MANHOOD AND THE DUEL: ENACTING MASCULINITY IN HAMLET

By Jennifer Low

AS MANY CRITICS HAVE REMARKED, Hamlet is framed by the deeds of Fortinbras. In 1.1 Marcellus and Horatio discuss Denmark's preparations for the possibility of a Norwegian invasion; in 5.2 Fortinbras enters, flushed with his victory over the Poles, just in time to receive Hamlet's endorsement of his claim to the Danish throne. Not only does Fortinbras serve as a possible monitory double for Hamlet—a son whose father is killed and who knows how to respond—Fortinbras and his martial exploits also remind us of the public sphere that is excluded from this play. Despite the play's examination of the relation between theatricality, deceit, and public personae, much criticism has focused on psychological issues or addressed the play largely as a private and domestic tragedy. But although the focus of the play is young Hamlet's dilemma, the drama's time-frame matches that of Claudius's rule over Denmark, and during that time Hamlet as a potential threat is merely one of Claudius's concerns.

Hamlet is concerned with being, not seeming, with translating genuine feeling into activity that manifests that feeling. His mourning clothes in 1.1 publicly bespeak his determination not to play a public role—to stay out of the sun. His black attire urges the community not to attempt to include him. Hamlet wishes to grieve privately, believing that the private sphere is appropriate to a good son. But he soon learns that mourning is not enough: he must also take revenge. Such an act must necessarily have a public component, as he is a prince and the son of a king. To kill Claudius is to become involved in the political arena. Action, then, is equivalent to taking a part, both in the sense of being partisan and in the sense of acting publicly, under the eyes of others. The notion of taking a part makes Hamlet uneasy, however, particularly because such a part would involve behavior that could be divorced from true feeling. But in the course of the fencing exhibition, Hamlet discovers a means of performance acceptable to him. While fencing is a courtly pastime and a way of entertaining others, it also contains the potential for decisive action; when it is not an actual duel, fencing is always (at least theoretically) practice for such an encounter. Moreover, the duellist's determination to back his challenge with his
body offers Hamlet one solution to the problem of representing himself honestly. When the exhibition breaks out of its mimetic frame, Hamlet finds the opportunity apt for his revenge: this very public method of killing involves a ritual element that grants the deaths a stylized, sacrificial quality and appropriately solemnizes this drama of the royal family.3

Hamlet’s decision to act is slowed by the need to understand all the roles that have been assigned to him. Chief among these are man and son.4 Hamlet learns from the ghost that his role as avenger depends upon his identity as son:

\begin{quote}
Hamlet: Speak, I am bound to hear.
Ghost: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
Hamlet: What?
Ghost: I am thy father’s spirit. (1.5.7-9)
\end{quote}

The ghost’s assertion of their relationship assumes that the moral imperative of revenge is concomitant upon their blood connection. Contrast this view to Beatrice’s allusion to revenge in Much Ado: “It is a man’s office, but not yours” (4.1.267). She implies that her newly declared lover is too distant in relation to her traduced cousin to serve as Hero’s champion. In Hamlet’s case, however, the task is his. Yet the role of avenger is incompatible with the models of manhood described throughout. The “What a piece of work is man” speech (2.2.303-08) emphasizes rationality, the infinite potential inherent in man’s reason.6 This valorization of mental faculties seems incompatible with the ghost’s call to action and revenge. Insofar as the speech describes an ideal of mankind, it urges both restraint and a reverence for the godhead in man.

Later, Hamlet offers Gertrude a blazon in praise of her husband. Apparently similar to the earlier speech, it actually offers an alternative model of masculinity:

\begin{quote}
See what a grace was seated on this brow:
Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a [heaven-]kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed,
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man. (3.4.55-62)
\end{quote}

Again the speech emphasizes man’s godlike stature; it further describes King Hamlet’s physical presence as manhood embodied. Young Hamlet’s
words create the notion of masculinity through specific signs which, taken together, offer a pictorial, almost emblematic representation of virility. Significantly, in this blazon the eye is not primarily an organ of apprehension; instead, it enacts unspoken imperatives, shaping the responses of those on whom the king glances.

