IKE so much about Hamlet, Act V remains a critical problem. Has Hamlet, absent for three scenes previous, truly changed or not? Are his humor and playfulness symbolic of a new attitude or simply new accents in his habitual melancholy? On the conservative side of the question is the much-abused but perennially suggestive A. C. Bradley. Caught up in the idea that Hamlet is at this point in the hands of some ineluctable fate, Bradley denies “any material change in his general condition” outside of “a kind of sad or indifferent self-abandonment, as if he secretly despaired of forcing himself to action, and were ready to leave his duty to some other power than his own.” Conversely, Maynard Mack builds his whole study of Hamlet on the movement from outraged innocence to mature acceptance of reality, culminating in Act V in “the deportment of a man who has been ‘illuminated’ in the tragic sense . . . he has now learned, and accepted, the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed.” But Mack’s assertion of an Act V Hamlet who can face the world without self-recrimination is unfortunately briefly treated near the end of his essay. There is room for a more textual approach to the problem, so integral as it is to the final view of the hero.

A whole, of course, is made up of its parts. Bradley or Mack, or any other interpreters of Hamlet’s last act, must stand or fall on what the words of the hero tell us, on how in the last moments of self-dramatization he expresses how he has changed in the unseen interim. This brief essay will concentrate on a significant part of the prefuneral dialogue in Act V, scene one, the skull-meditation:

Ham. . . . Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.
Hor. What’s that, my lord?
Ham. Dost thou think Alexander looked o’ this fashion i’ the earth?
Hor. E’en so.
Ham. And smelt so? Pah!
Hor. E’en so.
Ham. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?
Hor. ’Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.
Ham. No, faith, not a jot, but to follow him thither with modesty enough and likelihood to lead it. As thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall to expell the winter's flaw!
But soft! But soft! Aside—here comes the King.⁴

Again, commentators differ as to the meaning of these lines, especially the Alexander-Caesar references. Harley Granville-Barker, audience in mind, likes to see Shakespeare's plays dramatically composed in a series of points of intensity followed by quiet interims; he assigns the Alexander meditation to the latter. For him, Hamlet pauses at this point "to spin fancies round Alexander's dust. But so men who have greatly suffered do turn away to wistful sentiment and idle fancy."⁵ Hamlet's grave meditation becomes a time for Elizabethan audiences, especially tired by the fifth act of Hamlet, to turn to their equivalent of popcorn or to stretch their legs before the emotionally draining onslaught of the finale. Mack also refers explicitly to the reflection on Alexander, which for him illustrates "the mystery of human limitation. The grotesque nature of man's little joys, his big ambitions."⁶ Hamlet's reflections thus center around mortality, a dominant theme in Mack's reading of the tragedy. Alexander the Great, though great, falls to dust even like Yorick, the Everyman, the clown.

But is this dialogue merely a pause in dramatic intensity? Is it merely another illustration of mortality? This essay will show that the Alexander-Julius Caesar references are more than rhetorical illustrations. The double classical allusion is an organic aside which reinforces Hamlet's development in this scene. It provides not only a dramatic lull but also the affirmation of a new Hamlet, who has put away grieving over his too, too solid flesh and its penchant for nonaction and who has gained maturity enough to demand action from himself that is commensurate with a realistic approach to his place in the world.

Shakespeare's joining of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar as objects for young Hamlet's contemplation is neither accidental nor original. The source for this joining is Plutarch, who parallels the life of Alexander with that of Caesar. Shakespeare had, of course, read both lives: the Caesar shows up in the Roman plays, the Alexander in Fluellen's laborious comparisons in Henry V which end: "If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well; for there is figures in all things" (Henry V, IV, vii. 34-35).

