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Securing Sleep in *Hamlet*

REBECCA TOTARO

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch while some must sleep,
Thus runs the world away.1

These are the first words Hamlet speaks to Horatio after Claudius rises from his seat, Polonius calls for “Light, lights, lights” in an end to *The Mousetrap*, and all exit, leaving Hamlet and Horatio alone (III.ii.264). Hamlet’s initial assessment of the situation seems clear enough: Claudius is the “stricken deer” that will “go weep” while he himself is the “hart ungalled” that can “play.” Hamlet revels in his success; he has caught the conscience of the king. Ending the interpretation of this rhyme here, however, ignores the final parallelism. Shakespeare extends the comparison between the deer by likening the wounded, weeping one to the “some” who “must watch” and the other, unharmed deer who plays to those who “must sleep.” This pairing of images runs counter to our current use of the terms “sleep” and “watch”: we would be more likely to pair a wounded creature with sleep and a playful one with watching, thus causing a confusion that makes it difficult to identify the significance of the rhyme.

We might be inclined to solve the problem by consigning this rhyme to the set of Hamlet’s antic declarations. Evidence from the first quarto (1603) in which “some must watch while some must sleep” becomes “some must laugh, while some must weep” supports such a move, because a wounded deer that laughs

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and an unharmed deer that weeps makes even less sense as a parallelism. Yet, Hamlet utters this rhyme only in the company of Horatio, with whom he needs no antic disposition. Moreover, all later editions of the play amend the line to “some must watch and some must sleep,” and this suggests not the lesser but the greater importance of these particular terms “sleep” and “watch.” Furthermore, in every edition, this rhyme is the first of Hamlet’s post-Mousetrap utterances to Horatio, and it is thematically consistent with the attention Shakespeare gives to sleep and watch as a pair in this play and in many others. It is important to puzzle out this rhyme.

Scholars have heeded the call to do so. Editors have consistently adopted a several-word interpretation of “watch” as “to stay, keep, or remain awake.” Harold Jenkins, editor of the Arden edition of Hamlet, adheres to this basic definition, as do all Riverside, Norton, Longman, and Bedford/St. Martin’s editors. K. Deighton follows suit, not only noting that “watch” in the rhyme means “keep awake” but also inserting as a useful cross-reference Polonius’s description of Hamlet’s behavior after Ophelia “lock[s] herself from his resort” (ii.ii.143):

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 a madness wherein now he raves
And we all mourn for.

(II.ii.146–51, emphasis mine)

In these lines, “a watch” is a symptom of physical distress, and for Deighton, this corresponds with the use of “watch” in the rhyme at act III, scene ii: while the unharmed deer may rest at ease, it is the wounded deer that watches in pain. Editor T. J. B. Spenser also provides a reading of “watch” that implies an association with physical distemper, noting that “watch” means to “remain awake (with pain or sorrow).”

In full-length articles on sleep and watch in Shakespeare’s plays, scholars tackle the pair by unstringing them, often entirely, and interpreting them within one of two contemporary webs of meaning for each term: sleep, as associated strictly with dreams, nightmares, passion, and death; and watch, as associated with surveillance, spying, and the gaze. Although separately the terms are powerful, interpreting them within these current
contexts draws us away from the rhyme in its own context and into wider and more tenuous interpretive fields: considered with respect to sleep, Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy seems a natural partner to the troublesome rhyme; a focus on the watch places it thematically with spying in the play, recalling Claudius’s memorable observation that “Madness in great ones should not unwatch’d go” (III.i.190). When scholars have attended to the terms as a pair, it is only after having interpreted the terms separately, as is the case in recent new historicist and feminist readings of Shakespeare’s sleeping women and their male gazers. In such readings, the early conception of sleep and watch as a pair that was as naturally occurring as hot and cold or moist and dry is lost, effaced by our fascination with the staging of desire. In order to regain some sense of the original power of the pair, we must restring the early modern web of meaning that held sleep and watch as opposites bound together in the maintenance of civil, bodily, and spiritual health. When we do, we have the potential to illuminate both Hamlet’s rhyme at act III, scene ii and his behavior with respect to his father.

