes the motion of the sun as questionable (compared to the certainty of his love),

> "Doubt that the sun doth move" (2.2.116).[23]

2. The Question of Philosophies of Knowledge

The questioning in *De Academica* and *De Natura Deorum* of whole systems of belief and bodies of knowledge would seem also to find echo in *Hamlet*. We read in Cicero of the limits of individual philosophies,

> "Our doctrines," you will say, "are the only true ones." If they are true, certainly they are the only true ones, for there cannot be several true systems disagreeing with one another..."I don't say that I myself know" says he, "but that the wise man knows." Excellent! no doubt you mean "knows the doctrines that are in your system." (*Acad.* 615)

and of the philosophically impenetrable nature of the physical world,

> All those things you talk about are hidden,... closely concealed and enfolded in thick clouds

> of darkness, so that no human intellect has a sufficiently powerful sight to be able to penetrate the heaven and get inside the earth. (*Acad.* 625)

When Hamlet informs Horatio at the end of Act One,

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy, (1.5.174-5)

whether he intends by this the circumscription of one or all philosophies, the Prince underscores the comprehensive limitations of intellectual systems.

3. The Question of Divination

Related to the epistemological question "how do we know the world?" is the issue of such means of knowledge as divination and augury. In *De Natura Deourum,* Cicero counters the Stoic belief that

> man's welfare is studied by divine providence. I refer of course to Divination...events are foreseen by augurers or revealed in oracles and prophesies, dreams and portents, a knowledge of

> which has often led to many things gratifying men's wishes (*Nat.* 279)

with the skeptical contradiction

> your school [stoic] also asserts that all events are fated...what good is it therefore to know that something is going to happen, or how does it help us to avoid it, when it certainly will happen? (*Nat.* 299)

Scattered through *Hamlet* are numerous supernatural portents and allusions to portents, and the Prince spends much of the play attempting to validate the portent of the ghost. His own rejection of "augury" in the play's final scene would seem to echo Cicero's practical devaluation of such knowledge:

> ...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. The readiness is all....
>
> (5.2.216-218)

4. The Question of Physical Nature

In the matter of Cicero's second basic philosophical issue (What is the nature of the world?), *De Academica* reviews differing classical theories of physical nature, such as Aristotle's concept of "quintessence" and the stoic's theory of infinitely mutable and divisible matter:

> Aristotle deemed that there existed a certain fifth sort of element, in a class by itself and unlike the four that I have mentioned above [earth, water, fire, and air], which was the source of the stars and of thinking minds. But they [the Stoics] hold that underlying all things is a substance called "matter,"... and that out of it all things have been formed and produced, so that this matter can...undergo every sort of transformation...and in fact even suffer dissolution...into its own parts, which are capable of infinite section and division. (*Acad.* 437-439)

Hamlet also questions specifically Aristotle's concept,

> What is this quintessence of dust?
>
> (2.2.308)

and later, through several irony laden examples, wonders at what appears to be the stoic's materialistic theory,

> A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed on that worm...
>
> (4.3.27-28)
>
> May not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung hole?
>
> (5.1.197-198)
>
> Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
>
> (5.1.206-207)[24]

In *De Natura Deorum* Cicero discusses the question of the purpose of the illuminated heavens,

> Why should God take a fancy to decorate the firmament with figures and illuminations,...are we to suppose that...the varied beauties which we see adorning earth and sky have afforded him pleasure?...Or were these beauties designed for the sake of men, as your [stoic] school usually

maintains? (*Nat.* 25)

Hamlet may be indirectly alluding to this same question in denying the application of this anthropocentric stoic principle to himself:

> and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. (2.2.297-303)

Similarly, Cicero's syllogistic examination of stoic comparisons between human and divine attributes,

> What disposition of the limbs, what cast of features, what shape or outline can be more beautiful than the human form? You Stoics...are want to portray the skill of the divine creator by enlarging on the beauty as well as the utility of design displayed in all parts of the human figure...since it is agreed that the gods are supremely happy, and no one can be happy

> without virtue, and virtue cannot exist without reason, and reason is only found in the human shape, it follows that the gods possess the form of man. (*Nat.* 49)

would seem to offer a flattering humanistic *topos* from which Hamlet finds himself affectively estranged:

> ...What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals- and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me-
>
> (2.2.303-309)

5. The Question of How to Live

In the matter of Cicero's third basic philosophical issue (How are we to live in the world?), the argument is

put forward in *De Academica* that while the wise man (the skeptic) may intellectually withhold judgement upon the absolute truth of appearances, or upon the resolution of abstract philosophical questions, yet he may still go about the practical matters of life by acting in accordance with the guidelines of probability:

> if a question be put to him [the wise man] about duty or about a number of other matters in which practice has made him an expert, he would not reply in the same way as he would if questioned as to whether the number of the stars is even or odd, and say that he did not know; for in things uncertain there is nothing probable, but in things where there is probability the wise man will not be at a loss either what to do or what to answer. (*Acad.* 609)

> ...there is no presentation of such a sort as to result in perception, but many that result in a judgement of probability... Thus the wise man will make use of whatever apparently probable presentation he encounters, if nothing presents

> itself that is contrary to that probability, and his whole plan of life will be charted out in this manner...the wise man follows many things probable, that he has not grasped nor perceived nor assented to but that possess verisimilitude;[25] (*Acad.* 595)

Correspondingly, Hamlet disregards his premonitions about the proposed duel with Laertes and proceeds by estimating, instead, only the probability of the outcome. When Horatio states that the Prince will lose, Hamlet disagrees:

> I do not think so. Since he went into France, I have/ been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds./ Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my/ heart; but it is no matter.
>
> (5.2.206-209)

Cicero also catalogues in *De Academica* contending ethical goals (the "summum bonum," or chief good to be pursued) proposed by the various classical schools. For example,

> They [members of the Eretrian school] placed

> their good wholly in the mind and in keenness of mental vision whereby the truth is discerned... Others have held that the end is pleasure; their founder was Aristippus... (*Acad.* 635-7)

> I am slipping into agreeing with Epicurus or else Aristippus; virtue calls me back, or rather plucks me back with her hand; she declares that those are the feelings of the beasts of the field, and she links the human being with god. (*Acad.* 647-9)

Hamlet ponders this issue of life's chief good in similar terms amid his self-recriminations in Act Four:

> ...What is a man
> if his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
> Sure he that made us with such large
> discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unus'd.
>
> (4.4.33-39)

The above associations between *Hamlet* and aspects of Cicero's skeptical writings may be seen as the more arguable, given the Prince's emphasized student status, the popularity of Cicero's works in Renaissance academic curricula, and the growing controversy surrounding the intellectual challenge of skeptical thought to traditional physical, social, and theological dogma. While these associations by themselves demonstrate no unified skeptical philosophy on Hamlet's part, the interrogative vein in which the Prince uses the parallels with Cicero suggests, nonetheless, the skeptic's recognition of conflicting perspectives and resulting irresolution.

C. *Hamlet* and Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Associations between Shakespeare's plays and Diogenes Laertius's work have not been notably argued. And yet fascinating parallels may be seen between details in the entries for some of Laertius's skeptical philosophers and elements of *Hamlet*. The bulk of the correspondences with Shakespeare's tragedy are to be found in the outline and *exempla* of skeptical doctrines in the Pyrrho entry. Some interesting biographical details from the lives of other skeptical philosophers, however, also would seem to touch upon aspects of the character of the Prince.

1. The Ten Modes of Doubt

The Pyrrhonian school traditionally offered ten modes or categories of doubt as the bases for logically witholding affirmation of any statement of absolute truth. A number of these modes presented in Laertius's Pyrrho entry (and also outlined and extensively discussed in chapters fourteen and fifteen of Book One of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*) would seem in various

ways demonstrated in *Hamlet*. For example, the second mode, cited by Laertius as "the natures and idiosyncrasies of men, "(II, 493)[26] posits that the preferences, judgements, and personal backgrounds influencing the thought of individuals so differ from one another as to make uncontested consensus on any question impossible. Laertius uses the relative perception of hot and cold as one illustration of this mode, reporting that "Demophon, Alexander's butler, used to get warm in the shade and shiver in the sun" (II, 493).

Several situations in Shakespeare's play, in which opinion on a question divides between characters of different perspectives and circumstances, may relate to this mode. For example, Hamlet may be playfully raising this issue in his manipulation of Osric's obsequious behavior, when he also discusses a question of hot and cold:

> Osric: ...it is very hot.
>
> Ham.: No, believe me, 'tis very cold,...
>
> Osric: It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.
>
> Ham.: But yet methinks it is very sultry,...
>
> Osric: Exceedingly, my lord, it is very sultry.
>
> (5.2.94-99)[27]

Such a connection to this mode in the above exchange may

be additionally argued given that perceptions of hot and cold are commonly involved in other skeptical *exempla* as well, figuring also in Laertius's descriptions of modes four, six, and eight (*Lives* II, 495, 497, 499).

On a more philosophical level, another example of this mode of perplexity may be found in Hamlet's banter with Rosencrantz:

> Ham.: Denmark is a prison.
>
> Ros.: Then is the world one.
>
> Ham.: A goodly one in which there are many confines,/ wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o'th'/ worst.
>
> Ros.: We think not so, my lord.
>
> Ham.: Why, then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing/ either good or bad but thinking makes it so.
>
> (2.2.243-250)

Hamlet's remark, "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," would seem a variation on a widely used skeptical commonplace[28] expressed also by Laertius:

> There is nothing good or bad by nature, for if there [is], it must be good or bad for all persons alike,...but there is no good or bad

which is such to all persons in common;

(II, 513)

A third illustration of this mode perhaps is to be found in the conflicting analyses of Claudius and Polonius upon viewing the issue of Hamlet and Ophelia's arranged encounter:

Claud.: Love? His affections do not that way tend,...

(3.1.164)

Pol.: ...But yet do I believe
The origins and commencement of his grief
Sprung from neglected love.

(3.1.178-180)

The fourth mode of doubt, cited by Laertius as "due to differences of condition and to changes in general; for instance, health, illness, sleep, waking, joy, sorrow, youth, old age, courage, fear, want, fullness, hate, love..." (II, 495), posits that different psychological states (among different individuals and even within the same individuals) block conclusive verification of given appearances. As with the second mode, situations in the play would seem to exemplify this condition.

Polonius, for example, refers to youth as a qualifying factor in the assessment of appearances when he

tells Ophelia,

> ...You speak like a green girl,
> Unsifted in such perilous circumstances
>
> (1.3.101-102)
>
> ...Think yourself a baby
> That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay
> Which are not sterling.
>
> (1.3.105-107)

and also refers to the qualifying nature of his own age upon the assessment of appearances when he says

> ...it is as proper to our age
> To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
> As it is common for the younger sort
> To lack discretion.
>
> (2.2.114-117)

Hamlet refers to the impact of his own psychological state upon his perceptions when he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

> ...I could be bounded in a nutshell and count
> myself a king of infinite space- were it not
> that I/ have bad dreams.
>
> (2.2.254-256)

And in the closet scene, the queen also refers to the effect of what she believes to be her son's illness upon

his perception:

> Ham.: Look where he [the ghost] goes even now
> out at the portal.
> Queen: This is the very coinage of your brain.
> This bodiless creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.
> (3.4.138-141)

Also with regard to this mode, Laertius cites as an example of a questionable appearance to *both* the sane and the insane the apparent motionlessness of the sun,

> Even to our view the sun has the appearance of standing still. (II, 495)

This specific issue of solar motion is raised as well by Cicero in *De Academica*[29] and alluded to in Hamlet's line "Doubt that the sun doth move" (2.2.116).

