

## HOW SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMA CONTRIBUTED TO THE INDIVIDUAL IN EXILE: BEFORE *HAMLET*

Despite the fact that both his witnessing of his father's ghost and his reason for sparing Claudius in prayer signify Hamlet's religious mindset, his most famous lines reveal his innermost hesitation about whether or not he was allowed to end his life—a decision still entirely prohibited by Christianity, be it Catholic or Protestant—and this brief moment manifests a significant change in man's relationship with the omniscient observer in heaven. God's supreme status of ethical criteria was severely challenged, if not forfeited. Yet it was a strike at not only God's authority, but also the way man structured himself. As Katharine Eisaman Maus (1995) observes, around the time when *Hamlet* was staged, «[I]n fact, for some writers the presence of an omniscient spectator seems so fundamental to the structure of human subjectivity that the fact of that subjectivity becomes part of the proof of God's existence»<sup>1</sup>. In other words, his «to be or not to be» did shake the self-identifying conception loose from his religious moorings.

«For some writers» is a too modest an indication of the entire spectrum of the infiltration of God as an omniscient supervisor into man's self-identification and self-preservation. For example, the theory of equivocation, developed by Thomas More and the Jesuit Henry Garnet and used by either Catholic priests or other religious minorities to disguise true belief and temporize with external authority, was based on the conviction that the inner domain, though inaccessible to man, could be understood and absolved by God. On the other hand, for the laity, especially those who had slipped up in life, the confessional rites could admit their secrets which were not allowed to be divulged to mortals, and

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1 KATHARINE EISAMAN MAUS, 1995. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, 10.

reintegrate them into their secured positions within the collective order, thus restoring them as members of the community again. Since penitent rites, overtly or covertly, were still a prevailing Christian practice in both Catholic and Protestant faiths, the ritual mediation between secrecy and providence mended the rift between the potentially exiled and the socially admissible. Like equivocators' self-preservation owing to their insistent reliance upon God, the laymen's inwardness, albeit hidden or secluded from worldly connections, was nevertheless entrusted to the providential supervision, and thus completed their subjectivity.

However, when Hamlet uttered this soliloquy in which he commanded God's privilege of deciding man's mortality, the audience had no reason to see him as an abominable figure, a devilish character for example, whose undoing eventually would prove God's mighty authority. Instead, with sympathetic engagement with Hamlet's fate, theatergoers might have been invited to confront this suicide issue, acknowledging the legitimacy of «that is the question» and reconsidering its meaning according to the dramatic situation and the socially ethical codes. This thought-provoking process, echoing to Hamlet's internal struggles, reinforced the intimacy of their engagement with the indecisive prince and placed them in as much of an omniscient position as the one on which God used to dwell; a position independent of God's surveillance, or so to speak, an individual in exile from God's kingdom.

After *Hamlet*, Western history has been propelled by the progress of rationalization, which, according to the Cartesian model of the subject-object division, facilitates the growth of individuality into the underlying ground for the omnipresent internet, plastic surgery, vote equivalence, and custom-made consumerism. Yet the individual as a concept upon which man structures himself is not ever as robust as it seems to be conceived. What was the case before *Hamlet*?

The etymological approach to clarify the thorny definitions of 'individual' prepares the investigation of this question. As Terry Eagleton illustrates, «the word» individual» originally means 'indivisible' or 'inseparable from'. Homer's Odysseus seems to feel roughly this way, whereas Shakespeare's Hamlet most definitely does not»<sup>2</sup>. The combination of «in» and «divide» literally indicates «indivisible», suggesting a ceaseless action of dividing oneself from all encircling relationships and shaking off all identities embedded in all kinds of relations. It will

2 TERRY EAGLETON, *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 5.

not stop until only one's *sine qua non*, the last indispensable condition or essence, is left. As the Greek word «atom» signifies «indivisible» or «uncuttable», the individuality thus refers to a search for the impenetrable unit in selfhood.

Hence, individuality as a desirable idea is built upon the movement of endless negation, motivating one's striving for «moving away». It only signifies the allure of being independent of everything, even shared sensibility; or expresses an aversion to being integrated into the collective, and to be simply a member of something. Its fulfillment, if any, can only rest in the tireless dynamics of rejection.

However, paradoxically, to conceptualize the indivisible unit as the element essential to the constitution of the individuality only indicates the impossibility of its completeness. Causally speaking, unless by an artificial termination, the action of division finds nowhere to stop, and consequently there is not such an «ultimate atom» of subjectivity waiting to be achieved in empirical reality. That is, this indivisible unit belongs nowhere in the real world but sustains a conceptual existence, as a transcendental condition for the empirical occurrence.