I

Shakespeare and his audiences inherited “sleep” and “watch” as a pair of terms that originally referred to behavior necessary to maintain a civil society. Once humans had tools, they had possessions that others might try to steal, and they had reason to establish a night watch. Shelter protected them against animals and the weather, but only an alert eye and a mind able to distinguish false alarm from genuine threat could guard against thieves and their tricks. This has led A. Roger Ekirch to speculate, “In all likelihood, the night watch, not prostitution, is the world’s most ancient profession.” In early England, it was no different. Men and women, like those in the generations before them, relied on the night watch and told tales reinforcing its importance, but they also learned that even a creature with one hundred eyes could fail in keeping watch if he fell asleep.

Shakespeare took advantage of this situation, staging fantasies of the perfect watch and sweet sleep, anxieties over security heightened by the failed watch, and combinations of the two. In The Tempest, for example, the watch is a never-sleeping spirit. Ariel’s vigilance makes possible Prospero’s devoted scholarship and dedicated afternoon naptime. King Duncan in Macbeth has no such protection, a fact Lady Macbeth uses to her advantage.
in seeking to compel her husband to murder the king while he sleeps: "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th'unguarded Duncan?" In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the below-average head of the watch, Dogberry, suggests to his men that drinking and sleeping on duty are encouraged, but their watch is nevertheless successful in its apprehension of the troublemakers. Shakespeare's choice to open *Hamlet* with a night watch that is fortified at once against sleep, foolishness, and trickery contributed to this repertoire, giving audiences an example of a watch that was vigilant and yet human:

*Enter Barnardo and Francisco, two Sentinels.*

**Bar.** Who's there?

**Fran.** Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.

**Bar.** Long live the King!

**Fran.** Barnardo?

**Bar.** He.

**Fran.** You come most carefully upon your hour.

**Bar.** 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

([i.1.1–7])

Quick and careful to execute his charge to the letter, Francisco will not enter into conversation with his colleague Barnardo until Barnardo follows protocol. It is not for the one joining the watch to demand identification. "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself," demands Francisco, who will not be ruled by assumption. He demands ocular proof, as duty would have it. It is not until Barnardo shares the watchword, "Long live the King," that Francisco will recognize and commend Barnardo for coming "most carefully upon your hour." And only then will Francisco obey Barnardo and relax his duties. This watch is fit for anything, their vigilance allowing others to sleep in this time of heightened security.

Even in times of peace, the watch had three essential duties: remain alert, recognize the signs of danger, and take action if the signs warrant it. If the watch failed in one area, it failed in all. We can date legislation of these important charges in England to the Statute of Winchester proclaimed by Edward I in 1285. This document describes the official duties of the constables and watchmen who were to secure towns in England by reporting for duty from sunset to sunrise, stopping all strangers, and detaining them until morning, when it would be easier to assess the degree of the threat posed by the stranger. If there were concerns,
the watch would deliver the suspect to the Sheriff. If the suspect attempted to flee, the watch was to awaken the townsmen, who would join in pursuit. To assist citizens in their duties both as watchmen and in the event that the watch needed reinforcement, the statute calls for the arming of all citizens in the peace-keeping effort, and because this arming of citizens might itself pose a problem, the statute calls for a “View of Armor” twice per year. Anyone with more than his share would be suspect and reported to the king at Parliament. It was one thing to arm citizens in order to prepare them to assist in civil defense; it was another to allow them to develop an arsenal.

The detail in this early legislation points to the desire on the part of officials to keep the peace. Monarchs following Edward I would retain this statute in all points, making modifications as new issues emerged. In 1328, for example, Edward I’s grandson, Edward III, issued The Statute of Northampton, making it plain that laws governing the public wearing of armor were needed in addition to those prescribing its possession. It is worth quoting a complete sentence to illustrate the level of concern over this issue:

> It is enacted, That no Man great nor small, of what Condition soever he be, except the King’s Servants in his presence, and his Ministers in executing of the King’s Precepts, or of their Office, and such as be in their Company assisting them, and also (upon a Cry made for Arms to keep the Peace, and the same in such places where such Acts happen,) be so hardy to come before the King’s Justices, or other of the King’s Ministers doing their office, with force and arms, nor bring no force in affray of the peace, nor to go nor ride armed by night nor by day, in Fairs, Markets, nor in the presence of the Justices or other Ministers, nor in no part elsewhere, upon pain to forfeit their Armour to the King, and their Bodies to Prison at the King’s pleasure.