The fifth mode of doubt cited by Laertius is "customs, laws, belief in myths, compacts between nations and dogmatic assumptions. This class includes considerations with regard to things beautiful and ugly, true and false, good and bad..." (II, 495). It posits that variation in social conventions render the validity of all theological, moral, and aesthetic beliefs culturally relative. This mode would seem illustrated in Hamlet's remark to Horatio on how customary Danish revelry is morally censured by

Denmark's neighbors,

This heavy-headed revel east and west

Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations

(1.4.17-18)

This question of moral relativism may be seen more thematically imbedded in the play's central act of revenge to which its protagonist commits himself. Contradicting Hamlet's responsibility to murder Claudius as demanded by the moral conventions of the popular revenge-tragedy, is the Christian moral injunction, equally familiar to Shakespeare's audience, against such revenge.

The eighth mode of doubt cited by Laertius "is concerned with quantities and qualities" (II, 499), and posits that the qualities and effects of things are not intrinsic by nature, but relative to proportionate use. "Thus," Laertius says, "wine taken in moderation strengthens the body, but too much of it is weakening;"[30] (II, 499). This mode of quality by proportion may be seen transposed into moral terms in Claudius's commentary on the Prince's mourning. Contrasted against his own self-proclaimed "equal...weighing of delight and dole" (1.2.13), the King chides Hamlet for his *excessive* grief:

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature,

Hamlet,

To give these mourning duties to your father,
...But to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
(1.2.87-95)

The ninth mode of doubt cited by Laertius "has to do with perpetuity, strangeness, or rarity..." (II, 499) and posits that meanings and values are attributed to natural phenomena based upon their frequency of occurence. But as frequencies of the same phenomena vary from one location to another, so too do their attributed meanings.

This mode relating to frequency would seem most humorously illustrated by the grave-digger in his conversation with the Prince:

Ham.: ...Why was he [Hamlet] sent into England?
Grav.: Why, because a was mad. A shall recover his wits/ there. Or if a do not, 'tis no great matter there.
Ham.: Why?
Grav.: 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are/ as mad as he.
(5.1.145-150)

The tenth mode of doubt cited by Laertius

> rests on inter-relation, e.g., between light and heavy, strong and weak, greater and less, up and down. Thus that which is on the right is not so by nature, but is so understood in virtue of its position with respect to something else;... Similarly father and brother are relative terms, day is relative to the sun, and all things relative to our mind. (II, 499)

Laertius repeats this "father" example again later with

> a father in the absence of that in relation to which he is called a father, will not be a father. (II, 509)

This concept of relative and mutable definitions is possibly illustrated in Claudius's reference to Gertrude as "our sometime sister, now our queen" (1.2.8), and more pointedly in Hamlet's play on a Biblical phrase while verbally fencing with the king:

> Ham.: ...Farewell, dear mother.
>
> King: Thy loving father, Hamlet.
>
> Ham.: My mother. Father and mother is man and wife,/ man and wife is one flesh; so my mother....
>
> (4.3.52-54) [31]

Among an additional set of five skeptical modes of

doubt also outlined in the Pyrrho entry, Laertius presents as the second mode "extension *ad infinitum*," or the proverbial criterion of truth problem, where

> what is sought to be proved is [never] firmly established, because one thing furnishes the ground for belief in another, and so on *ad in finitum*. (II, 501)

A partial illustration of this process of posing and then doubting a sequence of validating criteria may be seen in the series of corroborative removes followed by Hamlet in his efforts to certify his belief in his uncle's guilt. First he feels that his own vague intuitions are confirmed by the testimony of the ghost ("O my prophetic soul" [1.5.41]). Then he begins to doubt the ghost's testimony:

> ...The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil, and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape,...
>
> (2.2.594-596)

He devises the "mousetrap" strategy to discover in Claudius's response to the play more certain "grounds" (2.2.599) by which to confirm the ghost:

> ...I'll observe his looks;
> I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,

I know my course.

(2.2.592-594)

But then Hamlet enlists Horatio to watch the king as well, in order to confirm his own observations:

...Give him [the king] heedful note;
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgements join
In censure of his seeming.

(3.2.84-87)

This kind of recurring doubt in Hamlet may be seen more generally characterized elsewhere in the Pyrrho entry:

We must not assume that what convinces us is actually true. For the same thing does not convince everyone, nor even the same people always. (II, 505)

and again:

The senses deceive, and reason says different things. Finally the apprehensive presentation is judged by the mind, and the mind itself changes in various ways. (II, 507)

2. Biographical Parallels

Laertius's review of the lives of the other notable skeptics contains little discussion of philosophy. Yet interesting parallels between certain biographical details and the character of Hamlet may be drawn. For example, Laertius reports Timon of Phlius (c. 320-230 B.C.), a disciple of Pyrrho, as having been a prolific poet and playwright (II, 521), and a successful collaborator in the dramas of others. Hamlet writes poetry (to Ophelia), and while not identified as a writer of plays, nevertheless lectures the actors on their craft (3.2.1-45) and does collaborate after a fashion in the play within a play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, by inserting "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.535) of his own into the text to provoke Claudius.

Arcesilas (c. 316-241 B.C.), founder of the skeptical New Academy, according to Laertius, enjoyed a reputation for word play and wit, being

> in his discourse fond of distinguishing the meaning of terms. He was satirical enough, and outspoken...mixing sound sense with wily cavils. (I, 411)

Laertius further expands upon this point in reporting that even Arcesilas's own students were "in terror of his pungent wit" (I, 415). Carneades (c. 213-129 B.C.), a subsequent leader of the New Academy, also is noted by Laertius for his linguistic skills:

> His talent for criticizing opponents was remarkable, and he was a formidable controversialist. (I, 439)

Hamlet's acerbic irony and emphasized facility with language, variously displayed throughout the play in conversations with Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric, would appear to constitute an arguable parallel to Arcesilas' and Carneades' celebrated verbal propensities and abilities.

Such connections in *Hamlet* to these biographical details and to the Pyrrhonian modes of doubt cataloged in Laertius's work are, perhaps, not all equally compelling, but need not be so to participate in the skeptical motif of the play. Rather it is the number and nature of these parallels and near parallels, added to those with the other skeptical works discussed in this study, that argue for their collective significance in the drama.

D. *Hamlet* and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum...*

Although little connection has been drawn between Agrippa and the plays of Shakespeare, we may find that two primary intersecting themes in Agrippa's work, (1) a supernatural universe in which fundamental truths are revealed only through supernatural experience and (2) the "fallen" condition of human reason, converge as well in *Hamlet*. Such a comparison with Agrippa's work may help accent aspects of theological skepticism in the play involving these epistemological issues.

The supernatural prospect in *Hamlet* is introduced to the audience immediately with the discussion and appearance of the ghost. The Prince's statement to his fellow student "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174-175) clearly locates this mysterious terrain (also, possibly, referred to as the "undiscover'd country" [3.1.79] upon which Hamlet later broods) outside the academic and rational curricular bounds of humanist schooling.[32]

1. The Question of Sin Impaired Reason

The predicament of sin impaired reason[33] would seem suggested in *Hamlet* through a linking of its motif of skeptical uncertainty, manifested throughout the play and derived from classical sources (as discussed in the previous sections of this study), and another motif variously presented in the tragedy, that of the Biblical Fall. That Denmark constitutes a "fallen" state in the Christian sense is implied by images associating the Biblical Fall with the death of Hamlet's father. The ghost relates how "the serpent" with "the power/ So to seduce" (1.5.39.44-45) that murdered him was Claudius, how the deed was done in the king's "orchard" (garden), and how Claudius both literally poisoned him and figuratively poisoned all of Denmark through the "ears" (the Serpent's locus of persuasion). The ghost's remark, "O Hamlet, what a falling off was there" (1.5.47), while ostensibly introducing a contrast between the two royal brothers, nevertheless, might also contain an allusion to the "fall" of man, as might Hamlet's earlier exclamation "Frailty, thy name is woman-" (1.2.146) generically identify Gertrude with Eve.

Accordingly, in Agrippa's sin darkened skeptical world

view,

> None can possess knowledge without the favoure of the serpente, whose doctrines are nothing but elusions, and the ende is alwaises naught...many for the desire of knowledge have loste their witte, neither is there any thinge more contrary to Christian faithe and religion, then knowledge...(183)[34]

It would seem, therfore, very much in keeping with this view that in Denmark, the fallen state in which the serpent wears the crown, the scholarly Prince Hamlet's "wit" would be "diseased" (3.2.313).

2. The Question of Fideism

Agrippa's Christian form of skepticism may help illuminate a connection between another theological element in *Hamlet* and the play's skeptical motif. For Agrippa, as later for Montaigne, the appropriate response to the irresolvable doubt pervading the affairs and debates of men is not the Classical state of Pyrrhonian ataraxia, but fideism, an unquestioning acceptance of Church doctrine.[35] In *De incertitudine...*, Agrippa proposes:

> to declare howe greate the blindenesse of men is, with so many Sciences and Artes,...always to erre from the knowledge of the Truethe: and howe greate a rashenesse, and presumptuous arrogancie it is, to preferre the schooles of Philosophers, before the Church of Christe: And to set before, and make equivalent, the opinions of men, with the Worde of God (unpaginated preface, Sanford translation)

> it [truth] cannot be perceived, with the speculations of any Science, nor with any straite judgement of the senses, nor with any argumentes of the Arte of Logike, nor with any evident proofe, with no Sillogismes of Demonstration, nor with any discourse of man's reason, but with Faithe Onely:...(4)

Similarly, Prince Hamlet, after a number of investigative interactions in the play in which he attempts both to conceal and discover various truths, would seem finally to accede to a kind of unquestioning Christian fideism in Act Five when he acknowledges God's providence: "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.215-216). His posture,

however, in some respects, is also ataraxia-like, in keeping with the other skeptical *topoi* in the play, in that it follows what might be characterized as fatigue-induced abstention from further intellectual investigations.[36]

3. The Question of Memory

Variations upon other areas of discussion in *De incertitudine...*, such as the subject of memory, also appear as prominent elements in *Hamlet*, and potentially a part of the tragedy's complex of skeptical *topoi*. Memory, as a source of mental distortion and instability, according to Agrippa,

> is oftentimes dulled with monstruonse Images, that oftentimes it causeth madnesse, and frensie in steede of profounde and sure memorie...(25)

The subject of memory, similarly associated very much with suffering and obsession, is raised in the play several times:

> Ham.:So excellent a king, that was to this
> Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
> That he might not beteem the winds of
> heaven/ Visit her face too roughly. Heaven

and earth,/ Must I remember?