Since the «ultimate indivisible» is conceived only in idea rather than in reality, the word combination suggests that the concept of the individual assumes a quasi-theological status, a likewise unrealizable counterpart to God, on the condition that both feature a transcendental precondition. In this aspect, the differences in the orientation by which one structures his own subjectivity are not as much as what humanism usually conceives.

To achieve the ultimate atom by rejection became a desirable ideal, and it casts a light on how the individual took shape before *Hamlet*. The English Renaissance has been regarded as one of the epochs in which factors advantageous to individuality began to emerge. It can be said that these factors generating or empowering the negotiation of all the events and powers that constitute the world as a whole prepared Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. For example, the introduction of Gutenberg's printing press into England by William Caxton in 1476 caused a widespread readership which molded more individuals as readers, since reading, compared to vis-a-vis oral tradition in knowledge transmission, can only happen between the subject and his text. In addition, the turbulence caused by the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe doubtlessly played a vital role in unshackling bonds of all kinds. Martin Luther's doctrinal «justification by faith» not only started the Protestant Reforma-



tion in Wittenberg in 1517, but also invigorated action towards the individual by locating the emphasis upon the priority of one's inwardness. However, England's Reformation in the 1530s complicated the movement towards the formation of the individual. Being doctrinally Catholic, the Henrician Church provoked discontent from other uncompromising religious stances, which, amalgamated with political struggles and bloodshed, shrank the room for tolerance and resulted in the separation of one's outward claim in faith from one's true belief at heart.

Maus, after investigating this separation by focusing on the emphatic discourses about the privilege of one's inwardness surging on the literatures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, cogently points out that there was an epistemological anxiety caused by the gap between the socially visible exterior and the invisible interior. Certainly, one of the places which could fervently embody this anxiety was theater. It was a place which called for the exposure of this anxiety since an actor's claim could only be deemed an «as if» of a character's interiority; and also a place which innately possessed the power to pacify it since the playgoers knowingly prepared themselves to acknowledge an actor's duplicity, and, in Coleridge's words, to «suspend disbelief». In short, the flaring sensitivity of the epistemological anxiety in theater generated the drive to distinguish the priority of cognition from other ways of man's engagement with the world.

However, this was not the case until the coming of the English Renaissance theater. Being a collective activity, theatrical performance in the medieval age was a circumstance not so much advantageous to the community's cognition as to their participation, be it emotional or bodily. This explains why the preoccupied biblical narrative was essential to the dramaturgy of medieval drama: because it spared the beholders' toils in understanding in favor of their participation, or even immersion. Moreover, allegorical characters as the impersonation of concepts in the morality plays, *Mankind* and *Everyman*, for instance, also indicate the fact that it was the belief system preparing the audience's play-going, which aimed to reinforce the known in them rather than to burden them with the epistemological unknown.

Before *Hamlet*, which, as it were, epitomizes the zenith of one's epistemological anxiety, the development of the English Renaissance theater can be regarded as a response to the process of the disintegration of the medieval «philosophical-historical condition» (a term borrowed from Lukacs in his *The Theory of the Novel*) that was supposed to com-



fortably oriented one to the world. In other words, it is the evanescence of the pre-existing guarantee for one's cognition that prompted one to know the world on his/her own, and, as Hamlet's defiance to God shows, eventually the rise of the individual. In this sense, the epistemological anxiety becomes the parameter by which both the development of dramaturgy in this disintegrating process and the power it generated to drive one towards the «indivisible atom», are thus gauged, embodied in Shakespeare's dramas before *Hamlet*.

Due to the brevity of this paper, the investigation of this dramaturgy toward the individuality will be sketched in the following two directions: problematization and possession.

## 1. Problematization

To confront the epistemological anxiety in theater, the dramaturgy of the English Renaissance theater appears to have had a tendency to enlarge rather than pacify it. The presupposed framework served not so much a source of understanding the performance as a target to be questioned and problematized. Narratives were constructed in order to accommodate characters infused with psychological complexities rather than monotonous concepts which constructed narratives in accordance to the accepted value and anticipated logic. What used to be taken for granted was doubted and in conflict; and consequently, questions, not answers, were brought into being. It means that the allure of thinking invoked by the problematized topics gradually emerged to fill in the emptiness left by the absence of the valid belief system or metaphysics. Theater was not only a place to see, but a place to protect the ones (or to get them addicted) in exile from any admittedly given *raison d'être* with the pleasure of thinking as a response to the dramatically reinforced epistemological anxiety. Simultaneously, one's subjectivity as an individual rose.

To make the certain problematic was thus one of the dramaturgical methods, especially inherent in the adaption of varying sources into dramatic narration. For example, Richard II, as a monarch in historical records and as a title character in *Richard II* (c. 1595), is definitely a negative figure, but Shakespeare gives the best verses of the play to him, making Richard to be both loved and hated, a provocative way of questioning the legitimacy of the divine king.