Only those charged with keeping the peace or otherwise called to arms were allowed to wear armor in settings that might suggest a need for increased security. On this point, legislation made the grounds of suspicion plain, clarifying the charge of the night watch: arrest all strangers and all who go armed without warrant.
The night watch in *Hamlet* is prepared for anything, then, except a former king whose ghost returns in armor, thereby requiring attention and proving suspicious if not demanding arrest. When the watch fails to apprehend the ghost, the immediate, legal result is a violation of the king’s peace. More important to the play, this violation also disrupts the literal and metaphorical sleep of Prince Hamlet. Upon hearing Horatio’s account of the ghost and being left to consider the situation for himself, Hamlet’s immediate conclusion—“My father’s spirit—in arms! All is not well” (I.ii.255)—is as apt as his initial prayer upon first seeing the ghost for himself: “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” (I.iv.38). In these cases, his words betray his body, as if they are immediate, visceral reactions to obvious danger. Yet, Hamlet is compelled to know more, and we are eager to eavesdrop as he pushes forward with his very personal inquisition: “O, answer me ... Say why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?” (I.iii.45–57). Hamlet falls to an immoderate watch, following the ghost into the night and later scanning the faces and behaviors of family and friends he once trusted. They become the suspects in his perpetual night. In the beginning of the play, Hamlet is the wounded deer that must watch. When he captures the conscience of the king in act III, scene ii, he is initially right to exult in his reversal of fortune by casting himself as the ungalled hart that might just be able to get some sleep.

II

But this is not the only line of reasoning supported by the specific use of “sleep” and “watch” as a pair in this rhyme or in the play as a whole. The terms together constituted one of the nine Galenic non-naturals thought to affect the human body. Physicians prescribed balance in all cases, as too much of one or the other might bring the body to a state of illness. In *The Castel of Helthe*, in a chapter on sleep and watch, Sir Thomas Elyot explains that adequate sleep assures “that naturall heate, which is occupied about the matter, wherof procedeth nouryshement, is comforted in the places of dygestion, and so digestion is made better, or more perfite by slepe, the body fatter, the mynde more quiete and clere, the humours temperate: and by moche watche all thynges happen contrarye.” In fact, immoderate sleep was thought dangerous enough to bring about bubonic plague. Physicians, including Thomas Phayer, translated plague treatises with chapters on sleep and watch, warning.
To moche slepe engendreth many humours in the body, specially if it be in the day tyme, and it dulleth the memory, and maketh a man unlusty and apt to receiue the pestilence. Therfore created almyghtye God the nyght, wher in we shulde rest, & the day for to kepe us waking that we fal not into synne and slouth. Surely to slepe on the daye tyme is exceedingly hurtfull, for when the sune ryseth, he openeth the poore of the body, and bryngeth the humours and spirites from within, to the outward parties, whyche prouoketh a man to watchynge, and excercysye or workes ... And therefore whosoeuer waketh in the tyme of slepe, or slepe when he ought to wake, he peruerteth, and hurteth not onely hys memorye, but also manye tymes shal engendre apostemes, catarres, reumes, agues, palsyse, and many other greuous and naughty diseases in the body.20

At the same time, Elyot warns more specifically that too little sleep "drieth to moch the body, and doth debilytate the powers animall, letteth digeston, and maketh the bodye apte to consumptions."21 Phayer confirms, "Also ye must take hede, that ye watche not to mucho, for thereof cummeth drynesse of the brayne, and many other syckenesses, that melancholye bredeth."22 Immoderate sleep or watch was a sign of impending illness at best and a body already courting the plague on the way to death, at worst.