(1.2.139-143)

Ghost: Adieu, adieu, Remember me.

Ham.: ...Remember thee?/ Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory hold a seat/ In this distracted globe. Remember thee?/ Yea, from the table of my memory/ I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,/ All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past/ That youth and observation copied there,/ And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain,...

(1.5.91-103)

Oph.: There's rosemary, that's for remembrance- pray/ you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for/ thoughts.

Laer.: A document in madness: thoughts and remem-/brance fitted.

(4.5.173-177)

4. The Question of the Whorish Art

Of perhaps particular interest with regard to *Hamlet*

is Agrippa's virulent attack upon what he perceived as the mentally debilitating "whoorish Arte" of sexual passion:

> The greatest menne also snared in the passions of these loves, and lusts, not seldome do little esteeme and waigh many worthy enterprises,... Caesar was retained by Cleopatra, and the same woman was the destruction of Antonie. The holy Scriptures doo declare, that for the fornication of the sonnes of Seth with the daughters of Caine well neare all mankinde was destroyed by the floude. (96)

Prince Hamlet, in his thoughts upon his mother, also associates lust with degraded reason:

> ...why, she-
> O, God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourn'd longer- married with my uncle,
> ...She married- O most wicked speed! To post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
> (1.2.149-157)

> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame

> When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn
> And reason panders will.
>
> (3.4.82-88)

Hamlet's diatribe delivered to Ophelia upon the mentally and morally destructive influence of women over men similarly echoes Agrippa:

> ...Get thee to a nun-
> nery, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry,
> marry a/ fool; for wise men know well enough
> what monsters/ you make of them. To a
> nunnery, go- ...You jig and amble, and you
> lisp, you nick-/ name God's creatures, and make
> your wontoness/ your ignorance. Go to, I'll
> no more on't, it hath made/ me mad.
>
> (3.1.138-149)[37]

Some of Agrippa's areas of skeptical concern in *De incertitudine...*, such as rhetoric and divination, parallel those of Sextus Empiricus[38] and thereby may help identify these same topics in *Hamlet* as conventional loci of skeptical debate in Shakespeare's day. In Agrippa's charge that rhetoric, as a source of Lutheran heresy, was

> nothing els, but an Arte of persuadinge and
> moving the affections, with subtle eloquence,

> with exquisite colouringe of wordes, and with a false likelihoode of the truth...(19-20)

we may find a Renaissance skeptical perspective upon Claudius's facile casuistry and Polonius's pompous word play. Or in Agrippa's detraction of astrology ("it denieth providence" [49]), divination, and augury,

> al these skills have no sound doctrine, nor are grounded upon any one certain reason, but searche out hidden thinges either by adventurous chaunce, or by the movinge of the minde, or by certaine apparaunt conjectures,...all these arts of divination doo openly shewe themselves, how much they differ from the truth: (50,55)

we may find some common Elizabethan understanding of Hamlet's experience with and final rejection of augury and omens.

Agrippa's work, if we accept such evidence as Barnabe Rich's observations upon its currency at court, may thus help demonstrate a context of popular Elizabethan skeptical discussion in which to see *Hamlet*'s cluster of skeptical issues and themes as participating. Shakespeare's dramatic handling of such intellectually topical subject matter, therefore, might well have provided the Oxford and Cambridge University audiences,

before whom (the First Quarto's title page tells us) *Hamlet* played, engaging theatrical fare indeed.

E. *Hamlet* and Fulke Greville's *A Treatie of Humane Learning*

Fulke Greville's skepticism in *A Treatie of Humane Learning* is perhaps best understood as a Calvinist critique of humanist pride in man's intellect.[39] In *Hamlet*, a related vein of skepticism may be noted in the Prince's repeated act of first praising man's rational powers and then puzzling at their failure to redeem or explain his fallen circumstances.

> ...What a piece of work is a man,
> how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
> ...in apprehension how like a god:
> the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals-
> and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of
> dust?
> (2.2.303-308)

> Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unus'd...I do not know
> Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and
> means

To do't.

(4.4.36-46)

Despite the second half of *A Treatie...*, which concedes in less compelling terms some limited benefit to learning, the work reveals perhaps more than any other poem of its time the depth and extent of the skepticism for which it speaks.[40] While not itself a source for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Greville's treatise provides an example of a contemporary work of theologically based skepticism sharing with the play skeptical themes commonly associated with Calvinist reformation debate.[41]

In a more condensed form than Agrippa's *De incertitudine...*, *A Treatie...* lists the flaws in man's sense, memory, and analytical capabilities, and cites the perceptual biases of age, illness, mental state, experience, etc. Unlike *De incertitudine*, however, which limits its discussion of original sin to its opening and closing, Greville's work continually repeats his premise of the Fall as source of man's mental decline, as he cites the futility of philosophy, medicine, grammar, music, mathematics, rhetoric, law, and government.

Againe, if man's fleshly organs rest
Under that curse, as out of doubt they doe;
If skie, sea, Earth, lye under it opprest,

As tainted with that taste of errors too;
In this mortalitie, this strange privation,
What knowledge stands but sense of declination?
(48)

A Treatie... thus correlates, perhaps more than Agrippa's work, with the extended motif in *Hamlet* of the Fall[42]

...[this world] 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
(1.2.135-137)

and of the Prince's much discussed mental decline.

A comic yoking of these motifs might be found, possibly, in Polonius's medical diagnosis of Hamlet's madness:

And he, repelled - a short tale to make-
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch. thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves
...If he love her not,
And be not from his reason fall'n thereon,
Let me be no assistant for a state,
(2.2.146-166)

As the audience knows, Polonius is wrong. Yet his fussy, pedagogical formularizing may indeed serve as an indirect allusion to and example of the general "fall" or "declension" of the "reason" of *all* men, representatively mouthed by a foolish wise man. Greville makes the same point in a pun about grammarians overly concerned with

> ...some small sentence which they patronize;
> As if our end liv'd not in reformation,
> But verbes, or nounes' true sense, or
> declination. (31)

1. The Question of the Fall of Language

Such preoccupation with words is part of a larger Calvinist skeptical issue that Greville pursues, fallen language and the pedagogical institutions and methods which perpetuate its debasement.[43]

> That of our Schooles it may be truley said,
> Which former times to Athens did upbraid:
>
> 'That many came first wise men to those Schooles;
> 'Then grew Philosophers, or Wisdome-mongers;
> 'Next Rhetoricians, and at last grew fooles.
> Nay it great honour were to this Booke-hunger,

If our Schools' dreams could make their scholars
see
What imperfections in our natures be. (36-37)

The wise reformers therefore of this Art [logic],
Must cut off termes, distinctions, axioms, lawes,
Such as depend either in whole or part,
Upon this stained sense of words or sawes:
Only admitting precepts of such kinde,
As without words may be conceiv'd in minde.

Rhetorike, to this a sister and a twinne,
Is grown a Siren in the formes of pleading,
'Captiving reason, with the painted skinne
'Of many words; with empty sounds misleading
'us to false ends, by these false forms' abuse,
'Bring never forth that truth whose name they
use. (107-108)

In *Hamlet*, the dialectical juxtaposition in adjacent scenes of Polonius's recitation of "precepts,"

And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character...
(1.3.58-80)

and Hamlet's rejection of "sawes,"

> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
>
> (1.5.98-101)

reflects the play's corresponding inquiry into the value of such bookishly recorded and transferred wisdom.

Similarly, the juxtaposition in adjacent scenes of the student Prince observed reading a book, "Queen: But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading" (2.2.168), and Ophelia displaying a book given her as a mere prop by Polonius,

> -Read on this book,
> That show of such exercise may color
> Your loneliness.
>
> (3.1.44-46)

might obliquely raise yet again this question of the use of books (as well as reemphasize the Prince's habitual academic bent).

More clearly, however, the play demonstrates how rhetoric is used as self-serving public manipulation by Claudius, and as contentless, vain formality by Polonius.[44]

Several commentators have argued that Greville's "Puritan scepticism" ascribed to the doctrine of original

sin radical consequences for secular knowledge never intended by Calvin.[45] But if Greville's encompassing skepticism was not shared by the average Elizabethan, it nevertheless may have been fashionable enough, or at least recognizable enough among the university theater audiences which saw *Hamlet* to serve as a viable thematic premise for the play. Indeed, the world of intellectual futility described in *A Treatie...* very much corresponds to the puzzling "sense of declination" expressed by Hamlet, a student abruptly pulled from an academic world of humanist philosophy and idealism into a real politik world of deceit, lust, and murder.

In this section of my study I have offered a broad range of sentiments, *topoi*, arguments, and questions found commonly in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and prominent classical and contemporary texts of Renaissance skepticism. If some of these correspondences appear less persuasively evident than others, my case for *Hamlet* as a theatrical expression of the skeptical thought of its day is, I believe, yet served by simply the large number of such correspondences and fainter associations. Here are the many specific ideas and allusions that reveal the play's direct participation in the intellectual dialogue among humanist, Reformation, and new science perspectives. And here, consequently, is

a play well suited to the university audiences for whom, in part, it may have been written.

In the next section of this study, we shall investigate how these same individual topical ideas and allusions may collectively collaborate in the overall structural and thematic design of the play.

Notes

[1] T. W. Baldwin's standard work on the scope of Shakespeare's probable academic background, *William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, makes no reference to Shakespeare's potential acquaintance with Sextus, nor does any other related work I can find.

[2] *Sextus Empiricus* 4 Vols., trans. R. G. Bury (1933; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), Vol. I (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*), 7. All page references are from this edition.

[3] Opening scenes in other Shakespeare plays also sometimes contain central thematic paradigms, for example, Iago's verbal manipulation of Roderigo at the outset of *Othello*.

[4] Moody E. Prior, in "The Thought of *Hamlet* and the Modern Temper," *ELH* 15.4 (Dec., 1948):261-285, notes in passing a resemblance between Hamlet's final resignation and the Pyrrhonist state of *ataraxia*, or quietude, but offers no additional discussion of parallels between Hamlet's deliberations in the play and any other specifics of Renaissance skeptical thought.

[5] See Popkin, 45-6,52-3,61,82.

[6] *Montaigne's Essays* 3 Vols., trans. John Florio (New York: Dutton, 1965) Vol. II, 199,201,204-5.

[7] Such definitions of day and night are used as examples in syllogistic arguments throughout Sextus's work. See Vol. II 131,207,277,287,291,355-359; Vol. III 301-305,321,329.

[8] See endnote 28 of this chapter.

[9] This cataloguing technique was a pedagogical device prescribed in many popular Elizabethan textbooks, such as Erasmus's influential *de Duplici Copia Verborum ac Rerum* (1512), with which, T. W. Baldwin argues in *William*

Shakspere's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke, Shakespeare was probably familiar (II,176-196). According to R. R. Bolgar, in *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (1954; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963), such exercises in "transmogrifying Greek and Latin literature into a series of notes...to produce a body of material which could be easily retained and repeated...furnish a key...to the whole field of classical learning" (274-5). Such an exercise in homelitic cataloguing by Polonius may thus constitute an allusion to just this pedagogical convention of humanist received wisdom.