In contrast, Gertrude uses eyesight as a figure for psychological perception. Her son refers to her senses to describe as an error of synesthesia her failure to recognize his father's superiority: “Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all, / . . . Could not so mope” (3.4.78-81). Gertrude responds by turning inward, away from her physical senses to her inner vision: “Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul” (89). She conceives the recognition of her error as a visual apprehension of wrong. Her words suggest that the function of her eyes is to monitor her own spiritual well being; Hamlet Senior, on the other hand, must use his eyes in a gesture of command. The old king's ability to urge the behavior of others characterizes masculine dominance as a theatrical staging (and, incidentally, recalls early modern concerns about the power of the stage-player). His mien compels, not by demonstrating force but by implying his capacity to shift to action. Action thus proves inseparable from theatricality; young Hamlet eventually learns the lesson as he finds his opportunity to act in the context of a performance.

To combine private and public is, for Hamlet, both to unite “that within” with forms and shapes, as he says (1.2.82), and to join the role of son with that of prince. While the role of prince by itself could be that of the classic protagonist of revenge tragedy, Hamlet’s desire to follow his father’s model of masculinity makes him perceive such an enactment as shrill and theatrical. When Hamlet blazons his father, the reference to his stance “like the herald Mercury / New lighted on a [heaven-]kissing hill (3.4.59) recalls Quintilian’s assertion that action in oratory is “a discourse, and sometimes . . . a certain eloquence of the body” (2:340). When speech and action are in harmony, their combination creates a sense of authenticity, of truth in argument. A public role for Hamlet must both derive from inward feeling and offer an acceptable presentation of himself as his father’s heir.

Manhood figures largely in Hamlet’s recollection of the dead king. When Horatio greets Hamlet in act 1, he comforts the grieving prince with the remembrance, “I saw him once, ’a was a goodly king” (1.2.186). Hamlet replies, “’A was a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look
upon his like again” (187-88). Unlike Fortinbras, whose eulogy upon
Hamlet’s corpse is, “he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov’d
most royal” (5.2.397-98), Hamlet does not see his subject’s primary
virtue in his royalty but in his masculinity. Though Hamlet’s comment
refers in part to the inevitable masculinity of all men, including kings,
it also bespeaks with simplicity the nobility inherent in his conception
of what it means to be a man. As Howard Felperin says in discussing
the morality play as one of this tragedy’s antecedents, Hamlet manifests
“a troubled awareness . . . of the simultaneous resemblance and dis-
crepancy between the play and its older models that is increasingly
forced upon us as the action proceeds” (60). The player’s enactment of
revenge reproaches him because, unlike his father’s appearance, it is
an empty show. Hamlet wants to rant, yet feels he must not: he chides
himself for womanly words, for his need “like a whore [to] unpack my
heart with words, / And [to] fall a-cursing like a very drab” (2.2.585-
86). He wants to act but cannot do so until he has discovered his own
form of masculine decorum, his way of uniting private and public
identities.

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That the fencing match is significant should be evident from the fact
that it was a departure from the original story of Hamlet. Shakespeare’s
depiction of Hamlet (who is, in the original version by Saxo Grammaticus,
resolute and unhesitating®) is capped by the fencing scene. But there
is a distinction between duelling and fencing, and my use of the term
“duellist” differs somewhat from that of other critics who have applied
the term to Hamlet. S. P. Zitner argues that Hamlet seeks to attain “a
state of mind that proceeds from ethical contemplation, social aware-
ness, a quenching of passion, and . . . the disinterestedness that aban-
dons the private will to the will of God,” assuming that Hamlet follows
the precepts of the Renaissance fencing-master Vincentio Saviolo, whose
writings proscribed vengeful duels (Zitner 8; Saviolo 381). But Hamlet
is not a duellist in this sense. Far from attempting to kill in a moral
frame of mind, he does not even definitively plan to kill his stepfather
by means of the sword. He does not reject the treacherous stab in the
back because it is an ignoble act but because it punishes Claudio
ineffectively, permitting him (Hamlet assumes) to rise to Heaven purged
of his sins. What Hamlet seeks throughout the play is a way to perform
the part of a man according to his father’s model.
Such a mode is that of the duellist. It corresponds to Hamlet’s needs in several ways. First, the verbal challenge that precedes a proper duel pledges to prove through action what is uttered in speech; thus, it establishes a connection between word and meaning that destroys the seeming/being dichotomy. Second, the duel harks back to medieval trial ordeals, invoking both historical tradition and the attempt by civil law to involve a heavenly tribunal. The custom of the duel also bears strong overtones of courtliness and chivalry that enable young Hamlet to act publicly in a princely manner. Finally, within that courtly context, the duel embodies the notion of manhood, both through the correspondence of word and deed and through the implicit legitimization of vigilantism (and, by extension, individualism) as a means of achieving justice. Thus we should not be surprised at Hamlet’s avowal of his “continual practice” of fencing since Laertes’s departure for France. Later, when sport turns into violence, Hamlet’s enterprise in turning Claudius’s own tools against him demonstrates his ease in the role of swordsman and suggests the psychological rightness of this pastime for him.

To understand fully the significance of the contest for Hamlet, we must be aware of the history of the duel in England. In the 1580s and 1590s, Italian weaponry and customs reshaped the English combat. The lightness of the Italian rapier made it popular; ease and popularity altered the nature of its use. Having passed through two distinct state-sponsored forms, the single combat evolved into an extra-legal proceeding.

The alternative term for the duel—trial by combat—derived from the duel’s position in late medieval English law as a supplement to criminal trial and judgment. The practice was generally understood as a test in which God’s hand would intervene on the right side. Social historian Robert Bartlett clarifies its purpose: “The components, in the fifth century as in the thirteenth, are clear: the absence of other means of proof, divine judgment, single combat, a means of proof” (115). The duel was a part of due process, used to distinguish between two disputants when evidence could not determine the case. The ritual was a legal trial proceeding that combined investigation, judgment, and, if a combatant was killed outright, summary execution. The presence of onlookers included the community in the ritual and reinforced the performative aspect of the custom.

As English civil law developed, the judicial duel fell into disuse and another form of state-sanctioned single combat became popular: the joust. What we may call the extra-judicial duel almost certainly derived,
if not from the joust itself, then from the traditions of chivalry that initially structured that type of one-to-one combat (Billacois 5-6).

By the time of the Tudors, the increasing centralization of power in the monarch diminished the importance of the nobility. The extra-judicial duel, or the duel of honor, helped to reaffirm the status of the aristocrat. Engaging in duels was a way for a nobleman to assert his independence from the Crown’s authority, maintaining a right that had existed from the time when the nobility were essentially answerable to themselves alone (Billacois 29-30). Duels of honor fought over trivial remarks and casual insults demonstrated Italianate sprezzatura and enhanced one’s reputation in an era when the aristocrat’s role was increasingly unclear.

In the late sixteenth century, the English Masters of Defence developed the fencing match as commercial entertainment for another level of society. An organization that legitimated the professional status of fencing teachers, the Masters of Defence generated publicity for their art by requiring students to engage in public matches in order to rise in the ranks of the organization. Yet because the legitimacy of the organization itself depended on the whim of the monarch (James I gave them his royal warrant, Elizabeth did not), the art of fencing remained a somewhat shady enterprise. Even before the sixteenth century, fencers tended to congregate in the suburbs of London where, later, theaters would be built. Early fencing exhibitions were staged outdoors and in taverns, but when Burbage and other entrepreneurs began to finance the playhouses, these stages were used for fencing exhibitions as they were for dramas and the other forms of secular spectacle popular at that time.