Although it is difficult for us to imagine lack of sleep as a health concern in these terms, the threat was very real in Shakespeare’s England. In the plays, Shakespeare shows us the risk to physical health that comes both from immoderate watch and from excessive or ill-prepared sleep. Shakespeare gives symptoms of excessive watch to Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part 1* and to Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, whose wives express concern over their lost sleep.23 Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking is another form of extreme watch, an early modern symptom of her physiological intemperance if also of her conscience and her crime. Shakespeare often created scenes in which characters sleep, and when he did, he preferred to show the power of a disrupted or otherwise tainted sleep, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, than to stage prolonged sleep. The more interesting ailment was the overheated, extrawatchful body, its eyes flashing and hair standing on end; but in rare cases, Shakespeare depicted a body with overstuffed humors compelling what Hamlet feared most: “bestial oblivion” (IV.iv.40).24 This is Falstaff’s condition in *Henry IV, Part 1*, for example, as he falls asleep behind an arras while hiding from the Sheriff.25
In *Hamlet*, the fractured civil defense signaling Denmark's rotten condition is reinforced by a concomitant physiological disturbance, originating in the body of King Hamlet, the man who slept during the day. The ghost explains to Hamlet the origin of his condition:

Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment.

(I.v.59–64)

Sleeping during the day was a bad sign showing a weak body; pair this weakness with a lax watch over that body, as in King Hamlet's case here, and the consequences are grave: "Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched" (I.v.74–5).

An interesting sixteenth-century document extending the 1285 Statute of Edward provides a glimpse of the line of reasoning that yoked together the physiological and civil problems attributed to daytime sleeping habits. In *The Duties of Constables, Borsholders, Tythingmen, and Such Other Lowe and Lay Ministers of the Peace*, William Lambarde explains that "for better preventing that nothing be done against the peace anie of these officers aforesaide may take (or arrest) suspected persons, which walke in the night, and sleepe in the day: or which do haunt anie house, where is suspicion of bauderie: and they may carrie them before a Iustice of the peace, to find suerties of their good behauiour." 26

The addition to the previous statutes is pronounced: those who sleep during the day are as suspicious as those who walk at night. An early character profiling emerges, where the nightwalker and day-sleeper are automatically suspect. The threat from the ghost is clear, and his specific condition, as he explains to Hamlet, is a direct result of his error:

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd away.

(I.v.10–3)
Unable to sleep at night, and during the day confined to flame, King Hamlet's body and soul burn in a Galeno-Catholic purging that is both painful to the afflicted and able to inflame mortal bodies in range, as the ghost warns,

> But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotty and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood.

(I.v.13–22)

If the ghost does not censor his description, he places in jeopardy the health of the man he claims as his son. Hamlet's blood may "freeze," his eyes bulge, and his hair "stand on end"—all the signs of grave intemperance, a body burning from within and craving the comfort of sleep.27

The night watch recognizes that this ghost poses a physical threat to Hamlet well before we hear the ghost's words. As Hamlet follows the ghost offstage at the end of act IV, scene i, Horatio exclaims, "He waxes desperate with imagination," and Marcellus determines. "Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him" (lines 87–8). They interpret Hamlet's desperate imagination as a physical condition, the result of an unhealthy encounter causing an extreme movement of the passions and promising greater physical damage. Because of their concern, they will follow Hamlet against his orders. These careful men of the watch and Horatio, "that man / That is not passion's slave" (III.ii.71–2), disobey the prince in an effort to fulfill their charges and secure the peace. By this time, however, it is already too late.

III

The civil and physiological disturbances resulting from a lax or excessive watch overlap, as the threat to the royal body placed the national body at risk. A failed watch could also signal the onset of a spiritual crisis, particularly in Tudor England: change
the king, and change the church. But Catholics and Protestants alike could agree that the personal, spiritual consequences of a lax watch were even more dangerous. Fail to watch over your own soul, lapse into an unguarded sleep of sin, and risk damnation. Early in Christian history, monks rose in the middle of the night to demonstrate a spiritual watchfulness in the dark, when the potential for temptation was at its zenith. From the division of night and day in Genesis to the coming of Christ as the light of the world, biblical narratives reinforced the fear of the night, its nature as a time of trial, and its potential as a time for profound spiritual transformation. In all cases, one should be mindful to secure spiritual health by conducting a vigilant spiritual watch, especially before sleep.  