[10] Samuel Johnson, in notes to his edition of *Hamlet* (in *The Plays of William Shakespeare* 2nd ed., [London: 1765] Vol. VIII), viewed Polonius's speech as sound and serious advice (183). By the late nineteenth century, however, Edward Dowden, in *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: H. S. King & Co., 1875), saw the speech as clearly platitudinous (141-142). In this century, G. L. Kittredge in notes to his edition of *Hamlet* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1939 [155]) and G. K. Hunter in "Isocrates' Precepts and Polonius' Character" (*Shakespeare Quarterly 8* [1957]:501-506) have returned to Johnson's position. Others, such as Josephine Waters Bennett, in "Characterization in Polonius' Advice to Laertes," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4 (1953):3-9, have judged the speech's sagacity to be indeterminable. Still others, such as Terance Hawkes, in *Shakespeare and the Reason: A Study of the Tragedies and the Problem Plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), have found the speech ironically multi-leveled, importing both good *and* questionable advice (48). More recent critics have tended to move away from the issue of sagacity, focusing rather on structural approaches, such as P. J. Aldus in *Mousetrap: Structure and Meaning in Hamlet* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977). Aldus perceives in Polonius's speech a parody of Claudius's earlier courtly speech to Hamlet (74). In "Polonius's Precepts and Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundreth Pointes of Good Husbandrie*," *Review of English Studies* 42.166 (1991):227-228), I have suggested that correspondences between Polonius's advice and portions of Tusser's work, a popular almanac written largely in doggeral verse, ironically imply the critical limitations

of such orderly common sense advice (appropriate only for an orderly common sense world) within the specific context of *Hamlet*, a tragedy so pointedly concerned with intractable spiritual, emotional, and philosophical perplexities.

[11] Popkin discusses this at length:

> Hervet, the secretary of the Cardinal of Lorraine...in his preface, boldly stated that in this treasury of doubts [the works of Sextus] was to be found an answer to the Calvinists...The avowed aim of Hervet, to employ Pyrrhonism to undermine the Calvinist theory, and then to advocate Catholicism on a fideistic basis, was to become the explicit or implicit view of many of the chief battlers against the Reformation...(68)
>
> They [the Counter-Reformers] could advocate their Catholicism on faith alone, while demolishing their enemies by engulfing them in sceptical difficulties. By allying themselves with the 'nouveaux Pyrrhoniens,' the Counter-Reformers could get their ammunition from the sceptics as well as a fideistic 'justification' for their own cause...They had accepted the claim of the Christian Pyrrhonists that scepticism is the way to God. (81)

[12] *Sextus Empiricus* Vol. II.

[13] *Sextus Empiricus* Vol. IV.

[14] Such an argument may be based on the fact that many scholars have proposed the character of Polonius to be, at least in part, a satire upon the Elizabethan courtier Lord Burghley (William Cecil, 1520-1598). Burghley was appointed chancellor of Cambridge University in 1559, was a prominent advocate of humanist scholarship, and served as chief advisor on Elizabeth I's privy council for almost forty years until his death. B. W. Beckingsale, in *Burghley: Tudor Statesman* 1520-1598 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), notes that Burghley was known for his rhetorical eloquence, seasoned with proverbs, adages,

and polymathic allusions (256-257). Other arguments for the modeling of Polonius on Lord Burghley include parallels between Burghley's relationship with his son and daughter, and Polonius's relationship with his children Laertes and Ophelia. See George Russell French's *Shakespeareana Genealogica* (London: Macmillan, 1869) 301-304.

[15] Shakespeare's tweaking of the rhetorician's beard would not be, of course, unique to his time. The question of rhetoric's fundamental nature and value was debated in Elizabethan England, often in connection with Reformation issues. Jonathan V. Crewe, in *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982) argues that the cultural impact of rhetoric in the sixteenth century induced "a profound irresolution about the nature of reality" (23), promoting various Puritan rationalist authors to strive for "a language of final order and ultimate significance" (21) to counter the duplicitous effects and abuses of rhetorical conventions upon English.

[16] Hamlet also makes passing reference to astrology immediately prior to his own encounter with the ghost: "Being Nature's livery or Fortune's star..." (1.4.32).

[17] Hamlet's rejection of augury comes as a response to his sense of foreboding ("Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my/ heart;" [5.2.208-209]), following his conversation with the courtier Osric, who delivers Claudius's proposal of a duel between the Prince and Laertes. The specifically ornithological allusion in the Prince's rejection of augury may appear more evident when we consider (1) the courtier Osric's name is given in Q2 (1604/5) as "Ostricke," a varient spelling of "ostrich," and (2) Osric is called a "chough" by Hamlet and a "lapwing" by Horatio, both birds associated with augural divination. Shakespeare makes the chough association explicit in *Macbeth*:

> Augures and understood relations have
> By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth The secret'st man of blood...
>
> (3.4.124-126)

Moreover, this pair of suspicious bird references connected to Osric joins a number of other bird references spread throughout *Hamlet*, explicitly and implicitly associated with signs and omens. Together, these references may be seen as constituting a kind of motif of augury in the play, suggesting one of the epistemological options to be tested by the Prince.

[18] T. W. Baldwin, in *William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, discusses Shakespeare's probable direct acquaintance with and use of Cicero's *Ad Herrenium*, *Topica*, *Tusculan Disputations*, and (if not direct, then) derivative knowledge of *De Officiis* (II 108,597,598,601).

[19] All quotations from Cicero are from *De Natura Deorum/ Academica* trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. Press, 1972). Oddities in the page references are due to the alternating Latin and English pages of the text.

[20] *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare*, ed. Marvin Spevack, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1973), s.v. "mark." Critic R. A. Foakes notes the difficulty with appearances as experienced generally by the play's characters:

> Everyone watches and spies, from the opening scene; but though the ghost is most clearly seen, though Claudius and Polonius spy, "seeing unseen," on Hamlet, though Reynaldo observes Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern study Hamlet's behavior, and Hamlet and Horatio rivet their eyes on Claudius, it is difficult to interpret what is seen.

See Foakes' "Character and Speech in *Hamlet*," *Hamlet*, eds. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (1963; New York: Schocken Books, 1966) 153.

[21] While the current Arden edition has dropped one of the two appearances of this phrase in line 1.2.236, both appear in the First Quarto and the First Folio. The other occurrences are in *The Tempest* (5.1.265), *Twelfth Night* (2.3.159), *Cymbeline* (2.4.36), and *Julius Caesar* (1.2.254). All citations in this dissertation from Shakespeare plays other than *Hamlet* are from *The Riverside*

Shakespeare, ed. Gwynne Blakemore Evans (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), unless otherwise noted.

[22] Philip Edwards, editor of the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), in his notes to Hamlet and Polonius's discussion of cloud shapes, also links it to a play-wide theme of perceptual and moral indeterminacy. He makes, however, no connection between this and Renaissance skepticism (168).

[23] Heliocentric models of the heavens began appearing in some almanacs by the beginning of the seventeenth century. It can be debated whether Hamlet is to be understood here (1) as referring to the sun's movement as a truism against which to measure the even *greater* certainty of his love, or (2) as referring to the Copernican controversy from which to set his love apart as an *enduring* certainty. The first reading would leave the irony of contending sixteenth-century astronomical theories for the audience alone to consider. I find the second reading, however, more in keeping with the Prince's characteristic complaint of diminishing certainties.

[24] That Hamlet repeatedly returns to this materialist perspective reflects not so much an affirmation by the Prince of stoic science as a continuation of his disillusionment with human vanity, facilitated by the skeptical convention of posing hypothetical cases.

[25] Cicero's defence of probability as the appropriate basis for action follows the tenets put forward by Carneades.

[26] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2 Vols., trans. R.D. Hicks (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925). All quotations are from this edition.

[27] This prompting of Osric seems to repeat Hamlet's earlier directing of an equally obsequious Polonius through a series of similies describing the shape of a cloud (3.2.367-373). In both cases, the Prince's manipulation of the courtiers may suggest, perhaps, not

only how dependent *some* opinion can be upon circumstance, but how dependent *all* opinion can be.

[28] Harold Jenkins, (in the Arden *Hamlet* [467]), cites Michel de Montaigne's essay "That the taste of goods or evils doth greatly depend on the opinion we have of them" (*Essayes*, trans. John Florio, [1603] I.40) as probably giving intellectual currency to this skeptical *topos* found in other works besides *Hamlet* (See M. P. Tilley's *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England* (1950; Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), M254. Yet this maxim may already have enjoyed some degree of intellectual currency based upon the skeptical works from which Montaigne himself drew, including not only Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, but also Cicero's *De Academica* and *De Natura Deorum*, and most importantly Sextus Empiricus's *Hypotyposes*, acknowledged by Montaigne as a primary source of much of his skeptical thought. For example, Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) in 1591 associated this *topos* with Sextus Empiricus in a preface to an edition of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, stating:

> our opinion (as Sextus Empiricus affirmeth) gives the name of good or ill to every thing. Out of whose works...a man might collect a whole booke of this argument...(Nashe III, 332-333)

It is extremely unfortunate that no copy of this 1591 English translation of Sextus is presently known to exist.

[29] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum/ Academica* trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972) 627. See endnote 23 of this chapter.

[30] Similar contradictory effects of alcohol are discussed by the Porter in *Macbeth*: "much drink...it makes him [lechery], and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and it disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to:" (2.3.31-34).

[31] Cf. Genesis ii.24; Mathew xix.5-6; Mark x.8.

[32] While editors generally accept as correct the *Hamlet* First and Second Quartos' wording here of "your philosophy" (and understand it to mean philosophy in

general), were the First Folio's wording of "our philosophy" given preference, the Prince's recognition of his own academic limitations would more meaningfully tie his university student status into the broader dialectic of ideas in the play about thought, action, innocence, and experience. Moreover, as Marlowe's Wittenbergian Faustus leaves his rationalistic and scholastic learning behind to mimic Agrippa and engage with the larger supernatural forces of the universe, might not Shakespeare have similarly linked Hamlet to Wittenberg to evoke this Faustian association with an abandoned or superseded academic perspective?

[33] The degree to which original sin contributed to the debilitation of human reason was a disputed issue amongst Renaissance theologians. While Calvinist and Lutheran assessments of the Fall's corruption of man's intellect generally exceeded that of the Catholics, both groups stopped short of ascribing to original sin the skeptical dead end argued by Agrippa, Montaigne, and, in England, Fulke Greville. See Paul H. Kocher's *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* (1953; New York: Octagon Books, 1969) 33-37,55-58.

[34] Henrie Cornelius Agrippa, *of the Vanitie and uncertaintie of Artes and Sciences*, trans. James Sanford (London: Henry Wykes, 1569). All citations are from this edition.

[35] See Popkin, 44,54,55. It is not, therefore, surprising to note that Agrippa is acknowledged as a source for some of Montaigne's own skeptical thinking. See Pierre Villey, *Les Sources et l'evolution des Essais de Montaigne* 2 Vols., 2nd edition (Paris: 1933), II, 166-170.

[36] On Hamlet's progress towards ataraxia, or quietude, see "1. The Stages of Skeptical Thought" in Part III, Section "A" of this study.

[37] It is perhaps no more than an interesting coincidence that Agrippa offers a version of the same ironic conceit that some editors of *Hamlet* have suggested is implied in the Prince's repetition here of the word "nunnery." The

OED includes in its definition of the term a 1593 euphemistic use in which it signifies a "brothel" (s.v. "nunnery[1]"). Agrippa, in exemplifying the extent of lust's power to corrupt, asserts (in jest?), "very many houses of Nunnes and Beguines be as it were private stewes of harlottes" (92).

[38] Agrippa's degree of familiarity with the works of classical skepticism is unclear. Popkin notes that Agrippa mentions Cicero and Diogenes Laertius, and speculates that some sections of Agrippa may possibly be based upon Sextus Empiricus (25). Nauert argues that Agrippa, not being able to draw directly from Sextus's works as they were not yet in print, developed his own skeptical observations from the increasing contradictions among the multiplying philosophies and schools of thought which characterized the sixteenth century (119,140-142). In *De incertitudine...*, Agrippa says only in passing that the "Academikes...saide nothinge might be affirmed," and that the "Pirronikes...affirmed nothinge" (5).

[39] C. S. Lewis, in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), argues the fashionableness among late Elizabethan courtier intellects of a stridently censorious Calvinism (43-44). And Joan Rees, in *Fulke Greville, Lorde Brooke, 1554-1628: A Critical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), assesses *A Treatie...* as a "working out of the situation which developed from the impact of Calvinism and Humanism upon each other" (193). Richard Waswo in *The Fatal Mirror* proposes that the Treatise reflects Greville's Calvinist moral beliefs supported "with a whole arsenal of current intellectual ammunition," borrowed in great part from "the philosophical skepticism much in vogue at the turn of the century" (13,15).

[40] Paul H. Kocher argues this in *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* (56).

[41] Scattered aspects of Greville's theological detraction of reason apparently appear in his dramatic works as well. Ivor Morris, in "The Tragic Vision of Fulke Greville," *Shakespeare Survey* XIV, ed. Allordyce Nicoll (Cambridge:

Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), links tragic perspectives extracted from the choruses of several of Greville's plays with themes in Shakespeare's tragedies, and uses as a prime example the liability of man's pride in reason as reflected in *Hamlet*. A redemption of sorts, Morris argues, is suggested in Greville's works only for those who "come to rely upon a will mightier than their own, and a reason above their own (which will perhaps bring them to see Providence in the fall of a sparrow)" (71). And such redemption "cannot take place, presumably, until a man is as filled with 'contempt for his own subtle brain and once devious ways' as the Providence-proclaiming Hamlet" (71).

[42] See "1. The Question of Sin Impaired Reason" in Part III, Section "D" of this study.

[43] Elaine Y. L. Ho, in "Fulke Greville's *Caelica* and the Calvinist Self," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 32.1 (Winter, 1992), 35-57, notes how this aspect of *A Treatie...* and similar sentiments in Greville's collection of poetry, *Caelica* (1633), reflect a pervasive Calvinist fear of rhetoric's betrayal of the soul (49-50).

[44] For more on *Hamlet*'s skeptical treatment of language, see "1. The Questions of Speech and Rhetoric" in Part III, Section "A" of this study.

[45] See Bullough, I, 62; and Kocher, 33,56,58.

Part IV - The Role of Skepticism in *Hamlet*

The abundance of skeptical *topoi* and *exempla* appearing in *Hamlet* does more than contribute merely intellectually provocative surface detail to the play. Indeed we may also see it as providing the more explicit flourishes of skeptical themes present in broad dialectic elements of action and ideas in the work. Scholars have noted dialectic aspects of structure in other Shakespeare plays in their ironic sequencing of contrasting action, setting, and dialogue, and in *Hamlet* in the patterned juxtaposition of cpposing philosophical perspectives.[1] Insufficient attention, however, has been given to certain dialectic movements in this play as they incorporate tenets of Renaissance skepticism. Such a movement compares and contrasts the character of Hamlet, with his evolving association with skeptical doubt, and the character of Polonius, the court counsellor, a figure with ties to conventional humanist beliefs and values.

A. Skeptical vs. Humanist Perspectives

1. The Court Counsellor Polonius: Humanist Figure and Skeptic's Foil

In the central action of the tragedy, Polonius is one of the four courtiers sent by Claudius against Hamlet, and killed by the Prince (directly or indirectly), crushed between the "mighty opposites" (5.2.62) of the royal family.[2] Yet in this play so much about the uses and limitations of reason and inquiry, Polonius the professional wise man (with, the third most spoken lines in one of Shakespeare's longest tragedies) may be seen as developing thematically into a second "opposite" for the skeptical Hamlet. While not "mighty" in his own particular abilities, the character's many associations with humanist traditions valorizing reason and education nevertheless emblematically, if ironically, dress him in a mantle of intellectual authority.

Some of the humanist aspects of Polonius, such as his stylized pedanticisms, rhetoric, and proud rationalism, I have already discussed at various points in this study. Also noted earlier is the possibility of

Shakespeare offering in Polonius a glancing caricature of Lord Burghley. Such an association with Burghley, appointed chancellor in 1559 of Cambridge, England's first academic center of humanism, and Elizabeth's chief advisor for almost forty years, may further invest the character with a distinctly humanist cachet, albeit (and significantly so) a parodic one.[3]

By identification with courtiers like Burghley, the dramatic character of Polonius may be seen as taking on broader connotative and thematic value by possibly evoking for Shakespeare's audience public perceptions of real humanist counsellors.[4]

Under Elizabeth I, humanist academic training helped many would-be courtiers to rise at court. Such scholar-advisors as Burghley, imbued with the authority of extensive classical educations and armed with didactic styles peppered with learned moral sayings, linked the court to the greatness of antiquity (at least rhetorically). They also served as a publicly acknowledged braintrust to the throne in helping to intellectually underwrite or legitimize the royal policies and decisions of a Tudor government of multiplying laws and shifting programs. Claudius's public declaration of Polonius's long standing value to

the state

> The head is not more native to the heart,
> The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than is the throne of Denmark to [Polonius]
>
> (1.2.47-49)

and private indulgence of the counsellor's theories about the cause of Hamlet's antic behavior indicate Polonius's Burghley-like status at Shakespeare's Danish court.[5]

Such an expanded consideration of Polonius as a parodic symbol of humanist intellectual authority and self-confidence allows us to see better how his ineffectiveness as learned advisor to his king and children may bear more dramatic weight than has generally been acknowledged.

While the ineffective advisor *topos* stretches back to classical Greek drama and is an ironic device used by Shakespeare in other plays, in *Hamlet* ineffectual advice would seem raised to a level of major theme. In this play abounding in the giving of useless, insincere, or unheeded advice, Polonius's persistent intellectual self-assurance as chief advisor assumes dialectic significance in relationship to Hamlet's evolving skepticism. For if Claudius, the moral head of Denmark,

proves to be a "bloody, bawdy villain" (2.2.576), Polonius, Denmark's ostensible humanist model and guarantor of rational order in the state, appears to Hamlet a "foolish prating knave" (3.4.217). He thereby may constitute a second major symbol of degenerative secular authority placed in thematic opposition to Hamlet and his skepticism.[6]

A possible dramatic indicator or plot correlative for this dialectic opposition may be suggested in Hamlet's antipathy towards Polonius, evident from their very first encounter on stage ("Ham.: These tedious old fools." [2.2.219]). As the Prince here and elsewhere uses the pompous counsellor as a target for his riddling and mocking wordplay, so may his overt antagonism help thematically identify Polonius as a parodic humanist foil for Hamlet's and the play's skeptical mockery of man's intellectual pretentions.

2. Hamlet and Polonius: Humanist Ties and Skeptical Breaks

While careful inspection of Polonius's characteristic speech and behavior may reveal his role to be something of a humanist stage convention, his

dialectic function as proposed above is not achieved in the play by his presence alone as a contrasting emblematic figure, Hamlet's epistemological opposite. Rather his full significance is incrementally established and dramatically enriched over the course of the play along two developing and thematically related lines. These are (1) the presentation of multiple correspondences between the student Hamlet and pedant Polonius, demonstrating their common receivership of Renaissance humanist traditions and values, and (2) Hamlet's repeated skeptical questioning of and final withdrawal from the counsellor's conventional humanist faith, as it fails to make sense for him of his subjective experience. Such humanist ties with Polonius, of course, ironically qualify the Prince's antipathy towards the old man, as well as towards his own skeptical difficulties.

Polonius's shared academic training with Hamlet is directly referred to by the Prince when he asks the counsellor prior to the performance of *The Mousetrap*, "My lord, you/ played once i' th' university, you say?" (3.2.97-98). Polonius thus becomes the fifth major character of the play identified with a university education. Additional, if indirect, evidence of the

Prince and counsellor's common intellectual orientation may be found in elements of the plot, and also in what one critic has referred to as "mirror-scenes," or scenic elements having little to do with the plot proper, but symbolically or ironically reflecting thematic questions of the play. Such scenic elements, when paired with others of related thematic import, help structure the dialectic progression of contrasting humanist and skeptical perspectives in *Hamlet*.[7]

As the Prince thus both reflects and doubts humanist conventions, indications of his divergence from the intellectual faith of Polonius take different and sometimes subtle forms. For example, Polonius's introduction of the players, with its neoclassical catalogue of dramatic genres and allusions to Seneca and Plautus (2.2.392-398), and his critique of Hamlet's Pyrrhus speech ("'Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion" [2.2.461-462]), indicate a textbook, if superficial, familiarity with Roman theatre and stage performance. So Hamlet's lecture to the actors on their craft two scenes later (3.2.1-45) reflects a knowledge of classical sources as well.[8] But it is also with a difference. At least one critic has noted that Hamlet's discourse on acting pointedly veers

away from the formal classical dramatic theory to which it alludes, asserting instead more realistic Elizabethan stage practice.[9]

Again, as Polonius plays the pedant with Laertes (1.3.58-80), Ophelia (1.3.105-135), Claudius and Gertrude (2.2.86-151), and in the initial players' scene mentioned above with Hamlet (until the Prince cuts him off), Hamlet plays the pedant with Polonius in their first verbal exchange. While, however, Polonius is deadly earnest in his manner and pedagogical intent while instructing his children on prudence and the King and Queen on love's madness, Hamlet deliberately subverts communication with the counsellor when making his slyly mocking pronouncements on honesty, the conception of daughters, and the matter of the "Words, words, words" that he reads. Instead, he takes issue with the truth in books, and demonstrates in his wordplay the ambiguities of language examined by the classical skeptic Sextus Empiricus in *Against the Dogmatists*, and condemned by the Puritan skeptic Fulke Greville in *A Treatie of Human Learning*.