Scholars have had many discussions of Shakespeare's various strategies of problematizing the certainty, but it has not been noted that the intervention of aside and monologue into them counteracted the sense of ambiguity, and consequently, generated the immediate driving force to shape the individual in the audience. Being age-old acting styles, both aside and monologue have been undoubtedly assumed to be true. Hence asides and monologues were the efficient vehicles that erased audience's epistemological anxiety by providing trustworthy messages. Moreover, in the moment of verity they create, the character's self-disclosure of the hidden intentions and secrets not only establishes a private bond with the audience, but also privileged the latter an omniscient position that endowed them a godlike access to the character's inwardness unknown to other onstage characters; a position which engenders the audience's individuality.

Maus, while referring to how the function of aside and monologue facilitates the audience's omniscient position, acutely ascribes the use of aside and monologue to the depiction of the machiavels. She observes,

Yet the same situation reproduces the Christian providential scheme the machiavel defies, with its contrast between divine omniscience and mortal myopia..... In *Richard III* Shakespeare puts us not only on God's aside but in God's place, in the position of 'the high all-seer' in the providential drama of history<sup>3</sup>.

Hamlet's disguise of insanity suggests it is not the machiavels' monopoly on stage to confuse the spectator's doubt with trust by exerting the old acting styles. Yet all the machiavels before Hamlet, like Richard III, Richard II, Lorenzo, and others, be they Shakespeare's invention or not, illustrate that the effect of their private self-revelation contributed to the tendency to create the omniscient position for the audience, enlarge their capacity to problematize the dramatic representations, and thus bring individual into shape.

## 2. Possession

To possess something means to put it under control or to make it at one's disposal. In this case, one is no longer subordinate to and independent of what is desired, moving away from bonds of desirability and

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3 MAUS, *Inwardness and Theater*, cit. (n. 1), 54.

paving the way towards the individual. In the light of the contribution of theater and drama to individuality, two objects will be investigated.

## 2.1 Name

The possession of one's own name is definitely a decisive move in the formation of the individual. When the gathering beholders came to see the medieval dramas, they were supposed to be anonymous. A theatrogoer's name was immersed in the collectivity of the audience and, given the religious purpose of the drama, was not unlike a churchgoer's name buried in the congregation in church. However, it is recorded that actors since the late medieval drama had begun to call the names of known individuals in the audience as an improvisational style of engaging the beholders. As Janette Dillon illustrates according to textual evidences, this trick of «naming the names»<sup>4</sup> can be found in the touring companies, the mumming play and the court masquerade of the late Middle Ages. It is conceivable that this acting style looms large in the potential to bring the presence of the audience from its anonymous status, or, to put it differently, to have the audience possess his /her name.

Naming and possessing names prefigure the occasion-oriented dramaturgy developed in the English Renaissance theater by which the prominence of the audience was integral to the performance as a whole. The names of the target audience might have been needlessly referred to in the speech, but it was their identities so distinguished from others that, far from being subjected quietly to the show, the whole performance seemed to fall into their possession. Shakespeare's dramas like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which possibly was written and staged for an aristocratic wedding party, or *Love's Labour's Lost* for the law students at the Inns of Court, are examples. Writing and staging a play for a specific occasion also explains why every revival of Shakespeare's play must demand revision, a phenomenon that complicates the history of publication of Shakespeare's plays and can be construed as meaning that playwrights like Shakespeare wrote only for his audience, rather than the reader. In this sense, bringing the particularity of the audience to every performance was an enlarged continuation of «naming the name», generating the energy to and opportunity for the audience to be lifted from their anonymous and passive status.

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4 JANETTE DILLON, *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, 57.



When the tendency to make the theatergoer's identity conspicuous during the performance extended to the open-air public playhouse, both the actor's impromptu attempt to engage the audience and the omnipresent daylight reinforced the dynamics of elevating one from the multitudes into the public gaze now applied not only for actors but also for spectators, whose visibility was exposed and ready to be brought into everyone's attention. Scholarly researches have put the emphasis either upon the audience's participation in the fictional context or upon the communal feelings with which they were involved, but the reverse force of divorcing one from the membership of the theatergoer's community and restoring one to his/her selfhood has not gained due consideration. However, considering the acting tradition starting from «naming the names» to the actor's intimate engagement with the audience, theater was indeed impregnated with the incessant action of distinguishing one from the multitude, an action pulsing with the trend towards the «ultimate indivisible» outside the playhouse, and thus preparing for the appearance of the individual in *Hamlet*.