In Shakespeare’s plays, this religious context for sleep and watch is more difficult to detect than its civil and physical counterparts. The word “sleep” can mean “death,” as in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, but this does not automatically mean that “sleep” also implies “sin” any more than “awake” in the plays means “pray.” It would be equally erroneous to ignore this context, however, because much early drama in England arose from it. In the scenes from the Bible that were first performed in churches, most notably what has become known as the quern quaeritis trope, the predominant message was of Christ’s second coming and the importance of being prepared for it. The morality plays that grew out of the mystery plays reinforced this message with a conventional Everyman character that awakens from sinful slumber just as death comes to claim his soul. Any suspense in these plays turns on whether or not Everyman will become watchful enough in time.

Shakespeare was more than familiar with these plays and with the same message in the Bible. In the Vulgate, for example, the singer of Psalm 119 (118 in the Vulgate) speaks of his desire to be ever with his lord when he says, “praeveniebant oculi mei vigilias ut meditarer in sermonibus tuis” (verse 148). The Geneva Bible, the version Shakespeare might have owned, translates this verse as “Mine eyes preuent the night watches to meditate in thy worde.” Those who best love God are awake even in the darkest hour thinking on his word and avoiding nocturnal temptation so that nighttime vigilance will lead not only to increased spiritual resilience but also to wisdom.

In Mark 13, we hear a similar call to watch, but in this case, the faithful are watchful for the second coming:
videte vigilate et orate nescitis enim quando tempus sit
vigilate ergo nescitis enim quando dominus domus veniat
sero an media nocte an galli cantu an mane
ne cum venerit repente inventiat vos dormientes
quod autem vobis dico omnibus dico vigilate.

[Take hede: watche, and pray: for ye knowe not when the time is.

Watch therefore, (for ye knowe not when the Master of the house wil come,
at euen, or at midnight, at the cocke crowing, or in the dauning)
Lest if he come suddenly, he shulde finde you sleping.
And those things that I say vnto you, I say vnto all men,
Watch.]32

The repetition of the word *vigilate* underscores the medieval and early modern religious meaning of “to watch.” The psalmist further emphasizes the importance of the message by the repetition of *dico* (I say). The vigil one is to keep is literal, but it is also metaphorical, emphasizing a second coming that could occur at any time and for which one should be prepared (and certainly not sleeping). The psalmist’s specificity in noting the various times when the master might return—“sero an media nocte an galli cantu an mane” (“at euen, or at midnight, at the cocke crowing, or in the dauning”)—calls attention to Christian thinking rooted both in the medieval liturgical calendar and in the need for security at night, the origin of Eikirch’s “most ancient profession.”

Writing in the sixth century, Saint Benedict combined this belief in a constant, anticipatory watchfulness with attention to the functional details of physiological experience that would prove long lasting in influence. Regarding night prayer, he advises, “During the winter season, that is, from the first of November until Easter, it seems reasonable to arise at the eighth hour of the night. By sleeping until a little past the middle of the night, the brothers can arise with their food fully digested ... Between Easter and the first of November mentioned above, the time for Vigils should be adjusted so that a very short interval after Vigils will give the monks opportunity to care for nature’s needs. Then, at daybreak. Lauds should follow immediately.”33 This schedule
for the night office would set the body clocks of the faithful for
generations. Monks will rise at the eighth hour, around 2:00 a.m.
after digestion is complete and when the mind and body both are
clear of vapors, most vigilant, and fit for prayerful observation of
the coming day. Benedict prescribes at once for civil, physical,
and spiritual health.

Centuries later, this powerful prescription was still a promi-
nent part of sermons, but in the hands of Protestants the watch
was released from association with the liturgical calendar. In
The Spirituall Watch, or Christs Generall Watch-word, the prolific
preacher Thomas Gataker undertakes a full definition of the word
"watch" before explaining that only if one is always watchful can
one finally sleep:

As we are to thinke therefore daily of that generall ac-
count; so let vs call each one himselfe daily to a particular
reckoning. We shall walke euery day the more warily being
to passe such a censure; we shall sleepe and rest more
freely, more quietly, more soundly, more sweetly, hauing
past such a censure: we shall be sure, when wee haue
ransacked our selues in this manner over-night, to have
no sin unrepented of lodge with vs till the next day. Yea
he that hath thus acquit himselfe ere he lay him downe
to sleepe, shall be sure to watch even while he sleepeth;
and though he were taken away sodainely in his sleepe,
should be found spiritually awake.