Another aspect of Polonius's humanist orientation shared by Hamlet (again with an implied difference) may be seen within the counsellor's homelitic catalogue of

advice offered to Laertes just noted ("And these few precepts in thy memory/ Look thou character...." [1.3.58-80]). Arguably functioning as one of the thematic "mirror-scenes" mentioned above, this set piece of humanist pedagogy adds nothing to the plot but does posit for the dialectic investigation of the play the value of such forms of received wisdom.[10] Interest in this particular question among Shakespeare's audience might be linked to what recent scholarship has noted as a rise in pithy sententiae in sixteenth-century English rhetoric, and increased pedagogical and political faith placed in such language.[11]

This same humanist technique of learning is exhibited by the Prince only two scenes later when Hamlet promises the ghost to copy its commandment into "the table" of his memory where he has previously kept the "saws of books" (1.5.98-104). But Hamlet's additionally declared intent to erase all earlier "record,...saws...forms" impressed into his memory implies at the same time some questioning of the utility of such programatically culled and proverbially codified wisdom. Ironically, he records the new lesson taught by the ghost yet again in maxim form:

My Tables. Meet it is I set it down

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain-

(1.5.107-108)

Hamlet's emphasis on the importance of memory here raises the issue of memory's particular weaknesses and distortions as identified and discussed by Agrippa in *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*. Indeed, Hamlet's very act of calling so pointedly upon his *mind,* here and elsewhere in the play, to recognize, fix, and retain truth raises the more inclusive skeptical issue of the mind's intrinsic condition of inconstancy as discussed in the Pyrrho entry of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.

Critics have in the past noted, but not in the context I offer here, how Hamlet and Polonius, in their academic characteristics and in their highlighted investigative activities in the plot (hypothesizing, experimenting, interrogating, observing, and analyzing), mimic each other.[12] I would suggest that their conspicuous sharing of such characteristics and activities underscores their common intellectual orientation as educated Renaissance courtiers, and their belief that observation and reason yield up sufficient truth to manage human affairs. Just such a belief in the power of reason and will to shape events may be seen as

a basic thrust of the humanist enterprise in general.[13] It may be considered even more so, perhaps, in its manifestation in Renaissance England, where an expanding class of highly educated courtiers was, as noted earlier, expected to provide the secular expertise to manage Tudor England's burgeoning political and economic development.[14]

This kind of utilitarian intellectualism is displayed by Polonius in another "mirror-scene" (again, of no consequence to the plot) prominently placed at the start of Act Two (2.1.1-73), after the play's first major shift forward in stage time. Desirous to know of his son's activities in Paris, the counsellor scripts for his servant Reynaldo a fictional (if probable) account of Laertes's youthful "crimes" to be casually presented to what Parisians Reynaldo may find who know of him. Polonius predicts that Reynaldo's auditors will "close" with him in volunteering similar observations of Laertes's actual errant behavior and thus corroberate Polonius's suspicions about his son. The counsellor's self-flattering confidence in his methodology is quite clear as he tells Reynaldo:

> Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
> And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,

> With windlasses and with assays of bias,
> By indirections find directions out.
> So by my former lecture and advice
> Shall you my son.
>
> (2.1.63-68)

As no further mention is made in the play of this investigation into the behavior of Laertes in Paris, we may see this scene all the more as being included for thematic reasons. It identifies the counsellor with his practice of and faith in intelligence gathering, a kind of Baconian experimentalism, relying on theory, observation, and analysis.

This very same method of intelligence gathering is chosen by Hamlet in the following scene. Commanding himself to *think* ("About, my brains. Hum-"), he decides to have the players show the King a fictional dramatization of Claudius's suspected crime, expecting, like Polonius, to thereby elicit corroberating evidence for his assumption (2.2.584-594). Hamlet additionally directs Horatio to watch the King with him so as to corroberate even his own interpretation of Claudius's visible response to the doctored play (3.2.84-87). This again mimics the methodology of the counsellor, who in the immediately preceding scene proposes to hide himself

in the Queen's chamber to lend a corroberative ear to Gertrude's private sounding of Hamlet's antic disposition (3.1.184-187).[15]

3. Skepticism and Delay: The Prince in *The Mousetrap*

If the audience does not learn the results of Polonius's assay of truth about Laertes in Paris, it does learn the truth about Claudius- but *not* as a result of the Prince's elaborate *Mousetrap* test. For Claudius makes reference to the "heavy burden" of his "conscience" in a seemingly gratuitous aside to himself in the preceding scene (3.1.50-54). If, however, we look upon this revelatory aside as not gratuitous, but serving some dramatic purpose in its particular timing, we may better understand *The Mousetrap*'s function in the play. Why would Shakespeare ostensibly structure the central climax of this tragedy[16] around the discovery of the King's guilt only to let the truth prematurely slip out a scene early? Perhaps it is to prepare the audience to focus its attention with regard to *The Mousetrap*, not on what it will find out about Claudius, but rather upon what Hamlet will think and do about his much anticipated confirmation of the King's guilt.

For in Hamlet's response to the success of his own stratagem, we see a replay of a skeptical pattern of rationalized evasive action performed earlier by the Prince. When, in Act Two, Hamlet, in his self-recriminatory "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy (2.2.543-601) whips himself into a rage against Claudius- based upon his *belief* in the King's guilt- and appears to be rededicating himself to the swift taking of his revenge, he surprisingly and suddenly changes mental course. By skeptically balancing contradictory propositions about the ghost's veracity, he creates for himself the standard Pyrrhonian condition of "equipollence" described by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism,* and rationalizes the need for a test to determine if, indeed, there is reason enough to take revenge at all.

If, in fact, the mid-play climax of *Hamlet* is thus generated by a Pyrrhonian turn of thought by the Prince, the aftermath of this climax is highlighted by similar skeptical thinking on his part. After the King's guilt is revealed to Hamlet, he once more appears vehemently rededicated to the achievement of his revenge:

> ...Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day

Would quake to look on.

(3.3.381-383)

And in this mood he directly comes upon the solitary Claudius in apparent prayer. Yet again, Hamlet surprisingly (in the face of his preceding rage) and conspicuously instructs himself to stop and *think*:

Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying.
And now I'll do't. [Draws his sword.]
And so a goes to heaven:
And so am I reveng'd. *That would be scann'd:*

(3.3.74-75, the italics are mine.)

and then defers his revenge, basing this deferment upon an implicit Pyrrhonian balancing of another pair of hypotheticals- his revenge may or may not be fully realized by killing Claudius at prayer. And so to insure sending Claudius more certainly to hell, he decides that he must wait until he can catch the King in some act "That has no relish of salvation in't" (3.3.92). Thus the Prince is himself caught, in a way, in the rational methodology of the *The Mousetrap* he has set for Claudius- just as the King later shall be hoisted by the very petard he sets for Hamlet.[17]

Beyond its similarity in form to the earlier behavior of the Prince mentioned above, at least two

additional aspects of his rationalized inaction at this point help draw attention to Hamlet's thought process here. One is Hamlet's ironic misreading of appearances (the ambiguities of which Cicero expands upon in *De Academica* and *De Natura Deorum*) in his decision to put off killing Claudius. If he so firmly trusts in Claudius's abiding sinful nature, how much true repentence can he possibly believe he is witnessing in the kneeling King to interfere with the full brunt of his revenge? His misjudgement of appearances is quickly demonstrated when, upon Hamlet's withdrawing, the King admits to himself his inability to repent. Attention is called a second time to the questionable nature of the Prince's reasoning here when, in the following scene, Hamlet informs Gertrude of his prior awareness of Claudius's plans to send him immediately to England-precluding his chances of catching the King *in flagrante* in the foreseeable future. So if such skeptically influenced thinking only retards the Prince's progress towards his stated goal, what purpose *does* it serve for Hamlet? And why is it so highlighted in this play?

In scenes such as the above, in which Hamlet's considered decision making affects the course of the play, we may arguably observe an anxious desire on the

part of the Prince for a very high degree of control over events around him. The skeptical aspects of his thought processes, particularly the Pyrrhonian proposition balancing, would appear to serve this desire as an intellectual safe-guard against erroneous action. Such an intellectual mechanism, however, when used excessively, facilitates the substitution of mental action- anticipatory error hunting and strategizing- for literal direct action.[18] Hamlet's preference for just such *imagined* control over his stressful circumstances is dramatically implied in the play by its presentation of the Prince's love of the theatre and its craft, and in the placement at the center of this tragedy Hamlet's own rescripting of Claudius's crime in *The Mousetrap*.

While conducting this imagined (and as such, successful) engagement with his circumstances in his analyses and plans, Hamlet may thus temporarily avoid the contingent nature of 'real' action, and temporarily abate his admitted fears of such contingency ("Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," [3.1.83]). This fear of *not knowing enough* to control the future (and, as emphasized in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, to determine his own eschatological end) is Hamlet's skeptical counterpoint to the humanistically

utilitarian (if perversely applied) confidence of Polonius and Claudius.

The full significance of such skeptical anxiety in the dramatic working of the play is most illuminated by its Renaissance associations. Skepticism would seem to have been called into sixteenth-century intellectual currency as part of Counter-Reformers' attack upon belief in the individual's subjective ability to interpret Scripture correctly for the preservation of his or her soul.[19] Proving intellectually useful, however, as an all- purpose investigative and debating tool in an age of multiplying and often conflicting ideologies, contemporized skeptical arguments spread by the end of the century into more secular contexts. Expedited by writers such as Montaigne, such arguments expanded to question eventually the certainty of virtually *all* human beliefs and assumptions.

Thus Hamlet's skeptical perturbations and compounding mental preparations with regard to action may be seen as a dramatic acknowledgement of deeply disturbing Renaissance intellectual and theological issues and a response to them in contemporary intellectual and theological terms. Indeed, the Prince's doubts and musings provide in this way major

philosophical dimensions of the play.

Appreciating how, for Hamlet, perceptual and (resulting) theological error may jeopardize not only his life but his immortal soul (a consideration to which he alludes when first seeing the ghost [1.4.66-67]), helps us understand more fully the measure of anxiety behind his cry of "why me?" at the very end of Act One, in response to the task given him by the ghost:

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right.
>
> (1.5.196-7)

It also helps us to understand better his delay (while semi-satisfying his moral imperative to *do* something with *mental* activity) until he feels sufficiently certain of the bases for and *full* consequences of the killing of Claudius.

But if Hamlet's purpose in *The Mousetrap* is objectively and rationally to confirm the knowledge he requires to take his revenge, this same rational process of determining truth, together with his wariness of error, deceives him when the opportunity to kill Claudius discussed above immediately arises. Instead, as the ironic upshot of all his intellectual efforts and logical precautions, Hamlet, in complete blind error,

kills Polonius.

4. The Death of Polonius: The Skeptical Eclipse of the Humanist World View

Given Polonius's dialectic relationship to the Prince outlined earlier, as humanist foil and emblem, his murder may indeed constitute a fitting though little recognized thematic antecedent to Hamlet's so-called "sea-change" and the Prince's final resolution of conflicts with himself and with the King.