Besides the simple joining by Plutarch—for which he unfortunately states no clear reason—there is an added bond between the two lives. Plutarch reports a significant episode in the life of the young Caesar:

Another time also when he was in Spain, reading the history of Alex-

⁴ Hamlet, V. i. 216-40. All quotations from the plays will be from G. B. Harrison's editions. None of the texts treated presents any particularly important textual problems.
⁵ Mack, p. 523.
⁶ The two major compilers of Plutarch-Shakespeare parallels ignore the parallelism I draw here and later in this essay. This omission on their part is doubtless owing to their absorption in the Roman plays. Cf. the lack of reference to Hamlet in the text of Caesar's life given by C. F. Tucker Brooke in Shakespeare's Plutarch, I (London, 1909) and by T. J. B. Spencer in Shakespeare's Plutarch (Harmondsworth, 1964).
ander's acts, when he had read it he was sorrowful a good while after, and then burst out in weeping. His friends seeing that, marvelled what should be the cause of his sorrow. He answered them: "Do ye not think," said he, "that I have good cause to be heavy, when King Alexander, being no older than myself is now, had in old time won so many nations and countries; and that I hitherunto have done nothing worthy of myself?"  

There are of course many possible meanings different men can give to an historical personage like Alexander. Indeed, in Shakespeare's day there seems to have been a predilection for references to the Conqueror, as any index to the dramatists will frequently testify. In Shakespeare, in the instance given, Fluellen chooses simply to grant Alexander's reputation and to grace his King through comparison of minor similarities. Marlowe, on the contrary, is selective in his detail: in one place Alexander is something of a womanizer; in another, beloved of his "minion," Hephaestion. But of interest in this essay are Caesar's reflections as given in North's Plutarch. Caesar negatively sees his own life in terms of Alexander's. Alexander has achieved the conquest of the entire world; Caesar, at the same age, hardly anything. Alexander's very accomplishments reproach the young Roman. Note especially the structure of the incident as North's Plutarch relates it and as Shakespeare read it: a young man who has done comparatively little contemplates another youth who in the same short time given has accomplished much. The contemplation further leads to a self-recrimination on the part of the less active youth.

II

In two soliloquies of self-recrimination, Hamlet parallels Caesar's grief over a lack of accomplishment. Moreover, the structures of the occasions for both soliloquies are similar to one another and to the prime analogue of the Caesar episode: the accomplishments of a young hero are contemplated and he who contemplates is subsequently saddened, caught as he is in his guilt at not having accomplished as much. Thus in II. ii. after the First Player's speech, Hamlet asks himself,

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? . . .

(II. 585-88)

Hamlet, who "can say nothing" (I. 596), comes off poorly in comparison with the Player. Less noticed though equally important in this scene is the implicit comparison between Hamlet and Pyrrhus, the savage subject of the Player's speech. Like Hamlet, young Pyrrhus is bent on revenging his father,

7 As given in Spencer, p. 31. The same incident is related, with slight differences in detail, by Suetonius: "At Cadiz he saw a statue of Alexander the Great in the Temple of Hercules, and was overheard to sigh impatiently: vexed, it seems, that at an age when Alexander had already conquered the whole world, he himself had done nothing in the least epoch-making" (Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars, trans. Robert Graves [Baltimore, 1957], p. 12).
8 Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, IV. iib.
9 Christopher Marlowe, Edward II, I. iv. 391.
the princely Achilles. Dressed like Hamlet in black (l. 475), Pyrrhus bears a still more significant resemblance. About to kill Priam,

... his sword
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seemed i’ the air to stick.
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

(ll. 499-504)

This “did nothing,” while Hamlet listens to the speech, is his own condition. His sword stuck in the air, a neutral to his will and matter, he has not acted. The image of Pyrrhus arrested in his vengeance is a vivid surrogate for the Hamlet, whatever his much-debated motives, of Acts II, III, and IV.

The motive for Hamlet’s self-recrimination at the scene’s end, however, is clear enough; for after his pause Pyrrhus does act.

... so after Pyrrhus’ pause
Aroused vengeance sets him new awork.
And never did the Cyclops’ hammers fall
On Mars’s armor, forged for proof eterne,
With less remorse than Pyrrhus’ bleeding sword
Now falls on Priam.

(ll. 509-14)

As Pyrrhus in fact pursues and mutilates King Priam, so Hamlet in desire destroys King Claudius:

... ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave’s offal.

(ll. 606-8)

The comparison of Priam to Claudius is driven home the more in the image succeeding the slaughter. As Priam falls, Fortune herself is addressed, presumably in a quote from Pyrrhus:

Out, out, thou strumpet Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod take away her power,
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel
And bowl the round nave down the hill of Heaven
As low as to the friends!

(ll. 515-19)

This identification of fallen royalty with the down-rolling wheel of fortune parallels the sycophantic encomium Rosencrantz later pays to Claudius:

... the cease of Majesty
Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
What’s near it, with it. It is a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit.

(III. iii. 15-18)

And so on. Wolfgang Clemen, whose comments on the Pyrrhus episode
basically align with the Hamlet parallelism suggested here, fails to mention
the decisive link, that the falling-wheel image seems to be reserved for Claudius
alone. The Pyrrhus episode, besides suggesting a surrogate for Hamlet, is
almost an allegory of young Hamlet’s proposed but delayed plan of action:
kill the King but spare the Queen. Priam, king of Troy, is killed. But partly
on the urging of Polonius (II. 542-43) and partly on Hamlet’s own acquiescence
(I. 544), the First Player never gets around to narrating Hecuba’s murder.
The Queen remains, in the playlet at least, quite alive. That Hamlet had
originally prompted the Player to “Say on. Come to Hecuba” (I. 523) and that
he then gives in to the usually opposed Polonius’ wish to stop the speech—
this vacillation shows the set of warring emotions he at this point holds in
regard to his mother. This war, of course, is reiterated in nonsymbolic terms
later on (III. ii. 410-17).

The second self-recriminatory soliloquy (IV. iv. 32-65) has been analyzed
sufficiently elsewhere. As Kitto remarks, “the meaning of the whole passage
becomes clear when we see that it is a parallel to the Pyrrhus-Hecuba passage.”
What should be emphasized here is the description of Fortinbras as “a delicate
and tender prince” (I. 48). This “young Fortinbras” (I. i. 95; V. ii. 361),
like Hamlet, is just starting out. But he has all the desire and readiness to
act that Hamlet lacks; he is already engaged in conquest. A Norwegian
Alexander, he has accomplished much in a short time. The “How all oc-
casions do inform against me” soliloquy completes the already noted structure
of contemplation and self-recrimination.

III
This structure—Hamlet’s contemplation of the young man who has already
accomplished much and his subsequent remorse—is, I suggest, in the back-
ground of the reflections over Alexander’s skull in Act V, scene one; the
juncture, of course, being Caesar’s Hamlet-like lament over Alexander in Spain.
As Alexander is to Caesar, so Pyrrhus and Fortinbras are to Hamlet. But
the first terms of the proportion coalesce for this moment in Act V. Hamlet
stands again before Fortinbras, symbolically represented by the skull, as
imagined, of Alexander. We can see now that much more is involved here

10 Wolfgang Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare’s Imagery (Cambridge, Mass., 1951),
p. 116. For varying treatments of the First Player’s speech, see Arthur Johnston’s “The Player’s
Speech in Hamlet,” SQ, XIII (1962), 21-30. Johnston ignores the previous intense treatment of
the speech by Harry Levin in “An Explication of the Player’s Speech,” Kenyon Review, XII
(1950), 273-96. The present analysis does not pretend to cope with their extensive treatments.
Explication of the speech seems for the time being to have exhausted its contents, not very great
in the first place.

11 For an opposing view, see H. D. F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama (London, 1956),
p. 253. Kitto suggests that these lines “have a much more vigorous reference to Hamlet.” Perhaps.
I read the lines as sycophantic bombast from Rosencrantz to Claudius, who stands at his side.
Their overblown style makes an ironic reference to Hamlet unlikely, if at all possible.

12 Kitto, p. 301, catches Hamlet’s “pity” for Hecuba/Gertrude while the Player speaks. I
prefer to cite Hamlet’s allowing the player to stop as a sign of this, while Kitto chooses the
“mobled queen” intersection (II. 524-25) as proof. Although he takes Hamlet’s “tone of voice”
into account, it is surely disputable to say that Hamlet speaks out of pity here. He has just de-
manded that the Player “Come to Hecuba” (I. 523). There is no evident reason why a line later
he should have second thoughts. Hamlet’s “The mobled queen?” is nothing more than a jest
at the Player’s rhetoric; this is the sense, I believe, to which the line has usually been taken.

13 Kitto, pp. 318-19.
than a philosophical lull or a reflection on mortality. In the Alexander lines we have a moment symbolic of the conflict nagging Hamlet all along. He has remonstrated with and denigrated himself as a "dull and muddy-mettled rascal... Like John-a-dreams" (II.ii.594-95), who has done nothing. Conversely, he has praised Fortinbras for his youthful accomplishment. The reflection over the skull of Alexander, summarizing this conflict, also shows its resolution.

For Hamlet is laughing during the contemplation of the skull. Though it is always difficult to track such things down, he apparently makes an academic joke for the philosophic Horatio. Alexander goes from flesh to dust to earth to the stopper for a bunghole, in an apparent parody of the Aristotelian-Scholastic doctrine of Substantial Change. All things follow this metaphysical law, even the flesh and bones of the great Conqueror. But for Hamlet, the reflection is a remembrance of past academic pursuits seen here, as often is the case with students, in a humorous light. Those students, even today, who have suffered through a professor's examples of Substantial Change will, like Horatio, get the point.

Editors sometimes put the next four lines (236-39), the rhyme about Caesar, into quotation marks. The temptation to do so is strong, since they look as if they might be an Elizabethan commonplace on mortality. On the other hand, even American undergraduates occasionally turn to limerick making over their beer; the Danish medieval equivalent ought not be denied the same right, even if he is in a graveyard. Moreover, the plug rhyme at the end suggests that Shakespeare may have intended Hamlet to be improvising here, and poorly at that. The graveyard itself also adds to potential meaning; does it suggest that Hamlet is making a mock epitaph, like those presumably scattered about him as he speaks? But whatever the stimulus for reducing Caesar from "Imperious" to insulation for a wall, the remark causes enough loud laughter from Horatio that, at the arrival of the funeral cortege, Hamlet has to silence him: "But soft! But soft! Aside—here comes the King."

Horatio's attitude toward the Alexander contemplation is ambiguous. In response to Hamlet's first suggestion that "imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole," Horatio demurs: "'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so." He could himself be joking, or he could have at this point caught wind of the latent paradigm, the doer Alexander versus the cunctatory friend. By his remark is he trying to head off another attack of his friend's morbid self-recrimination?

But Hamlet, it is clear, is not going to be serious. He laughs that Alexander, for all his youthful accomplishment, may now serve as a bunghole stopper. By extension, may we conclude that Fortinbras too is now welcome, without envy, to his youthful exertion? That Hamlet will go his own way? The rivalry has ceased. Life, power, youth, accomplishment, the conquest of much of Asia or a small part of Poland, vengeance for one's father—all these things Hamlet now sees in proper proportion. They must be gained, it is good that they are, but one need not lacerate oneself with guilt that they are not already sealed fact. It is most significant for Hamlet's development, moreover, that this realization is presented humorously. He does not philosophize here in a reluctant acceptance of the fact of his non-
action in the past. Rather, he goes one step further and laughs. Acceptance of himself and his lack of Alexandrian herosim is included now in his world view with the sort of integrality that only laughing at self can adequately symbolize.

IV

This brief essay has shown that a Plutarchian reference underlies the Alexander the Great passage in Hamlet, V. i.; that the structure of the reference parallels earlier events in Hamlet's life and dramatic development; and, lastly, that in laughing at the fall of Alexander, Hamlet symbolically witnesses to his own growth in maturity and self-acceptance. Of the two general interpretations of Act V mentioned at the start, this essay most surely would side with Maynard Mack's. Hamlet has definitively changed. Without saying that a progress from innocence to experience is all that goes on in the play, research into these few lines in Act V does suggest that the maturity theme is present. Moreover, though the source for Hamlet's self-recliminations throughout the play is undoubtedly more complex than the author's reading of Plutarch, it is a helpful corrective to an overly psychological view to see that a literary analogue does exist.

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