The emphasis is no longer on conducting a literal watch at pre-
scribed hours but on vigilance at all times. The result is peace
for the daytime mind and sleep like an innocent babe that is free,
quiet, sound, sweet, and spiritually salubrious.

This is the very sleep that the ghost of Hamlet forfeited, and it
is by this reading of "sleep" and "watch" that we see the problem
with Hamlet's formulation of the rhyme at act III, scene ii. In a
Christian context, one was not called to balance sleep and watch
but always to watch; moreover, one should be always watching
over oneself, one's soul in one's own care. The ghost laments his
own lack of Christian vigilance; explaining "Thus was I, sleeping,
by a brother's hand," deprived, "Of life, of crown, of queen." The
greater loss is of his soul:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhoisel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!

(I.v.76–80)

Sleeping upon his not so "secure hour" (I.v.61), in the middle of the day and without protection from confession or communion, the former king exposed himself to physical and spiritual harm, his nation to civil unrest. What might have been an undisturbed, eternal sleep of peace is instead an enforced march at night and a constant burning all through the day. The ghost is also a wounded deer that must watch until the last judgment and perhaps beyond.

IV

Hamlet recognizes his father within this burning ghost, but it appears that he is unable to take steps to relieve either his father's condition or his own. His antic disposition, The Mousetrap, and his careful observation of family and friends lead only to greater internal fire and he comes to desire the final rest his father also seeks: "'tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd" (III.i.63–4). But Shakespeare supplies Hamlet with the knowledge his father lacked, and this allows him to gain some distance from the thinking that had led to the conclusion in the rhyme of act III, scene ii.37 Hamlet receives a warning from beyond the grave to secure a sound sleep that is free from bad dreams, and he acquires direct experience with death. If in act I Hamlet believes "all the uses of this world" to be "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" (I.ii.133–4), by act V the bodies have piled up, exposing him to the discernable, even tangible, difference between the living and the dead. Polonius, Yorick, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are "stale, flat, and unprofitable." They cannot stir for justice or a straw. Hamlet can. By this point, Hamlet also has enough evidence to exact his revenge, because he has seen Claudius react to The Mousetrap, and he knows that Claudius arranged for his murder. Soon after the visit to the graveyard, he explains to Horatio that his justification in killing Claudius is undeniable. In his final declaration to be swift in the execution of his revenge, however, we hear something new:

It will be short. The interim is mine.
And a man's life's no more than to say "one."
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours.
But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a tow'ring passion.

(V.ii.73–80)

In a rare acknowledgement of empathy, Hamlet remembers not
his father but Laertes, a more appropriate object of, and perhaps
model for, his immediate affections. This realization prompts re-
fection and then change. Hamlet extricates himself from his own
suffering, from his purgatorial watching, long enough to alter his
course. When word comes that Laertes has challenged him to a
duel, he agrees to it immediately, and when a protective Horatio
counsels him against this choice, we hear in response words
his father could not have taught him: “We defy augury. There is
special providence 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. Since no man, of aught he leaves,
knows aught, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be” (V.ii.215–20).
“The readiness is all” is Mark 13:37, “I say unto all men, Watch.”
We also hear a precursor to Gataker’s words, exhorting follow-
ers to watch vigilantly in order to “sleepe and rest more freely,
more quietly, more soundly, more sweetly, having past such a
censure.” Shakespeare depicts here in Hamlet a vigilance that is
constant but warranted and moderate. In this adjusted economy
of sleep and watch, sleep will be neither troubled by dreams nor a
symptom of bestial oblivion; it will be true relief from those “slings
and arrows of outrageous fortune” (III.i.58).

Only here does Hamlet become the ungalled hart that can
play and sleep. Hamlet will move to make amends with Laertes,
putting peace between them. He will kill Claudius only after
Laertes exposes the trap Claudius had laid. And only then will
Hamlet seek inaction, giving himself over to “fell sergeant, Death”
(V.ii.341). If he has accomplished a successful watch, we know it
from his final words: “the rest is silence” (V.ii.300). By this final,
fully formed exhalation, Shakespeare moves Hamlet to a point
of experience that his father had not reached. Hamlet had said
that “some must watch while some must sleep.” but by the end
of the play, he has learned that this only sounds good. It is a
witty rhyme, but put in practice it is a recipe for civil, physical,
and spiritual illness. Adherence to this ill maxim resulted in his
father’s inability to watch over his nation, his body, his soul, and his wife. Hamlet changes it, arriving at a new conclusion: every man must watch over himself, because only in this way will his sleep be secure. If the audience imagines that Horatio’s blessing over the dead body of Hamlet is answered and that Hamlet is attended by angels who sing him to his rest, perhaps this is because Shakespeare convinced them that Hamlet had become his own best watch.

NOTES

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1 Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), III.i.265–8. Subsequent references to Hamlet will be to this edition and will appear in the text parenthetically by act, scene, and line number. Though the spelling for Hamlet has been modernized, I have retained original spellings for subsequent quotations from early modern texts throughout the essay, modifying only where symbols stand for words or letters and transposing “s” for “f.”

2 Shakespeare, The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke by William Shake-speare. As It Hath Beene Diuerse Times Acted by His Highnesse Servuants in the Cittie of London: As Also in the Two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and Else-where (London: Nicholas Ling, 1603), sig. F4v; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 22275. According to Thomas Davies, when David Garrick performed this scene on stage, he carried a handkerchief, twirling it vigorously for effect [Dramatic Micellanies [sic]: Consisting of Critical Observations on Several Plays of Shakspeare: With a Review of His Principal Characters, and Those of Various Eminent Writers, as Represented by Mr. Garrick, and Other Celebrated Comedians, 3 vols. [London: Thomas Davies, 1784], 3:93–4; ECCO ESTC T090854]. Garrick’s replacement of “sleep” and “watch” with “laugh” and “weep” suggests the greater ease with which an actor might play and later audiences might receive the latter pair over the former.


6 For a critique of these recent scholarly readings of Shakespeare's sleeping women and watching men, see Roberts, pp. 239–41. For the consideration of the trope in the Italian Renaissance, with a focus on painting, see Maria Ruvo, The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep, and Dreams (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 90–121.

7 George Walton Williams and Vincent Petronella acknowledge the early modern pairing of watch and sleep (Williams, "Sleep in Hamlet," RenP [1964]: 17–20; Petronella, "Watch and Ward in Hamlet," HSt 1, 1 [October 1979]: 135–6). Restricting their readings to the text alone, Williams and Petronella do not account for the early modern contexts of civil, physical, and spiritual health by which audiences interpreted the paired terms. For more on "the


10 In the scenes in which humans sleep, Ariel is always active. See for example I.i.184–8 and II.1.190–333; Ariel also guards Prospero during his afternoon naps (III.ii.87–8 and IV.1.165–83) in *Shakespeare, The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, Arden Shakespeare Third Series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2000).


14 “Statute of Winchester,” 1:96–8, 97.

15 “Statute of Winchester,” 1:96.


18 This examination of the ghost complements those by E. Pearlman, who argues that Shakespeare stages a surprisingly lifelike ghost (“Shakespeare at Work: The Invention of the Ghost,” in *Hamlet: New Critical Essays*, ed. Kinney [London and New York: Routledge, 2002], pp. 71–84); by Stephen Greenblatt, writing that Hamlet leaps over “the questions that were traditionally asked of ‘questionable’ apparitions” and that the ghost does not change its appearance in ways more predictable for its initial audiences (*Hamlet in Purgatory* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001], pp. 209–10, 238); by Ann Rosalind
Jones and Peter Stallybrass, who discuss the problematic nature of staging a material (armed) yet immaterial (spirit) ghost in Hamlet (Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000], pp. 245–68); and, most significantly, by R. A. Foakes who examines the specifically armed attire as a sign of Elizabethan nostalgia for chivalry and a reminder of an awkward, Catholic past (“Armed at Point Exactly: The Ghost in Hamlet,” ShS 58 [2005]: 34–47).


21 Elyot, sig. 48r. Decades later, Robert Burton also described “waking overmuch” as a cause and symptom of melancholy (Anatomy of Melancholy, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith [New York: Tudor, 1927], p. 217).