When the duel is placed in the context of a theatrical production, that context interrogates the very structure of drama’s mimetic framework. Because all combat is itself a performance, the performative aspect of theatre is redundant in the enactment of the duel. Staged, the duel’s apparent authenticity does not depend on how successfully the actors represent a state of mind. While a staged combat is choreographed and its outcome is predetermined, it still has a reality lacking in more mimetic acts. The difference derives partly from the fact that words are extrinsic to the duel. As Cynthia Marshall says of the wrestling match in *As You Like It*,

[T]he firmest distinction between the “game” or “spectacle” of the wrestling match and the “drama” of the surrounding action will also be the most
obvious one: wrestling is an affair of bodies and not words. Le Beau's announcement of Charles's defeat—"He cannot speak" (1.2.208)—illustrates perfectly the established priority of deed over word, the capacity of pure spectacle or of violence ... to destroy language. The ludic interval, because it presents violent physical action of a sort that is anterior to language, would seem to possess greater "reality" than the surrounding text of As You Like It. (276-77)

Marshall's analysis reminds us that the duel was only one instance of the plentiful spectacular violence enacted during this period. Yet the wrestling match and the duel share that element of performativity, of ludic entertainment, that separates such spectacle from its surrounding context.

From inception to conclusion, such a physical contest, staged, functions as a small drama on its own. Self-contained, a small play-within-a-play, it presents two figures whose fight resolves their conflict. The fight itself is bounded, delimited by on-stage presentation. In a way, the conventions of dramatic structure force the duel (when it is part of a drama) to revert to its earlier form as trial by combat. If the challenge to the duel is a speech-act, the staged duel is a tacit judgment of the combatants.

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When Osric, the superfine courtier, asks Hamlet to take part in the contest in compliance with the King and Queen's wish, his account of the proposed fencing match stresses the formal nature of the exhibition. He emphasizes the courtliness of Laertes, hinting that the nature of any entertainment in which he takes part will be equally elegant:

Osric: Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes, believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society, and great showing; indeed, to speak sellingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry; for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see. (5.2.106-11)

Osric's euphonious description of the proposed combat and his account of Claudius's and Laertes's wager both call attention to the courtly character of this ludic competition. Osric puts forth the combat as a sport of gentility, a combat in spirit and in class closer to the tilt than to the duelling exhibitions of early modern England. Hamlet and Laertes both use unusual linguistic formality when they meet for the fencing competition. Their language suggests that the fencing will be well-
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governed, controlled, regulated by the ceremonies of courtesy. But the ceremony, of course, has been designed by Claudius, the devious, false monarch.

Although the challenge to this combat characterizes it as an entertainment, not a duel, one participant (Laertes) and one watcher (Claudius) are aware that the combat will be lethal. Their knowledge (in which we participate) restructures the nature of the match. Yet the fencing appears sportive and friendly at first. Hamlet actually asks Laertes to judge one of his hits. In the crucial bout, in which each wounds the other with the envenomed rapier, they appear at first to be in earnest; Claudius calls out, “Part them, they are incens’d” (5.2.302). But when Hamlet refutes this, he and Laertes face one another again. It is only when Gertrude cries out at the poison and Laertes admits his treachery that disorder breaks out. The match which had seemed a lawful entertainment reveals itself as a ploy of the monarch, created by the king’s design and yet unlawful, as perfidious as Claudius himself.

At this point, the device that Claudius has created for Hamlet’s death grows beyond his control. As Laertes falls, he confesses his wrongdoing toward Hamlet, thereby recanting the unspoken accusation of Hamlet as his father’s murderer. Moreover, his final words—“the King, the King’s to blame” (5.2.320)—offer a new accusation that may be proven in blood. Hamlet attacks his uncle with the envenomed sword and, as he forces Claudius to drink the poisoned wine, makes his own accusation: “[T]hou incestious, murd’rous, damned Dane,” he charges as he acts (5.2.325-26). The violence set in motion by the king becomes the swordsman’s prerogative.

The first overt violence occurs earlier—in the almost comical struggle between Hamlet and Laertes in Ophelia’s grave. That brawl occurs in a disjunctive setting that shows how unpromising combat is when it takes place without ceremony or due process. That combat is replayed in the fencing match set up by Claudius as a blind for murder. The display of competitive sport now carries its participants beyond the bounds set by the game. Throughout, Shakespeare exploits the dynamics of violence as he has already done in As You Like It. As Marshall says of the ludic match in that play, one character (here, Laertes) sees violence as the sign of sincerity, authentic feeling, while another character (Claudius) sees “the formal violence of [a contest] as open to manipulation” (268). But with the denouement Hamlet recognizes both possibilities: for him the violence is public display, a chance to write
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his story, as well as the embodiment of feeling. Claudius's manipulations enable him to die as an avenger and a true prince.

For the court onlookers in Hamlet, a performance that began as a game has exploded its boundaries, breaking out of ceremony and playfulness to become brutal, sly, and real. What the onlookers realize only at the bloody conclusion is that this apparent sport concealed more than one character's intention not to "act," but in fact, in deed, to do something decisive to alter his circumstances.

For us as audience, the fencing exhibition restructures the relationships within the larger play. As Jean Howard points out, the fencing places Hamlet "visually at the center, rather than the periphery of the action. Sword in hand, he is himself a public actor" (118). At that juncture, Hamlet's internal state (which has been the play's focus) and the public world of Denmark come together. Once Hamlet begins the match, he becomes an actor rather than an observer. Even though the combat is not a performance of his choosing, it offers him the opportunity to act, to do—in earnest as well as in the ludic context of the competition.

NOTES

1See, for example, Bevington 1071.

2It is convenient to cite Ernest Jones's Hamlet and Oedipus (1949) as the beginning of the body of psychoanalytic criticism of Hamlet. C. S. Lewis, however, names Schlegel (1815), Hazlitt (1815), Hallam (1837-39), Coleridge (1856), Sievers (1866), Raleigh (1907), and Clutton-Brock (1922) as critics who analyze Hamlet's psychology (cited in Lewis 140-41). Maus (1995) has recently addressed the issues of theatricality and deceit in her excellent discussion of "seeming" in Hamlet (1-5).

3James V. Holleran discusses this scene in "Maimed Funeral Rites in Hamlet." Holleran gives an interesting reading of the fencing exhibition as a distorted version of Holy Communion (87-93).

4Masculinity in Hamlet is far from being a stable construct, and the assumptions about its constitution vary from one character to another. As Judith Butler says, summarizing phenomenologist theories of gender,

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (270)
Butler's discussion of gender forms a large part of the theoretical underpinning of my analysis of duelling and masculinity in *Hamlet*.

5 All quotations of Shakespeare's works are from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

6 My discussion of rationality and revenge has been inflected by Gordon Braden's analysis of Stoicism in English Renaissance drama in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*.

7 For early modern texts that reveal anxiety about the powers of the stageplayer, see J. Northbrooke, Stephen Gosson, Anthony Munday, and Philip Stubbes, among others.

8 See Saxo Grammaticus.

9 For information about the change in swordfighting brought about by the introduction of the rapier to late sixteenth-century England, see Aylward 26-75, Brian Parker 58, and Sieveking 2:389-407, among others.

10 For two conflicting views on this point, see Lea 166 and Bartlett 68.

11 But according to Bartlett, "The idea of 'letting them fight it out' is at least as strong as the sentiment 'may the best man win' (even given that 'best' means 'with the best case')" (114).

12 As Foucault says of the watchers at executions, "they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and ... they must to a certain extent take part in it. The right to be witnesses was one they possessed and claimed" (58).

13 Arguing that the judicial duel was not a thing of the past in early modern England, Francois Billacois asserts that it continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (19). For an excellent discussion of jousting and chivalry, see Maurice Keen 83-7.

14 Lawrence Stone's groundbreaking study *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* was among the first to discuss this phenomenon in detail.

15 On the subject of trivial remarks as the pretext for single combats, see Parks 166-72. For the aristocrat's anxiety about his social role and the complex codes of behavior that resulted from this anxiety, see Whigham.

16 See Wickham 2.1.168 and 2.2.42 for a discussion of the various kinds of entertainment offered in Elizabethan and Jacobean London.

17 For discussion of Claudius's use of the performative fencing display as concealment for the assassination of Prince Hamlet, see Holleran 67 and Alexander 23 and 174-75.

18 I should acknowledge the debt that this point owes to Johan Huizinga.

**LITERATURE CITED**


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