The perception of Polonius's exit from the play as an event of major thematic significance may prove more apparent when viewed in context with interpretations of corresponding departures of certain characters from other Shakespeare plays- specifically, Enobarbus from *Antony and Cleopatra* and the Fool from *King Lear*. The death of one and disappearance of the other of these two characters from their respective plays have, of course, both garnered much thematic commentary. That this has not occurred in the case of Polonius's death is due, I believe, to the critical neglect of the counsellor's full emblematic possibilities, and also to the failure of scholars to take notice of the following correlations

among Polonius and these other characters.

First, Enobarbus and the Fool serve, more directly and sympathetically perhaps, in functions nevertheless related to that of Polonius- in either a choral (the Fool), or a choral *and* advisory capacity (Enobarbus). And both of them prove, as does Polonius, conspicuously ineffective in their efforts to avert or mitigate disaster. Other characters may be found in Shakespeare's works who serve in this ironic way. At least one critic has aptly linked Polonius with Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida* and Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* as figures whose moral *sententiae* are cast in ambiguous light either because of the dubious wisdom or motives of the speakers, or because they "prove to be questions not statements when viewed in relationship to the action."[20]

Second, the deaths and disappearance of Polonius, Enobarbus, and the Fool, under dramatically charged circumstances, constitute the first departure from each play of a prominent character.

Third, these characters' departures occur at approximately the same place in each play. The Fool exits in the penultimate scene of Act Three in *King Lear*. Enobarbus closes the third act of *Antony and Cleopatra* with his decision to desert Antony, and is

dead shortly after. And Polonius is killed in the final scene of Act Three of *Hamlet*. All three exits follow hard upon the heels of the climactic action of their respective plays- Lear's confrontation with the storm, Antony's defeat at Actium, and Hamlet's "Mousetrap"- and thereby suggest deliberate positioning for some structural purpose.

That purpose would not, however, seem to be one of any significant contribution to the subsequent action in the plays, as Lear's madness, Antony's military failure, and Claudius's designs upon Hamlet's life are all inexorably under way before the exits of these characters. What function their departures *do* seem commonly to serve establishes the fourth correlation among the group (and a function hitherto overlooked in Polonius's case). They primarily provide thematic commentary, in the sense of the "mirror-scenes" discussed earlier, suggesting the following related interpretations for how the fates of Lear, Antony and Hamlet are to be understood.

Much has been written of how the Fool's rather mysterious departure from *King Lear* symbolically comments upon the dissolution of the King's final margin of sanity. It has been argued by critics that the Fool's

presence in the play may be seen as constituting a reference point of verbalized, if not enacted, common sense.[21] Whether, however, as one critic argues, the Fool's exit may be seen as figuratively signaling Lear's absorption of the Fool's worldly-wise perspective,[22] or as another critic proposes, as reflecting Lear's total transcendence of such a perspective,[23] it is the rare *Lear* commentator today who does not perceive Lear's post-Fool experience of insanity, delusion, and despair as occurring on a tragic plane pointedly beyond the Fool's rational one of common sense.

In the case of Enobarbus, it has long been understood that the death of this seasoned tactician and counsellor of pragmatic military advice helps identify (by contrast) the value system dramatically proffered in *Antony and Cleopatra*.[24] One critic, in fact, notes the parallel between the deaths of Enobarbus and Lear's Fool, stating, "It has been observed that the Fool in *King Lear* passes out of the play at the point where Lear enters a realm of experience that the Fool's mind and heart are not large enough to master. This also happens to Enobarbus."[25] In Enobarbus's death (apparently from the pangs of a guilty conscience after he abandons Antony), his worldly-wise priorities of pragmatic self-

preservation and all its attending logic are repudiated by the play, and so the audience better learns to honor Antony's final choice of impractical loyalty to Cleopatra.

Shakespeare's striking of Polonius from *Hamlet* signals in much the same way as do the two cases above, a fundamental reframing of the play's perspective, and marks, in this case, Hamlet's entrance into skeptical "realms of experience" beyond the play's carefully defined rational and worldly-wise dimensions of Polonius's "mind and heart." The murder of Polonius by Hamlet, apart from whatever significance it may have for the action proper, prefigures in a symbolic sense Hamlet's ultimate rejection or transcendence of his shared faith with Polonius in the effort, product, and utility of formal ratiocination, a faith parodically personified in the counsellor. The "petar" (3.4.209) by which Hamlet, as he lugs Polonius's body off the stage, envisions his enemies hoisting themselves, becomes in the case of the journeyman intellectual Polonius just this pursuit of presumably useful truths.[26]

Beyond this symbolic crux of Polonius's death, Hamlet begins to reconcile himself to the discontinuity between his rational grasp of things and the ultimately

mysterious workings of Providence and his own soul. Thus the death of the spiritually unprepared[27] though intellectually engaged Polonius contrapuntally helps to suggest for the audience (again, by contrast) the meanings of Hamlet's intellectually exhausted, but spiritually reconciled death.

5. The Skeptical Approach to Faith

And so skepticism serves its purpose for Hamlet. While the Prince never espouses a full or consistent Pyrrhonian philosophy denying *all* certainty (he *is* certain of some things), by play's end he does come to recognize the critical inadequacy of his habitual proposition balancing and precautionary hedging, and that neither his reason nor will can control the timing and nature of events around him. Even truth itself (in the form of objectively established facts) cannot sufficiently make clear to him, much less empower him to execute, what he believes to be divine will.

Hamlet's skeptical turning toward a form of Renaissance fideism seems first expressed when, in commenting on his experience at sea to Horatio, he acknowledges a guiding power at work in his affairs

apart from and greater than his own.

Rashly-

> And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should
> learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will-
>
> (5.2.6-11)[28]

Hamlet's skeptical retreat from presumptions of personal agency and sufficient knowledge continues in his second expressed recognition of divine supervision later in the same scene, in his remarks upon providence:

> There is special provi-/dence in the fall of a sparrow. 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. The readiness is all.
>
> (5.2.215-218)

This acknowledgement of providence is Hamlet's explanation to Horatio for his refusal to act on his own misgivings about the proposed contest with Laertes, and demonstrates the Prince's rejection of the anticipatory and deliberative posture he assumed at the start of the

play. His decision here rather to trust in the workings of divine will finally enables him to resign the crushing sense of individual responsibility he presumed thrust upon him by the ghost's injunction in Act One.[29] Recognizing that he cannot know enough to determine for himself the specifics of his providentially assigned role, he relinquishes further desire to write the script, as it were. Instead, he waits, psychologically wearied but unburdened in his skeptically induced, ataraxia-like state of "readiness," no longer to "sweep" to his revenge, but to *be swept* to it and his own death in the service of an inscrutable, divine will.[30]

Notes

[1] W. R. Elton, in *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1966), discusses the sequential irony of line and action found in juxtaposed scenes in *King Lear* (329-334). Norman Rabkin, in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), stresses the general dialectic nature of Shakespeare's dramaturgy in theatrically presenting pairs of opposing ideals or groups of ideals, and devotes several pages to illustrating this principle at work in *Hamlet* (1-13). And Rosalie L. Colie, in *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), touches upon some skeptical sources in her exploration of sixteenth-century intellectual traditions of paradoxy, mentioning some thematic aspects of intellectual contradiction reflected in *Hamlet* (488-495). Robert Grudin, in *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1979), connects structural elements of Shakespeare's plays with Renaissance philosophical traditions of contradictions and dichotomies.

[2] The character of Polonius has generally been portrayed on the stage for comic effect (with some textual justification) as a busybody and mildly Plautine senex figure, impeding Hamlet's access to Ophelia, and serving up lengthy discourses to reluctant or impatient listeners. Cornelia C. Coulter, in "The Plautine Tradition in Shakespeare," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 19 (1920):66-83, points out this association with Polonius (78).

Beginning with Samuel Johnson's sympathetic perception of Polonius as a dignified figure suffering the encrouchment of old age and the deterioration of his intellectual powers ("He knows that his mind was once strong, and knows not that it is become weak....he utters weighty sentences, and gives useful counsel." *The Plays of William Shakespeare* 2nd ed. [London: 1765] vol.8, 183), scholarly attention given the character has

for the most part focused upon the questions begged by the stage portrayal cited above. How seriously are we to take Polonius's role, and how worthy is he of the audience's sympathy? Conflicting internal cues present themselves. While Claudius compares the counsellor to the "heart" of Denmark (1.2.47) and Gertrude pities him as "a good old man" (4.1.12), Hamlet reviles him as a "foolish prating knave" (3.4.217). The unresolved issue of the relative empathetic and intellectual weight of Polonius is most tellingly reflected in the range of differing critical responses to his often anthologized "precepts" speech delivered to Laertes in Act One, scene three (See Part III, endnote 10 of this study). I submit that the character of the counsellor and the dramatic function of his principal speech reach their fullest significance upon a thematic level, in their contrapuntal relationships to skeptical perspectives in the play.

[3] Another distinguished Renaissance humanist courtier linked by some scholars with Polonius has been Grimaldus Goslicius of Poland (hence, goes one critic's argument, the source of Polonius's name) whose 1563 Latin work *The Counsellor* appeared in English translation in 1598.

[4] Mary Thomas Crane, in "'Video et Taceo': Elizabeth I and the Rhetoric of Counsel," *Studies in English Literature* 28.1 (Winter, 1988): 1-15, refers to Polonius as parodically portraying on stage the same highly conventionalized role of Renaissance court counsellor as actually presented by Lord Burghley (3).

[5] G. K. Hunter, in *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), discusses how humanist academic training led to court appointments (26-35). J. E. Neale discusses Elizabeth's use of her "Cambridge group" of inner circle ministers in *Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934) 22-3, 62. B. W. Beckingsale, in *Burghley: Tudor Statesman 1520-1598* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), points out Burghley's role as intellectual resource at Elizabeth's court (196-7), as does Richard Helgerson in *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the*

Literary System (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1983) 27,57. Beckingsale also provides an example of Elizabeth's Claudius-like praise for Burghley (191), as does A. S. Hume in *The Great Lord Burghley: A Study in Elizabethan Statecraft* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1906) 310.

[6] Northrop Frye, in *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (1967; Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), proposes that one of the three basic and frequently overlapping archtypal themes in Shakespeare's tragedies is the murder of the father, or order figure (17). As *Hamlet* begins, two fathers are already dead, setting their sons in fateful motion. In this context, rather than viewing Polonius as merely a third father figure who must wait three acts before he can redundantly fulfill his archtypal role, we may see his assimilation immediately into a variation on this theme as one of the play's three inadequate *substitute* father figures (the "impotent and bedrid" [1.1.29] uncle of young Fortinbras and Claudius being the other two) whose respective physical, moral, and intellectual infirmities all promote disorder.

[7] Hereward T. Price discusses such thematically reflective scenes in "Mirror-Scenes in Shakespeare," *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, eds. James G. McManaway, Giles E. Dawson, and Edwin E. Willoughby (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948) 101-113. Paul J. Aldus, in "Analogical Probability in Shakespeare's Plays," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 6.4 (1955): 397-414, develops the idea of the thematic interrelation of these scenes as a structural principle distinct from, though collaborative with, the action of the plot. Mark Rose, in *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), also discusses this, and ties the dramatic utility of such scenes to a characteristic quality of emblematic or correlative thinking among Elizabethan audiences (4-6).

[8] See Harold Jenkins' note to Hamlet's "mirror up to nature" (3.2.21-22) analogy in the Arden edition of *Hamlet*.

[9] See Robert Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978) 198-199.

[10] More overt indication of this questioning of Polonius and his precepts may possibly be inferred from the fact that in the First Quarto of *Hamlet* (1603) the counsellor is called not Polonius, but Corambis, a name said to be punningly derived from the well-known Elizabethan proverb *Crambe bis posito mors est*, or "Cabbage served up twice is death." Doris V. Falk, in "Proverbs and the Polonius Destiny," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18.1 (Winter, 1967): 23-36, suggests this proverbial source of the name (23-4), noting both Shakespeare's allusion to it in other plays and its commonplace use in varient form in classical works such as Juvenal's "Satire on Scholarship and Writers." While scholars have not resolved the question of *why* this name appears only in the First Quarto, simply the fact that it does suggests a telling Elizabethan perspective on the counsellor's significance in the play. For more on the thematic function of Polonius's precepts speech, see Part III, section A.4 of this study.

[11] Mary Thomas Crane discusses this in "Intret Cato: Authority and the Epigram in 16th Century England," *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Keifer Lewalski (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986) 158-186, and more extensively in her doctoral dissertation, "Proverbial and Aphoristic Sayings: Sources of Authority in the English Renaissance," diss., Harvard Univ., 1986.

[12] Paul J. Aldus, in *Mousetrap: Structure and Meaning in Hamlet* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977) refers to these repeated instances of Hamlet and Polonius's mutual mimicry as part of a larger thesis that Hamlet serves as a structurally unifying reflection of *all* of the other diversely drawn characters in the play (88).

[13] R. R. Bolgar, in *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries*, states this about humanist beliefs (301).

[14] R. Weiss, in *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century* (1941; Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) proposes that humanist neoclassical studies in England originated and developed along such utilitarian lines (181-183).

[15] This corroberative means of approaching the truth may indeed be thematically introduced at the start of the play when the sentinel Marcellus explains how Horatio is present in part to "approve...[the guards'] eyes" in the matter of the apparition they have seen (1.1.32).

[16] The centrality of *The Mousetrap* scene as the climax and crisis of the plot in *Hamlet* has been argued by J. Dover Wilson in *What Happens in Hamlet* (138-197).

[17] Indeed, this skeptical practice of contraposing propositions that impedes Hamlet here may be seen as a philosophical principle of, ironically, "mighty opposites" which constitutes the Prince's own particular petard. In a vein unrelated to skeptical epistemology, the idea that *The Mousetrap*, as a dramatic metaphor for the degraded human condition, implicitly "catches" or reflects *all* the consciences of the play, including Hamlet's, has been explored by Francis Fergusson in *The Idea of a Theatre* (1949; Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972) 122-124.

[18] This description in some ways may seem to resemble the well-known Coleridgean thesis of Hamlet's excessive imaginative faculty preoccupied with a more vivid inner reality abstracted from the world without. Coleridge, however, was discussing a psychological *type* in connection with a nineteenth-century Romantic model of genius craving after the sublime through imaginative recall. I am trying to show how Hamlet's expressed mental processes dramatically illustrate rather the skeptically facilitated intellectual consequences of a late sixteenth-century confrontation between aspects of a secular humanist ideology and intractable metaphysical questions.

[19] Although *Hamlet* does not address this issue of Scriptural exegesis as such, the subject is indeed directly alluded to in the play, in the Grave-digger's question, "What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand/ the Scripture?" (5.1.35-36).

[20] Alfred Harbage, *As They Liked It: An Essay on Shakespeare and Morality* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947) 109.

[21] Enid Welsford, in *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) says of *Lear*'s Fool: "his role has even more *intellectual* than emotional significance...[and] forms a vital part of the central tragic theme" (253-254).

[22] See Paul A. Jorgenson, *Lear's Self-Discovery* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1967) 111.

[23] See S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974) 90-92.

[24] Charles Bathurst, in his *Remarks on Shakespeare's Versification in Different Periods of His Life, and on the Like Points of Difference in Poetry Generally* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857) noted that the death of Enobarbus "after the manner of Shakespeare, is made to throw great light on the character of Antony" (131).

[25] See Julian Markels, *The Pillar of the World: Antony and Cleopatra in Shakespeare's Development* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968) 126.

[26] It is probably only a coincidence, but in Hamlet's cry "A rat!" (3.4.23), expressed at the point of stabbing Polonius, there may be found a partial pun upon the counsellor's investigative efforts. Editors generally gloss this exclamation by citing how, proverbially, noisome rats call attention to, and thereby endanger themselves. If, however, we recognize here the Latin verb form *arat*, or "he ploughs," and remember another proverbial expression, *litus arare* ("to

plough sand"), which means to labor in vain (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare [1968; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985] s.v. "aro[1]"), then Hamlet's veiled pun accurately describes, in a thematic sense, the unfortunate Polonius.

[27] Given that the ghost makes a point of attributing his tenure in purgatory to his spiritually unprepared state at the time of his death, that Hamlet explains his decision not to kill the apparently praying Claudius for related reasons moments before he *does* kill a surprised Polonius, that the Prince also consigns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to deaths with "not shriving-time allow'd" (5.2.47), that Ophelia's suspected suicide conspicuously deprives her of funeral rites of "peace-parted souls" (5.1.231), and that Hamlet declares in his "providence" statement to Horatio (5.2.215-220) his own preparedness for death, the thematic importance attached to this matter seems evident, and reflective of the eschatological perspective most important to the Prince. Polonius's arguably unprepared spiritual state at the moment of his death may possibly be meant to imply the spiritual dangers of his rationally circumscribed world view.

[28] Interestingly, Sextus Empiricus offers an anecdote about rashness as an analogy for how early skeptics discovered their means to peace of mind. Sextus reports that Apelles, court painter to Alexander the Great, once angrily flung a sponge at a painting after strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to achieve a certain effect. The sponge then, by accident, created the desired effect-just as early skeptics, in suspending frustrating irresolvable judgements, discovered, also by accident, the result to be their philosophical goal of quietude. (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 19-21). It should perhaps be noted, however, that "rashness" is not really presented in *Hamlet* as a higher means by which to collaborate in one's own destiny than "deep plots," considering that the Queen declares Hamlet's killing of Polonius a "rash and bloody deed" (3.4.27), and that the Prince calls Polonius's corpse a "rash, intriguing fool" (3.4.31). We therefore may perhaps more accurately see both Hamlet's

rashness *and* deliberative delay as examples of equally ignorant "rough-hewing."

[29] This may also suggest, in a more theologically allusive sense, a retreat from the struggle imposed by Calvinism upon the individual to discover by effort and will his or her own spiritual salvation.

[30] This question of personal agency and its eschatological consequences over which Hamlet broods would seem raised once again at the end of the play in comic form. In the conversation in Act Five between the clowns regarding the circumstances of Ophelia's death, the Grave-digger explains his understanding of culpability in acts of suicide:

> Here lies the water- good. Here/ stands the man- good. If the man go to the water/ and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes,/ mark you that. But if the water come to him and/ drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is/ not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.
>
> (5.1.15-20)

As Mark Rose points out in *Shakespearean Design*, this pseudo-definition of suicide is as inadequate in determining responsibility in the complex case of Ophelia's death as it is (looking forward to the end of the Fifth Act) in determining the extent of Hamlet's responsibility in his eventual killing of Claudius, or in his own demise. For, according to the clown's pronouncement, the Prince is neither strictly guilty nor strictly innocent of his own and the other deaths at play's end because he knowingly lets the "water," so to speak, come to him when he accepts the duel about which his intuition warns him (121). In a Similarly ambiguous vein, Hamlet may possibly be understood to poison himself deliberately by drinking from Claudius's goblet ("by Heaven I'll ha't." [5.2.348]) while already dying from Laertes' envenomed sword.

The thematic purpose in the above clownish discourse (a burlesque of legal arguments involved in a well-known suicide by drowning in Shakespeare's day [See Jenkins, 547]), may be to present us with, in an even

more debased and parodic form, a final example of the kind of cause and effect hunting upon which Polonius prides himself. Weighed now against the increasing skeptical perspectives in the play, this kind of reasoning may indeed seem reduced to the babble of clowns- such is its relevance to the irresolvable mysteries of providence.

Part V - Conclusion

It has been my purpose in this study to accomplish two tasks. The first has been to demonstrate the hitherto inadequately recognized use in *Hamlet* of Renaissance skeptical *topoi* and ideas by identifying a spectrum of correspondences between the play and well-known skeptical texts of Shakespeare's day. I have not pressed the narrower case for the playwright's direct use of any one text as a source or template for matter in the tragedy, nor do I feel such a case is needed. The number and range of such correspondences in *Hamlet* I believe argue a skeptical motif in the play reflective of a common vocabulary of Renaissance ideas in intellectual currency in late sixteenth-century London. My second task has been to demonstrate how such Renaissance perspectives of skepticism participate in *Hamlet*'s dramatic structure by framing philosophical and religious themes dialectically presented in the play, and by influencing aspects of the plot.

This study restricts itself to *Hamlet*'s associations and correspondences with the Elizabethan intellectual milieu in which the play arose. That is because *Hamlet*, upon which so much has already been

written, has yet to be appraised adequately as a dramatic artifact of its own time and about its own historical issues. As striking and informative as the Freudian insights of Stanley Cavell or the dramatic perspectivism of Graham Bradshaw may be in those authors' studies of skepticism in *Hamlet*, they do not substantively link the play's skeptical concerns to those of the audience for whose theatrical sensibilities *Hamlet* presumably was composed. I believe that the most comprehensive meanings, skeptical or otherwise, to be derived from this complex tragedy must eventually come from our careful reconstruction of such links between the play and its originally intended audience. Other scholarly approaches surely can benefit from such an historical regrounding of Shakespeare, and proceed possibly at some critical risk without it.

It is to be acknowledged, as recent scholars have argued, that our view today both of Shakespeare's dramas and their Elizabethan mileu may be unavoidably refracted to some degree by our own cultural biases and ideologies. Yet much basic and reasonably objective work may be done in the historical recontextualizing of plays such as *Hamlet* without serious concern that such refractive effects will invalidate our findings.

This basic work requires that we go back to the language of the play- not merely for the etymological or colloquial definitions of the words- but for the conventional *topoi*, rhetorical tropes, topical allusions, and connotative associations arguably present to various segments of Elizabethan audiences but indeed lost to us over time. Such close attention to the text yields such unexpected prospects of verbal and structural meaning in *Hamlet* as to make the play's language, so abstracted in sense today, and seemingly familiar, once again something profoundly rich and strange.

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