22 Phayer, sig. N2r.


24 On Hamlet’s comparison of man to a beast that only sleeps and feeds, see Clifford J. Ronan, “Sallust, Beasts that ‘Sleep and Feed,’ and Hamlet, 5.2,” HSt 7, 1–2 (Summer and Winter 1985): 72–80.


26 William Lambarde, The Duerties of Constables, Borsholders, Tythingmen, and Such Other Lowe and Lay Ministers of the Peace Whereunto Be
Admonished, the Severall Offices of Church Ministers and Churchwardens, and Overseers for the Poore, Surveighours of the Highwaies, and Distributors of the Provisioun against Noysome Fowle and Vermine (London: Roger Warde, 1582), p. 11; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 15146. This text was published regularly through 1677.

27 See also Gertrude’s words to her son in her closet, when she describes his appearance (III.iv.119-24). For more on this passage and an examination of Hamlet as the soldier called to action versus negligent inactivity, see Williams, pp. 17–20.

28 On the development of the Catholic liturgy as related to an early ritual celebrating the power of light over darkness, see especially Gregory W. Woolfenden, Daily Liturgical Prayer (Aldershot UK and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 9–25; and Ekiych, pp. 137, 302–3. For more on sleep in the Bible and Shakespeare’s plays, see Bevington, p. 51, and Roberts, pp. 239–41.


30 Psalm 119 in The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition, Lloyd E. Berry, ed. (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), fol. 262v. For more on Shakespeare and assumptions regarding his use of the Geneva Bible, see Steven Marx, Shakespeare and the Bible, Oxford Shakespeare Topics (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. ix. When this verse from Psalm 119 in the Geneva Bible is compared with a translation of this passage from the Luther Bible, we are closer to hearing what current readers might expect: “I wake up when it is still night to reflect on your word.” The Luther Bible of 1545 records, “Ich wache auf, wenn’s noch Nacht ist, zu sinnen über dein Wort” (Der Psalter, Bible, Luther Translation, Univ. of Michigan Digital Library Production Service, available online at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/1/luther/luther-idx?type+DIV28&byte+2278658 [accessed 19 January 2010]).

31 Robert Dunn shared with me the following passage from the 1560 Geneva Bible translation of the Wisdom of Solomon:

For while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the middes of her swift course,
Thine almighty worde leapt downe from heaven out of the royal throne, as a fierce man of warre in the middes of the land that was destroyed,
And brought thine unfained commandement as a sharpe sworde, and stode vp, and filled all things with death, and being come downe to the earth, it reached unto the heavens.
Then the sight of the feareful dreames vexed them suddenly, and fearefulness came vpon them vnawares.

(Geneva Bible, fol. 423v–424r, 18:14–7)

This passage refers to the death of the firstborn before the Exodus, but its words might remind us of the call that stirred Hamlet to overactive vigilance, perhaps an initial reaction to terrifying wisdom.


It is worth noting the change in the liturgical calendar that Benedict observes as occurring at the very end of October. If Steve Sohmer and Steve Roth are correct, the ghost of King Hamlet walks on four days from late October to early November, just at this time of change in the liturgical calendar and just when Catholics turn their attention to the dead in observance of All Hallows Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day. Of all days in the year, these remind Catholics to pray for souls—those of the departed and one’s own—and in the process to conduct a more conscious, if not more rigorous, spiritual watch (Sohmer, “Certain Speculations on *Hamlet*, the Calendar, and Martin Luther,” *EMLS* 2, 1 [1996], http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/02-1/sohmshak.html; Steve Roth, “Hamlet as the Christmas Prince: Certain Speculations on *Hamlet*, the Calendar, Revels, and Misrule,” *EMLS* 7, 3 [January 2002], http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/07-3/2RothHam.htm).


Claudius is luckier than his brother, prayer before bed on the night Hamlet comes to kill him. Although we know he is unable to complete his prayer in a manner convincing to himself, he unknowingly prevents his own murder and buys time, however squandered, for his soul.

One can readily agree with Foakes and Greenblatt who suggest that Hamlet differs from his father by new versus old faith: “Hamlet belongs to a Protestant present, the Ghost to a Catholic past” (Foakes, p. 46).

Gataker, p. 84.