## 2.2 History

Man belongs to history. When one begins to possess history by whatever seemingly plausible ways, one is detached from it. Discourses of history in print or on stage can help one's orientation in the world via the establishment of the collective memory in which the revered and the despised are orchestrated in the narratives substantiating the system of moral values and grounding the collective order. On the other hand, when history becomes something to be toyed with, one's tie with the world becomes frayed.

It is well known that after the Spanish Armada was crushed by England's fleets in 1588, history plays surged as a response to the English's strong desire to know their past and their yearning for the establishment of national identity. However, it underestimates the consequences of staging English history drama. Given the commercial purpose of the Elizabethan playhouse, as Paul Yachnin points out, the history plays thrived because they catered to the audience's curiosity and obsession with royal houses<sup>5</sup>. The divinity and mystery of kings, queens,

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5 YACHNIN's argument can be seen in his «The popular theater» in ANTHONY DAWSON and PAUL YACHNIN, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, 37-65.

their relations and even famous courtiers were appealing to the theatergoers, since their being mounted on stage signified that the spectators could have access to the inaccessible, and degrade what they had revered in real life. In this sense, history dramas with the royal attractions could be a kind of commodity, just like the mugs or t-shirts with Queen Elizabeth II's portraits as souvenirs for tourists visiting London today.

Therefore, the influence of the popularity of history dramas in the 1590s upon the theatergoers is twofold: their aspiration for national identity seems satisfied on the one hand, and on the other hand their patronage of the royal figures of the playhouse implicitly erodes their piety toward the royal authorities; not to mention that the dramatization of bloody crimes and vicious conspiracies committed by the royals might undermine the audience's reverence for the celestial figures and make the audience perceive them as ordinary as, if not worse than, the common people. Therefore, it should not be taken for granted that the playhouse assimilated the theatergoers' identification with their past and made them as members of English history, like biblical narratives capable of turning them as Christians in the medieval age. Instead, it was the playhouse's appropriation of history for its commercial benefit that easily explains the infidelity of the playwright's adaptation of historical narratives, ruining one's sense of belonging to history by 'owning' it. It is a process analogous to the widespread cultural industry in modern society that transforms the «cult value»<sup>6</sup> of art by making artwork as a consumer product. In this sense, Shakespeare's history dramas alienated his audience from history, furthered the endless movement of division, and eventually contributed to the formation of the individual.

Then, perhaps to overcome this epistemological anxiety, perhaps to struggle with the dawning subjectivity of being the individual, Shakespeare's poetic creativity erupted.

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6 The replacement of art's original «cult value» by «exhibition value», as a result of the widespread of the mechanical reproduction of art works, is a point made by WALTER BENJAMIN in his influential essay «The Work of Art in the Age of mechanical Reproduction» in his *Illuminations*. See BENJAMIN, WALTER. *Illuminations*. vol.241, Random House Digital, Inc., 1986. vol. 2.

### Ամփոփում

## ԻՆՉՊԷՍ ՇԵՔՍՊԻՐԻ ԹԱՏՐԵՐԳՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ ՕԳՆԵՑ ԱՔՍՈՐԵԱԼ ԱՆՀԱՏԻՆ. ՀԱՄԼԵԹԷ ԱՌԱՋ

### ԻՖԱՆ ՀՈ

«Ըլլալ, թէ չըլլալ»: Թէեւ Համլէթ կրօնական հակումներ ունի, այսուհանդերձ, իր ամենածանօթ խօսքը կը բացայայտէ իր խոր տատանումը անճանապահ ըլլալու իր իրաւասութեան մասին՝ որոշում մը, որ տակաւին քրիստոնէութիւնը կ'արգիլէ: Այս կարճ պահը կը պարզէ նըշանակալից փոփոխութիւն մը մարդու եւ ամենազէտ երկնային դիտորդին յարաբերութեան մէջ:

Համլէթի այս խօսքը Աստուծոյ բարոյագիտական չափանիշի գերազոյն հանգամանքը կը խախտէ կամ նոյնիսկ կը խորտակէ: Ոչ միայն Աստուծոյ հեղինակութեան դէմ հարուած մըն է, այլ նաեւ մարդու տեսութեան սեփական էութեան մասին:

Կատարին էիսաման Մաուսի խօսքերով, Համլէթի առաջին ըեմադրութեան օրով՝ այսինքն, Ժէ. դարուն, չարք մը գրողներու համար «ամենազէտ հանդիսատեսի մը ներկայութիւնը այնքան տարրական էր մարդու ենթակայութեան կառոյցին համար, որ այդ ենթակայութեան իրողութիւնը մաս կը կազմէր Աստուծոյ գոյութեան փաստին»: Մէկ խօսքով՝ Համլէթի «Ըլլալ, թէ չըլլալ» խօսքը մարդու ինքնութեան մտապատկերը կը խլէ կրօնական արմատներէն: