

## **“WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN”: THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN *HAMLET***

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, among other things, an agonized meditation on conflicting early modern conceptions of human nature, a preoccupation signalled by persistent anthropological generalizations.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite this insistent emphasis on “man,” Shakespeare's view of human nature in the play seems ambivalent; it is perhaps the safest path to argue that the implied anthropology of *Hamlet* is paradoxical, both affirming optimistic classical-humanist commonplaces and subverting them by voicing radical pessimism, doubt, and uncertainty. This sense of irresolution can be illustrated by the play's most memorable statement about human nature. Having characterized the earth as simultaneously a “goodly frame” and “sterile promontory,” and the atmosphere as both an “excellent canopy” and a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.299, 302-3), Hamlet turns his attention to the enigma of humanity: “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of

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<sup>1</sup> Here are some examples: “He was a man, take him for all in all” (1.2.187); “apparel oft proclaims the man” (1.3.72); “As infinite as man may undergo” (1.4.34); “Every man has business and desire” (1.5.136); “to be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand” (2.2.177-8); “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping” (2.2.524-5); “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all” (3.1.128-9); “To give the world assurance of a man” (3.4.62); “What is a man” (4.4.33); “a man's life's no more than to say ‘one’” (5.2.74); “to know a man well, were to know himself” (5.2.137-8). All quotations from *Hamlet* are from The Arden Edition, i.e. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ed. Harold Jenkins, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982) and refer to Act, scene, and line numbers.

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dust? Man delights not me...” (2.2.303-9). The passage’s judgment on human nature is suspended between a Piconian exaltation of human potential and a Montaignean anti-humanism which denies human exceptionalism. The gap between the two accounts is not attributable to any new datum – e.g. the new science, Copernican cosmology, etc. – but by an apparent rupture between the objective and subjective. Hamlet knows (or at least used to believe) that human beings are magnificent creatures living in a majestic cosmos; this judgment seems sufficiently universal and objective. Yet, having mysteriously lost his mirth, Hamlet now perceives otherwise: “seems to me,” “it appeareth nothing to me,” “yet, to me” (2.2.298-9, 301-2, 308). Like Montaigne, whom Shakespeare read closely, Hamlet pits the authority of the perceiving human subject against received opinion, even to the point of solipsism: “The world always looks straight ahead; as for me, I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the volume and degree of disagreement among the play’s critical commentators, as well as the play’s thematization of irresolution,<sup>3</sup> it is tempting to play it safe and call *Hamlet*’s anthropology irresolvably paradoxical. But I don’t believe this does justice to the text, which contains three distinct strands in its exploration of the theme of human nature: 1) an articulation of Piconian optimism, coalescing in the figure of *homo rationalis* – man as the rational or thinking animal; 2) a skeptical Montaignean critique of *homo rationalis*; 3) the proposal of an

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, “Of Presumption,” trans. Donald M. Frame, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), . 499.

<sup>3</sup> The play is notoriously resistant to definitive interpretation. Moreover it dramatizes suspension of judgment and action. One thinks for example of the emblematic poised over the prone body of Priam, Pyrrhus, who, “like a neutral to his will and matter,/ Did nothing” (2.2.477-8), or of the guilt-ridden Claudius’s self-description: “like a man to double business bound,/ I stand in pause where I shall first begin,/ And both neglect” (3.4.41-3).

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unlikely alternative model, *homo histrio*<sup>4</sup> – man the actor – which, while conceding the Montaignean critique in many respects, nevertheless recuperates Piconian ideals in an unexpected form. *Hamlet* shifts the focus from human nature *per se* to the human condition; the play explores the multiple ways that theatricality, a human invention, has entered into the human world and become a powerful conditioning force within it. *Homo histrio* might be termed the theatricalization of the human condition, or, as Lionel Abel puts it, “life seen as already theatricalised.”<sup>5</sup> And while *homo histrio* is not necessarily Shakespeare’s final word on humanity (though he certainly employs the notion again in *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*), it effectively addresses key issues around which the play’s critique of traditional anthropology coheres: rationality, epistemology, temporality, language, identity, and agency. It is an elegant, modest, and flexible definition of the human, one that acknowledges the ineluctable presence of irrationality, contingency, illusion, and conditioning in human life.

As all readers and auditors of *Hamlet* know, the arrival of the players in Act Two, scene two, changes everything, not least the protagonist’s mood. The cloud of melancholy hanging over the prince temporarily lifts, and he springs to life, suddenly enthusiastic, gregarious, and purposeful: “there did seem in him a kind of joy/ To hear of it” (3.1.18-9). I wish to suggest that the arrival of the players and the extended meditation on theatre which follows are directly relevant to Hamlet’s conflicted meditations on human nature. When Hamlet tells his former

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<sup>4</sup> I am not using the term as a synonym for *homo ludens* – man the player – Johan Huizinga’s term which covers a wide range of cultural phenomena and does not pertain to theatricality *per se*. Nor is the term as narrow as Erving Goffman’s “dramaturgical self” developed in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) or Colin McGinn’s “theatrical construction of a self,” an adaption of Goffman’s concept used in *Shakespeare’s Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 10-12. *Homo histrio* is meant to stand as a comprehensive metaphor for human nature parallel to *homo rationalis*.

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Abel, *Metadrama: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 60.

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schoolfellows, "Man delights not me" (2.2.309), Rosencrantz smiles in amusement:

Ham. Why did ye laugh then, when I said man delights not me?

Ros. To think my lord, if you delight not in man, what Lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you. We coted them by the way, and hither are they coming to offer you service.

Ham. He that plays the king shall be welcome....

(2.2.312-8)

Rosencrantz has a valid point. If Hamlet's claim is true – that he no longer takes delight in humanity *per se* -- then this must necessarily include the players. It is evident, however, that the players, "Even those you [i.e. Hamlet] were wont to take such delight in" (2.2.326), are a striking exception to the rule, a continuing source of delight to the Prince despite his disillusionment with human beings in general. One might even go out on a limb and argue that, while Hamlet no longer finds *homo rationalis* viable, the actors represent a way of being human which he can embrace, an anthropological paradigm which is precisely answerable to the objections he has conceived against the classical-humanist model.

In our own time, when theorists from a variety of fields – e.g. Erving Goffman, Kenneth Burke, Gregory Adams, Elizabeth Burns, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner<sup>6</sup> – have appropriated and generalized dramatic and theatrical concepts in order to construct theories of the self, social

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, Kenneth, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945); Gregory Adams, *All the World's a Stage*, (New York: Basic Books, 1963); Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A study of convention in the theatre and in social life* (New York: Longman, 1972); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publishing, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Quotations are all from Arden Editions of the plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Ed. Harold F. Brooks, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979); *Henry V*, Ed. T.W. Craik, (London: Methuen Drama, 1999); *The Tempest*, Eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, (London: Methuen Drama, 1999); *Macbeth*, Ed. Kenneth Muir, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1951).

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behaviour, and cultural practice, it is easy to underestimate the bold originality of *Hamlet*. To offer up the actor as anthropological model was audacious in a strongly antitheatrical milieu in which actors and acting were persistently associated with inauthenticity, affectation, deception, hypocrisy, unreality, and unnaturalness. Indeed, Shakespeare’s own references to actors often have an antitheatrical cast; they are “shadows” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.208, 409), “ciphers” (*Henry V* Prolog. 17,) “meaner ministers” (*The Tempest* 3.3.87) and “poor player[s]/ That strut and fret [their] hour upon the stage,/ And then [are] heard no more” (*Macbeth* 5.5.24-6).<sup>7</sup> Even in *Hamlet*, where the acting “quality” is treated with relative dignity, the protagonist expresses dehumanizing contempt for popular but inept players, “that neither having th’accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably” (3.2.31-5). This passage simultaneously establishes the figure of the actor as a potential “measure of man,” while quieting potential objections to this standard by acknowledging the inferiority of particular actors and performances.

But Shakespeare’s purpose goes well beyond outflanking the enemies of the stage by pandering to anti-theatrical biases. Rather, he appropriates and transforms the ancient analogical trope of *theatrum mundi* – all the world’s a stage. As Anne Barton contends in *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, Shakespeare found in the commonplace of *theatrum mundi* “a virtually inexhaustible means of expression, reflecting the multiple possibilities inherent in the dramatic situation itself” and turned this into something “individual and characteristically brilliant.”<sup>8</sup> But,

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Richter (Barton), *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 89. Barton argues that Shakespeare’s contemporaries used *theatrum mundi* persistently to represent the theatricality of English political, social, and religious life, whether the ideological use of public spectacle by princes, the sermons of divines dramatizing the splendour and transience of human life, or the use of costume and stagecraft in the gulling of dupes (83-4, 113).

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as Thomas Postlethwait and Tracy Davis argue, *Hamlet* is not merely a compendium of the *theatrum mundi* heritage, but in fact the inaugural point of a new kind of dramatic self-consciousness.<sup>9</sup> In a period when many European playwrights were exploring the possibilities of metadrama, or drama about drama, *Hamlet* is the metadramatic work par excellence, utilizing all of the varieties of overt metadrama: plays-within-plays, ceremonies within plays, role-playing within roles, literary/real life references, self-reference, and the theme of drama and perception.<sup>10</sup> As Alvin B. Kernan notes, Shakespeare depicts all life at Elsinore as acting and playing; virtually every scene (e.g. Hamlet's first meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia's pretense of prayer in the "nunnery scene") is a latent or submerged play-within-the-play.<sup>11</sup> In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's self-reflexive meditation on the art of theatre suspends the dramatic illusion and in so doing sets up a conceptual mirror which illuminates the conventional, illusory, and theatrical nature of everyday life. Further, I would argue, the play is designed to produce in its auditors metadramatic consciousness, a multi-level awareness in which one simultaneously 'believes' in the dramatic illusion, perceives the play as theatrical artifice, and experiences self-conscious awareness of one's own awareness (i.e. becoming one's own audience, as it were). This metadramatic experience, writes Richard Hornby, is characterized by "unease, a dislocation of perception,"<sup>12</sup> and it is uncannily analogous with the shift of consciousness we observe in the protagonist, who comes to perceive his own reality metadramatically. As James Calderwood argues, Shakespeare "wants our disillusionment to mirror Hamlet's....For Hamlet the Ghost's

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Postlethwait and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: An Introduction," in *Theatricality*, Ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlethwait, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 31-2.

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician: Shakespeare's Image of the Poet in the English Public Theater*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 101-3.

<sup>12</sup> Hornby, *Metadrama*, 32.

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story dissolves, annuls, or in the fashionable term deconstructs his schoolboy conceptions of a world governed by honor, love, and truth. ....So Hamlet discovers behind the arras of his youthful assumptions the fraudulence of the world, and suffers for his knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Yet, Calderwood goes on to argue, though we participate in Hamlet's disillusionment, we also move with him toward "a more embracing conception of the human condition, one that neither endorses nor denies either innocence or disillusion but acknowledges both."<sup>14</sup> In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how this double consciousness coheres in the metadramatic figure of *homo histrio*, drawing particular attention to its recuperative and constructive function in *Hamlet*.

***Homo Rationalis and its Discontents***

To appreciate *Hamlet's* reconception of human nature, we begin with the classical-humanist model I have called *homo rationalis* – the human being as a rational or thinking animal – as memorably delineated by Pico della Mirandola in the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Pico begins with the striking assertion that human beings were created in indeterminate form at the midpoint of creation and endowed by the Creator with the capacity for rational self-fashioning: "In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself...Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the molder and maker of thyself."<sup>15</sup> According to Pico, the fact that "we may be what we will to be" (7) confers on humans godlike dignity and unlimited potential. Through the exercise of reason – which he defines as that "by which the soul measures, judges, and examines everything" (15) – human beings move upward in the chain of being toward union

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<sup>13</sup> James Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 169-70.

<sup>14</sup> Calderwood, *Negation*, 173.

<sup>15</sup> Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, Trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 4-5. All subsequent quotations from the *Oration* are from this edition

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with the divine, the realm of authentic being (5). For Pico, the apex of human development is the philosopher, the type of sovereign human selfhood who transcends temporal and somatic finitude, attaining a lofty autonomy through pure rationality:<sup>16</sup> "If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost part of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh" (6). Reason for Pico is the defining human trait and the ruling faculty in a divinely ordered inner hierarchy comprising understanding, imagination, memory, will, sense, passion, and appetite. Certainly, this model allows for the possibility of internal conflict between the higher and lower faculties, though it is a conflict in which reason is assured the victory as it brings the passions into harmonious accord (10-1).<sup>17</sup> Pico's affirmation of human reason and dignity is accompanied by a confidence in language or discourse, "the speaking or reasoning art" by which humans move up the ladder of being (10) and communicate truth from mind to mind.<sup>18</sup> Yet the sovereign

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Heptaplus*, Pico urges the reader, "let us enter into our very selves, into the inner chambers of the soul...so that we may successfully recognize in ourselves not only all the worlds but also our Father and our home" (Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, trans. Douglas Carmichael, in *On the Dignity of Man*, [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998], 118).

<sup>17</sup> This is Pico's memorable depiction of inner conflict: "there is multiple discord in us, and we have severe, intestine, and more than civil wars at home: if we are unwilling to have these wars, if we will strive for that peace which so lifts us up to the heights that we are made to stand among the exalted of the Lord, moral philosophy alone will still those wars in us, will bring calm successfully. First, if our man will seek a truce with the enemy, he will subdue the uncurbed forays of the multiple brute, the quarrellings of the lion, and the feelings of wrath. Then if we take the right counsel, and desire for ourselves the security of everlasting peace, it will come and will fulfil our prayers liberally. The slaying of both beasts, like stuck sows, will establish most solemnly a most holy treaty between the flesh and the spirit. Dialectic will calm the turmoils of a reason shoved about between the fistfights of oratory and the deceits of the syllogism" (*Dignity*, 10-1).

<sup>18</sup> Both the rhetorical form and content of the *Oration* imply confidence in the capacity of language to convey truth, especially the adequacy of written texts: "they could not remain long in memory without the mediation of writings" (*Dignity*, 31). We see this confidence as well in Pico's bold assertion that he has harmonized Christian theology with the wisdom of the kabbalistic writings and other occult traditions by drawing out their secret meaning, and brought them to light through his own perspicuous use of language (*Dignity*, 33).

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self, as Pico conceives it, is resolutely individualistic, even anti-social, little concerned with the communal aspect of communication. Content with the pleasures of disinterested solitary contemplation, he has no abiding need of other human beings and disdains earthly things, including the vagaries of economic life and the good opinion of others. Of his own pursuit of the contemplative ideal, Pico says,

I have never philosophized for any reason other than for the sake of philosophizing...I have neither hoped nor sought from my studies...any other gain or profit than cultivation of soul and knowledge of truth...I have always been so desirous of this truth, and so much in love with it that, abandoning all care of public and private affairs, I gave my whole self over to the leisure of contemplating, from which no disparaging of the envious, no curses from the enemies of wisdom, have been able so far or will be able later to frighten me away. Philosophy herself has taught me to weigh things rather by my own conscience than by the judgments of others, and to consider not so much whether I should be badly spoken of as whether I myself should say or do anything bad.

(18)

Endowed with the capacity for cognitive certainty and a free and effective will, *homo rationalis* can practice moral agency without hindrance from external and internal determinative forces (e.g. fate, fortune, heredity, etc.), making man "the animal that is most happy, and is therefore worthy of all wonder" (3).

In contrast, *Hamlet* conveys an ambivalent view of *homo rationalis*. There is undoubtedly a powerful strain of Piconian humanism in the play. "Godlike reason" (4.4.38), for example, is

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repeatedly affirmed as the ultimate arbiter in human affairs and actions.<sup>19</sup> Indeed reason is identified as the *sine qua non* of humanity *per se*: "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer" (1.2.150-1); "Divided from herself and her fair judgment,/ Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" (4.5.85-6). Like Pico, Hamlet identifies authentic being with rational inwardness and disdains corporeal life as mere appearance or seeming:

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

(1.2.76-86)

Hamlet thinks of the body as a mere "machine" (2.2.124), a "quintessence of dust" (2.2.317), and a "mortal coil" to be shuffled off (3.1.67), and he longs to transcend the flesh through death: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,/ Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,/ Or that the

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Claudius says, "You cannot speak of reason to the Dane/ And lose your voice" (1.2.44-45) and "A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,/ To reason most absurd" (1.2.102-103).

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Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129-32).<sup>20</sup> The flesh, for Hamlet is contemptibly vulnerable and corruptible, heir to a "thousand natural shocks" (3.1.62) and subject to the humiliation of decomposition (4.3.16-31; 5.1.158-205). He could therefore be contented to "be bounded in a nutshell and count [himself] the king of infinite space" (2.2.254-5), rather than encased in flesh.

Temporal life, the play suggests, is a prolonged assault on human dignity. In the play's most famous soliloquy, the principal criterion for being or non-being is the consciousness of one's own human worth, and the options are weighed according to what is "nobler in the mind" (3.1.57). Death relieves one, not of insupportable suffering or metaphysical uncertainty, but of the burden of being undervalued or insulted by one's inferiors: "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,/ Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,/ The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,'/ The insolence of office, and the spurns/ That patient merit of th' unworthy takes...." (3.1.70-4). Pico argues in the *Heptaplus* that spiritual impulses toward fame, anger, and revenge are laudable and appropriate to a proper human self-valuation, for "everyone ought to preserve his dignity and not refuse honors obtained in honest ways."<sup>21</sup> Hamlet too is acutely sensitive to the loss of honour, such as his countrymen being branded drunkards because of the custom of the "heavy-headed revel" (1.4.17-22). He is also profoundly disturbed by the scandalous inability of his contemporaries to distinguish between greatness and infamy, substance and shadow, most pointedly in the substitution of Claudius, "a king of shreds and patches" (3.4.103) for the "gracious figure" (3.4.104-5) of his father.<sup>22</sup>

As is the case with Pico, Hamlet's humanistic ideal is the philosopher, the individual

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<sup>20</sup> The textual crux in Hamlet's first soliloquy is variously rendered by editors as "sallied," "sullied," and "solid," but whether Hamlet's flesh is too tainted or too solid, he wishes for it to undergo a kind of sublimation (1.2.129-30).

<sup>21</sup> Pico, *Heptaplus*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> See also 2.2.263-4 and 3.2.129-30.

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whose intellectual self-discipline makes him invulnerable to both external contingencies and internal perturbation. He perceives such an ideal in Horatio, who is able to subordinate the appetitive demands of "blood" to rational judgment and is thus loftily indifferent to the arbitrary fluctuations of Fortune:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice  
And could of men distinguish her election,  
Sh'ath sealed thee for herself; for thou hast been  
As one in suffering all that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee.

(3.2.65-76 )

Hamlet admires Horatio's neo-stoic constancy, his dignified self-control under pressure. From the Prince's standpoint, Horatio's antithesis is Gertrude whose "o'erhasty marriage" is a shameful surrender of reason to the lower faculties: "You cannot call it love; for at your age/ The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,/ And waits upon the judgment, and what judgment/ Would step from this to this?" (3.4.68-71).

Yet, even as it articulates this classical-humanist anthropology, the play reveals it to be

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overstated and untenable. Much of the play's dramatic power derives from the protagonist's painful discovery that *homo rationalis* represents an impossibly idealistic account of both the human condition and his own disordered subjectivity. As Hamlet's paean to Horatio makes clear, instances of *homo rationalis* in the Piconian mold are exceedingly rare, yet, if that is true, does the classical-humanist definition of humanity hold? Throughout the course of the play, various characters, overwhelmed by passion, appetite, or trauma, suffer an impairment of reason, yet it is not at all clear that this abrogates their humanity. Indeed, Gertrude and Claudius are perhaps most fully and characteristically human in their irrational, akratic persistence in incestuous cohabitation, while Ophelia's mad discourse is "pregnant" with signification, insight, and humanity, "a happiness," notes Polonius earlier in the play, "that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (2.2.209-11).

Typically, the play's generalizations about "noble and sovereign reason" (3.1.159) are embedded in self-contradictory enthymemes and situational ironies that amount to an inadvertant refutation of *homo rationalis*:

What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To fust in us unused. Now whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th' event -

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A thought which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward -- I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do't.

(4.4.33-46)

This soliloquy is occasioned by the spectacle of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras and his army crossing into Poland in order "to gain a little patch of ground/ That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.18-9), and this context ironically demonstrates the inadequacy of *homo rationalis*. Hamlet begins by asserting with certainty that the God-given discourse of reason is an objective standard by which to judge human actions. According to this standard, his own relative inactivity – sleeping and feeding when he ought to be killing Claudius – constitutes a sub-human abandonment of rationality. But this judgment is only superficially plausible, for Hamlet, as he goes on to admit, does not really understand the source of his own reticence to seek revenge. While it could be attributed to thinking too little ("Bestial oblivion"), it could just as plausibly be the result of thinking too much, which in turn could be his mind's attempt to rationalize its own cowardice.<sup>23</sup> Apparently, rational consideration of the moral consequences of action paralyzes the capacity to act. Seizing on this explanation, Hamlet proceeds to compare himself unfavourably with Fortinbras, "Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,/ Makes mouths at the invisible event,/ Exposing what is mortal and unsure/ To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,/ Even for an eggshell" (4.4.49-53). In other words, Hamlet reverses his position during the course

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<sup>23</sup> The phrase "craven scruple" recalls the play's most famous soliloquy where Hamlet contends that "conscience does make cowards of us all" and "the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.83-85). In this astonishingly pessimistic speech, suicide is offered as a rational response to suffering.

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of the speech. In the end, Fortinbras is to be praised for his irrationality, for how else can one characterize the slaughter of twenty-thousand men in the reckless pursuit of military honour, which Hamlet calls a mere "eggshell" and "straw" (4.4.55), "a fantasy and trick of fame" (4.4.61)?

What is the implied status of *homo rationalis* when Hamlet, arguably literature's most intelligent and introspective character, provides such a contradictory account of human reason and fails so miserably to perceive the implications of his own argument? Montaigne, in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond," grounds his critique of human nature on "man in his highest estate...that small number of excellent and select men who, having been endowed with fine and particular natural ability, have further strengthened it by care, by study, and by art, and have raised it to the highest pitch of wisdom that it can attain" (371).<sup>24</sup> He nevertheless concludes that "there are few souls so orderly, so strong and wellborn, that they can be trusted with their own guidance" (420). Hamlet, the archetypal Renaissance man, possessing the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (3.1.153) seems a likely exception, but his intellectual potency – his tendency, for example, to think "too precisely on th'event" – proves not only a hindrance to the straightforward achievement of revenge, but renders his own descent into irrationality more threatening, as Claudius notes: "There's something in his soul/ O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,/ And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose/ Will be some danger..../ .... / Madness in great ones much not unwatch'd go" (3.1.166-9, 190). The mind, says Montaigne, is "a dangerous blade, even to its possessor" (420), "an erratic, dangerous, and heedless tool," particularly for "those who have some rare excellence beyond the others, and some extraordinary quickness" (419). The opinions and conduct of the intellectually gifted often burst the bounds of moderation,

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<sup>24</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," trans. Donald M. Frame, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 371. All subsequent quotations from Montaigne come from this edition.

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so that "It is a miracle if you find a sedate and sociable one" (419). Moreover, when persons of quick, keen, agile, and subtle mind go insane, they are given to "the greatest and wildest manias," for "[w]ho does not know how imperceptibly near is madness to the lusty flights of a free mind and the effects of supreme and extraordinary virtue?" (363).

Reason is defined by Montaigne as "that semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself" and "an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and all measures" (425). As such, it produces no certain or indisputable knowledge (414), and training in philosophy provides negligible help in overcoming fundamental human ignorance: "For every philosopher is ignorant of what his neighbor is doing, yes, and of what he himself is doing, and does not know what they both are, whether beasts or men" (402). If anything, humanist confidence in dialectic is a trap. As Montaigne contends, "Reason does nothing but go astray in everything, and especially when it meddles with divine things" (386). For Montaigne, Piconian speculation about the sovereign self's capacity for rational self-formation and divinization would constitute egregious examples of presumption, "our natural and original malady" (330). He argues instead that man, far from being a noble, self-determining being placed in the indeterminate middle of creation, is a miserable and puny creature, lodged in "the mire and dung of the world" (330), yet so ridiculously vain to imagine himself God's equal, the "master and emperor of the universe, the least part of which it is not in his power to know, much less to command" (328-9, 331). Montaigne bases this pessimistic view not merely on general observation but close scrutiny of himself: "I would hardly dare tell of the vanity and weakness that I find in myself" (425).

While *Hamlet* praises reason, it also reveals its vulnerability to corruption and its limited functionality. We see, for example, the cheapening of reason in Polonius whose brain "[hunts]

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the trail of policy" (2.2.47) rather than truth. In the case of Gertrude, "reason panders will" (3.4.88), feverishly manufacturing rationalizations for sin. But reason may fail quite apart from human intention. The "o'ergrowth of some complexion," for example, may break down "the pales and forts of reason" (1.4.27-8), or fear may deprive one of the "sovereignty of reason" (1.4.73). Hamlet -- perhaps disingenuously, perhaps not -- admits his own rational dysfunction: "I cannot reason" (2.2.265); "My wit's diseased" (3.2.313). While not repudiating philosophy, the play emphasizes its limitations: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ That are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174-5); "there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out" (2.2.363-4). And, like Montaigne's "Apology," *Hamlet* voices radical epistemological skepticism, doubt, and uncertainty that call reason's provenance into question: "Doubt truth to be a liar" (2.2.117); "there's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50); "I'll have grounds/ More relative than this" (2.2.599-600), "Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes" (5.2.218-20).

Doubts about reason lead almost inevitably to doubts about the composition and stability of the self. Even though the authorial voice in Montaigne's essays is powerfully individual, one of his most persistent themes is the inconsistency and variability of the self: "My footing is so unsteady, and so insecure, I find it so vacillating and ready to slip, and my sight is so unreliable, that on an empty stomach I feel myself another man than after a meal...Now I am ready to do anything, now to do nothing; what is a pleasure to me at this moment will some time be a trouble. Either the melancholic humor grips me, or the choleric; and at this moment sadness predominates in me by its own private authority, at that moment good cheer" (425). While Montaigne objects to the philosophers' division of the soul into many parts, making man into an imaginary republic (401), he fully acknowledges the chaotic inner diversity which defeats all

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anthropological taxonomies: "we have as our share inconstancy, irresolution, uncertainty, grief, superstition, worry over things to come even after our life, ambition, avarice, jealousy, envy, unruly, frantic, curiosity. Indeed we have strangely overpaid for this fine reason that we glory in, and this capacity to judge and know, if we have bought it at the price of this infinite number of passions to which we are incessantly a prey" (358). *Hamlet* likewise questions the existence of the authentic, unitary self. Hamlet may speak of his inner integrity and coherence – "I have that within which passeth show" (1.2.85) – and Polonius may counsel, "to thine own self be true" (1.3.79), but often the play presents that self as radically conflicted, unstable, and fractured. In the extreme condition of madness, complete dissociation of the self may occur: "Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet./ If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,/ And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,/ Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it" (5.2.229-32). But even among the sane, the self is hardly an ordered hierarchy of faculties; it seems rather a volatile mixture of competing elements typically colluding to unseat or compromise reason.<sup>25</sup> Even though he is considered "The glass of fashion and the mould of form,/ The observ'd of all observers" (3.1.155-6), Hamlet's own discourse of reason is frequently disrupted by the pangs of grief, disgust, rage, fear, dread, self-loathing, and envy, particularly in the soliloquies whose mangled syntax signifies, not only the inherently discontinuous and disordered nature of his thought, but his sense of self-alienation,<sup>26</sup> which, like Montaigne, he recognizes through close self-examination: "I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give shape, or time to act

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<sup>25</sup> Note the fractured sense of self in the following passages : (1.2.92-104) (3.3.38-41) (3.4.68-76, 85-8).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, 1.2.129-59 and 2.2.543-88.

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them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, believe none of us" (3.1.123-30). As strenuously as Calvin, the play affirms the doctrine of universal depravity: "A savageness in unreclaimed blood,/ Of general assault" (2.1.34-5); "Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?" (2.2.524-5); "Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remember'd" (3.1.89-90). The moral world, like the physical, is radically entropic: youth and innocence are susceptible to "calumnious strokes," "canker," and "contagious blastments" (1.3.38, 39, 42), while a single defect can corrupt the possessor of virtues which are otherwise "pure as grace,/ As infinite as man may undergo" (1.4.33-4). Ascent to the angelic proves more difficult than descent to the venial, bestial, and demonic. It is not even a fair fight; while the power of beauty transforms honesty (i.e. chastity) into a bawd (3.1.111-2), "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.117-8).

Humanity's depraved, fallen condition and unstable sense of identity, in both Montaigne and Shakespeare, manifest themselves in the problem of language. Montaigne argues that, owing to the weaknesses and defects in speech, "Most of the occasions for the troubles of the world are grammatical" (392), and that "the world is filled and soaked with twaddle and lies" (403). So too *Hamlet* also calls into question the reliability of language as a vehicle for rational discourse and truth, exposing the various ways that language is abused by those who use it, and how language betrays them in turn. Words in *Hamlet* are either too plentiful ("More matter with less art" [2.2.95]) or too scarce, as characters lapse into enforced or voluntary silence: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159).<sup>27</sup> Calumny (1.3.38; 3.1.136-8) and mendacity (2.2.178-9; 3.2.348) are ubiquitous, and "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (2.2.178-9). There are persistent contradictions between words and

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<sup>27</sup> See as well 1.3.59-60, 1.5.13-4, 1.5.144, 152, 159, 185-86, 3.4.198-200.

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intentions ("Words without thoughts"[3.3.98]), and between words and actions ("my deed to my most painted word" [3.1.53]). Language is the instrument of deception *par excellence*. Polonius, for example, describes Hamlet's vows of love as "mere implorators of unholy suits,/ Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,/ The better to beguile" (1.3.129-31). Language is a devalued currency, of little worth without the collateral of deeds. Laertes, for example, counsels Ophelia to believe Hamlet only insofar as "his particular act and place/ May give his saying deed" (1.3.26-7), while Claudius insists that Laertes, in turn, "show [himself his] father's son in deed/ More than in words" (4.7.124-5). Certainly there are obvious abusers of language like Polonius with his long-winded tribute to brevity (2.2.86-92) and Osric with his "golden words" (5.2.129). But the inadequacy does not wholly lie in the speakers themselves; the inherent fallenness of language as an instrument to convey human inwardness is also implied. Hamlet, for instance, finds it demeaning that he "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (2.2.581), for, though silence is unendurable, words inevitably falsify what he feels. Overall, the play exposes the enormous potential for misunderstanding that results from human reliance on language.

The anti-humanist critique in *Hamlet* also emphasizes the ineluctable effects of temporality on the human condition. It is no surprise, argues Montaigne, that certainty of judgment is impossible, since both "the judging and the judged [are] in continual change and motion" (455). The perceiving human subject can have "no communication with being" because all things, including the would-be knower, are "coming into being and not yet fully existent" (455). Similarly, in *Hamlet* human beings are depicted as "fools of nature" (1.4.54), caught in an unstable temporal flux and subject to unpredictable change: "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5.43-4). Laertes, for example, tells Ophelia to consider Hamlet's

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professions of love as merely "Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute" (1.3.8-9) because "young" Hamlet is still in a process of becoming: "as this temple waxes,/ The inward service of the mind and soul/ Grows wide withal" (1.3.12-4). While the characters ideally wish to master time – "Take thy fair hour, Laertes, time be thine,/ And thy best graces spend it at thy will" (1.2.62-3) – they find this extraordinarily difficult, and the overall impression is that of temporal dislocation: "The time is out of joint" (1.5.196). The great determinative fact is the brevity of human existence: "a man's life [is] no more than to say 'one'" (5.2.74). From this standpoint, time is in desperately short supply: "Not shriving-time allow'd" (5.2.46); "Had I but time" (5.2.341). Yet, from another standpoint, time may seem intolerably long, especially when "the whips and scorns of time" (3.1.70) inflict protracted suffering. Human beings typically misspend and waste time rather than redeem it; Hamlet, for example, accuses himself of being "lapsed in time and passion" (3.4.108). Some actions, like the killing of Polonius, fail for being "untimely" (4.1.40) or premature, while others, like the killing of Claudius, "come tardy off" (3.2.25). Time-pleasers, like Osric, strive to achieve modishness but only manage to get "the tune of the time" (5.2.186-7). Time frustrates human desires and designs, irrespective of reason or will. Claudius, in counselling Laertes to revenge, brings the problem of temporality into sharp focus:

Not that I think you did not love your father,  
But that I know love is begun by time,  
And that I see, in passages of proof,  
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.  
There lives within the very flame of love  
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,

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And nothing is at a like goodness still,  
For goodness, growing to a plurisy,  
Dies in his own too much. That we would do,  
We should do when we would; for this 'would' changes,  
And hath abatements and delays as many  
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,  
And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh,  
That hurts by easing.

(4.7.110-23 )

As Claudius points out, everything born in time changes and ceases to be; even the strongest passions and best intentions abate in the face of temporal contingencies. As the Player King tells the Player Queen, "what we do determine oft we break," either because the original motivating passion lapses or because circumstances change arbitrarily (3.2.192-219).

Indeed, with respect to the alleged agency of the sovereign self, *Hamlet* depicts human beings as mere "player" kings and queens, whose wills are tragically limited: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/ That our devices still are overthrown:/ Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (3.2.206-8). Hamlet himself is emblematic of the human condition in that his "will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth" (1.3.17-8), and "nature cannot choose his origin" (1.4.26). If Pico instantiates the image of self-fashioned, self-determined human beings ascending to divinization through the exercise of the intellect, *Hamlet*, like Montaigne's "Apology," seems calculated "to crush and trample underfoot human arrogance and pride; to make them feel the inanity, the vanity and nothingness, of man; to wrest from their hands the puny weapons of their reason; to make them bow their heads and bite the ground beneath the

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authority and reverence of divine majesty."<sup>28</sup>

**Enter *Homo Histrio***

How then does the notion of *homo histrio* represent a viable alternative to *homo rationalis*, mediating between Piconian ideals and Montaignean critique. First, *homo histrio* implies modest claims about human capabilities and potential rather than hyperbolic ones. The actor in Shakespeare's time was often an undignified figure of folly. Alluding to the theatrical profession, the speaker in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 110" laments that he has "gone here and there,/ And made [himself] a motley to the view" (1-2),<sup>29</sup> i.e. a public fool. In the Elizabethan context, a player (presuming he was not an unlicensed "rogue" or "vagabond") would possess the official status of a servant in a noble house, a subordinate "coming to offer...service" (2.2.317). Little would be expected from actors besides "abridgement" (2.2.416) or entertaining diversion, even from "the best actors in the world" (2.2.392), as Polonius calls the "tragedians of the city" (2.2.327). Yet *homo histrio* is not simply the antithesis of Pico's sovereign self; rather, the actor exposes the truth that sovereignty itself is merely a role – "He that plays the king shall be welcome" (2.2.318) – not part of the human essence. Theatrical imitation *per se* tends to undermine human pretensions to power, dignity, and freedom, and to level social hierarchies; indeed, the more skilful the imitation, the more we recognize the artificial, 'scripted,' and performative nature of social and political life, and metadrama – which presses the analogy between theatrical and social roles -- intensifies this effect. As we watch Claudius watching the performance of the Player-King, for example, we cannot help but reflect that Claudius himself is merely playing the role of king, and we may judge his "seeming" (3.2.87) as we would that of an actor. Indeed, the mere presence of the actors at Elsinore not only makes visible the staginess of

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<sup>28</sup> Montaigne, "Apology," 327.

<sup>29</sup> *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2007).

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the conventions by which Danish society coheres, but simultaneously disrupts or suspends these codes, as suggested by Hamlet's half-hearted apology to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Th' appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony. Let me comply with you in this garb – lest my extent to the players, which I tell you must show fairly outwards, should more appear like entertainment than yours" (2.2.367-71). "With much forcing if his disposition" (3.1.12) and "in the beaten way of friendship" (2.2.269-70), Hamlet complies with the ceremonial forms prescribed by the code of courtesy yet in doing so reveals their empty conventionality. One important function of the courtesy code is to reinforce social hierarchies, in this instance to mark the distinction between the common players and Hamlet's schoolfellows. Yet these distinctions are not observed; Hamlet insists that Polonius entertain the players as social equals: "Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (525-7).

*Homo histrio*, unlike *homo rationalis*, does not claim certitude of knowledge or judgment. In the theatrical paradigm, the threshold of human knowledge is narrowly circumscribed. Erving Goffman, in his "dramaturgical" account of self and society, approaches social interaction as a realm of performance in which individuals play social roles, act out "routines" – pre-established patterns of action – and influence others through various forms of concealment and "stage management."<sup>30</sup> In the interpersonal realm, he argues, we can ascertain the inner reality of other people – their attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and motives – only indirectly, through inferences based on their avowals and involuntary expressive behaviour.<sup>31</sup> We see a similar perspective operative in *Hamlet*, where the Prince plots with Horatio to scrutinize Claudius's looks during "The Murder of Gonzago":

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<sup>30</sup> Goffman, *Presentation*, 6-16.

<sup>31</sup> Goffman, *Presentation*, 2-4.

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I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,  
Even with the very comment of thy soul  
Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt  
Do not unkennel in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,  
And my imaginations are as foul  
As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note;  
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,  
And after we will both our judgments join  
In censure of his seeming.

(3.2.78-87)

Claudius is an audience member, but his reaction to the play is to be assessed as "seeming" or performance, and, like all theatrical performances, it is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Hamlet not only doubts the ghost's word and his own imaginations, but sufficiently doubts his own power of observation to require confirmation from Horatio. Given the ambiguous and collective nature of audience response, theatrical judgment is a matter of consensus, not individualistic whim: "though it makes the unskilful laugh, [overacting and underacting] cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others" (3.3.25-8). Indeed, Hamlet, despite his evident knowledge of theatre, defers to others when he speaks of those "whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine" (2.2.434-5). And, as subsequent events illustrate, he has good reason to doubt. When Claudius rises and yells, "Give me some light" (3.2.263), for example, he is not unambiguously conceding his murderous guilt. The theatrical action which precipitates the interruption of the

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play is a regicide performed by "Lucianus, nephew to the King" (3.2.239), and it is possible that the court interprets Claudius's response, not as guilt, but as justifiable outrage at being threatened by his own nephew: "The King, sir...[is] in his retirement marvellous distempered...with choler" (3.2.274-8). Then, in the scene that follows, Hamlet totally misinterprets Claudius's performance, assuming that bent knees signify a repentant heart, when in fact Claudius's "thoughts remain below" (3.3.97).

The conception of *homo histrio* also implies a severe circumscription of the individual will. Theatrical art is of necessity cooperative and collaborative, not individualistic. It is significant that none of the players is identified by name; each is distinguished rather by the various theatrical types or 'lines of business' in which he specializes: adventurous knight, lover, humorous man, lady, etc. (2.2.319-24). One of the reasons Hamlet despises ranting actors who "tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings" (3.2.10-1) and the clowns who pander to the "barren spectators" for cheap laughs (3.2.38-45) is that both are guilty of "pitiful ambition" (3.2.44) in a properly collective enterprise; to draw attention to oneself when "some necessary question of the play be then to be considered" (3.2.39, 42-3) is selfish and self-defeating. Good playwrights and actors, according to Hamlet, cultivate subtlety and self-restraint, the subordination of individual aspiration and precocity to the effect of the whole: "I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine" (2.2.437-41). This subordination of individual to collective good is a healthy corrective to the solipsism of *homo rationalis*.

*Homo histrio* also implies a more plausible relation to temporality than *homo rationalis*, one which fully acknowledges human subjection to contingency and finitude, and in so doing

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provides an alternative to Pico's sovereign self. *Hamlet* emphasizes the players' vulnerability to the vicissitudes of fortune and temporal change in a variety of ways. For example, attention is called to the players' economic dependence. Actors, unlike Pico's philosopher, cannot afford to pursue their art in glorious isolation or to engage in the leisure of disinterested contemplation. Playing is their source of income, as we are reminded a number of times: "his Majesty shall have tribute on me" (2.2.318-9); "the lover shall not sigh gratis" (2.2.320-1); "if their means are no better" (2.2.347-8); "There was for a while no money bid for argument" (2.2.352).<sup>32</sup> Actors are likewise painfully subject to changing theatrical tastes and fashions. The city company has been forced to travel because the "little eyases that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't...are now the fashion" (2.2.337-9); that is, a rival boys' company, specializing in shrill, polemical plays, have diminished their audience share and profit. This threat to the players' livelihood is not attributable to a decline in quality, for "their endeavour keeps in the wonted pace" (2.2.336). Rather the restless, novelty-seeking theatre-going public is only interested in personal attacks, where "the poet and the player went to cuffs in the question" (2.2.353-4). This is not an anomaly. The nature of the theatrical enterprise renders players subject to the praise and blame, no matter how inane, of amateur critics, "who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" (3.2.11-2). The instability of mass audience taste is not merely a professional hazard for actors, but emblematic of the human condition. Hamlet compares the fickleness of the theatre audience to the Danish public's changing response to Claudius: "those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little" (2.2.360-2).

Paradoxically, however, *homo histrio*, whose subjection to temporal contingencies is

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<sup>32</sup> Hamlet himself jokes that, should his own fortunes "turn Turk" (i.e. should he lose his privileged position as prince), he might seek a "fellowship in a cry of players" (3.2.269-72).

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obvious, may master time in a way which *homo rationalis* fails to do. Theatre, of all the arts, is the most evanescent, and thus a powerful trope for the temporal finitude of human life, perhaps expressed most poignantly in Prospero's "Our revels now are ended" speech in *The Tempest*:

These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And – like the baseless fabric of this vision –  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Lead not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

(4.1.148-58)

As Prospero indicates, the evanescence of the theatrical illusion is a mirror of the human condition. Yet this very quality, as Hamlet observes, makes the actor the authoritative interpreter of the present: "Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live" (2.2.519-22). The purpose of playing, he asserts, is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.22-4). In both its form and content, drama bears faithful witness to the poignant brevity of human lives.

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*Homo histrio* may likewise provide an imaginative solution to the problem of language. *Hamlet* implies that theatrical representation, as both text and performance, is a use of language better adapted to the real world than dialectic. "In the corrupted currents of this world" (3.4.57), as *Hamlet* depicts it, direct, earnest, sincere communication is not possible, except in rare circumstances. The truth, as Polonius's metaphors indicate, is virtually always concealed and can only be accessed by means of stratagem and subterfuge: "Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth,/ And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,/ With windlasses and with assays of bias,/ By indirections find directions out..." (2.1.62-5). Working on the Montaignean premise that language is fallen, the protagonist seeks adaptative strategies rather than longing nostalgically for linguistic purity. Like Polonius, he adopts various "fetch[es] of warrant" (2.1.39), most obviously his "antic disposition" (1.5.180).<sup>33</sup> The most important of these tactics of indirection is theatrical representation:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play,  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaimed their malefactions;  
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.  
I'll tent him to the quick. If `a do blench

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<sup>33</sup> He even takes sardonic pleasure in the "sport" of outwitting and undermining his enemies: "O, `tis most sweet/ When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.210-1).

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I know my course.

(2.2.601-10)

Here, Hamlet attributes the efficacy of dramatic language, specifically its ability to penetrate the human conscience, to "the very cunning of the scene" (2.2.586), that is, its self-effacing artfulness. Another virtue of effective dramatic language is "modesty" or restraint; Hamlet praises an unnamed but exemplary play as "well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning" (2.2.435-7) and instructs the players, "o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (3.2.19). Dramatic language, as he conceives it, is inherently disingenuous, hiding its deadly seriousness and its learning behind the pretense of inconsequentiality: "they do but jest – poison in jest" (3.2.229). Plays are effective because people normally think of them as trivial; thus, they circumvent the audience's psychic defences, eliciting, for example, involuntary admissions of hidden guilt: "the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.600-1). Just as "A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear" (4.3.22-3), a good play is "a knavish piece of work" (3.2.234), mischievously deploying irony ("Marry, this is *miching malicho*. It means mischief" [3.2.135]), "That's wormwood" [3.2.176]) and testing its auditors' wit.

And yet, despite these adaptations to a corrupt world, dramatic language may serve as a powerful instrument of truth, holding the mirror up to nature (3.2.20-3). One cannot, of course, take its truth for granted or construe it simplistically. As Kernan writes, the meaning of the internal plays in Hamlet are deeply ambiguous, and they demonstrate "that plays can be used to conceal truth as well as reveal it, and that they can be used to manipulate reality for base purposes as noble ones."<sup>34</sup> While it is a cliché that mirrors tell us the objective truth about ourselves, we all know that mirrors can be arranged in such a manner as to deceive sight. Yet theatrical language has, in addition to its indirection and modesty, an advantage over ordinary

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<sup>34</sup> Kernan, *Playwright*, 109-10.

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discourse. The merely verbal may degenerate into "words, words, words" (2.2.192), while the merely gestural, like the dumb show which precedes "The Mousetrap," may leave its audience in a state of incomprehension (3.2.134). As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, "Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is human disclosed by the word..."<sup>35</sup> Words are not in themselves enough, nor are actions, but perhaps a disciplined synthesis of word and action can reliably represent internal and external reality, and drama is precisely such a synthesis: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17).

*Homo histrio* provides a more nuanced and plausible conception of the self than *homo rationalis*, mediating once again between the ideals of Pico and the critique of Montaigne. The self is neither, as Pico would have it, a rigid hierarchy with reason on top, nor a chaotic torpor as Montaigne depicts it, but rather a dynamic equilibrium in which various human faculties, the irrational and corporeal included, cooperate, taking predominant roles in turn. In theatrical terms, one might call the self an 'ensemble piece' rather than a 'star-turn' for rationality. Plays are certainly the products of human rationality; common Elizabethan synonyms for play and plot are "argument" (2.2.352; 3.2.136) and "question" (2.2.354; 3.1.42-3), terms drawn from the rhetorical lexicon. Yet theatre, for both performers and audiences, equally engages the emotions. Upon arrival, the First Player is asked to deliver "a passionate speech" (2.2.427) which is nevertheless delivered "with good accent and good discretion" (2.2.461-2). As the speech progresses, the player's performance becomes increasingly passionate and intense, so that Polonius finds the display of emotion unseemly: "Look whe'er he has not turned his colour and

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<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178-9.

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has tears in's eyes. Prithee no more" (2.2.515-6). Hamlet's response gets closer to the heart of the matter:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wanned;  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her?

(2.2.545-53)

Hamlet contrasts his own inadequate reaction to the seduction of his mother and the murder of his father with the actor's remarkable emotional identification with Hecuba, a mere fictional character. He goes on to amplify the contrast first by accusing himself of apathy, then by indulging in a fit of uncontrolled rage, and finally by reproaching himself for losing his temper at all. If we look at the scene emblematically, we see that *homo histrio* (in the person of the First Player) succeeds in achieving what *homo rationalis* (in the person of Hamlet) cannot: a satisfying emotional release in the context of affective discipline and harmony. He succeeds, not through philosophical reflection or mere repression, but through the exercise of imagination or "conceit" (2.2.547, 551), which directs the player's entire being -- soul, voice, facial expressions,

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bodily gestures -- toward the rational end of representation. This is precisely the balance Hamlet recommends in his advice to the players and often lacks in himself: "in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.... Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor" (3.1.5, 16-7). That is, *homo histrio* recuperates *homo rationalis*'s objective of passional discipline through a different set of means.

One common sense objection to this is that the actor's passions are "fake" and those of Hamlet "real." Yet the play confounds this distinction: "What would he do/ Had he the motive and the cue for passion/ That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,/ And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, / Make mad the guilty, and appal the free,/ Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed/ The very faculties of eyes and ears" (2.2.554-60). Though he is ostensibly contending for the depth and authenticity of his own passion, Hamlet puts himself and the player on the same footing by using theatrical terms like "motive" and "cue," and by imagining a theatrical representation of his emotional turmoil. Moreover, repeatedly, the unrestrained indulgence of Hamlet's putatively authentic emotions produces melodramatic over-acting, such as his volcanic self-reproach (2.2.561-78), his murderous rage toward, and outrageous rebuke of, Gertrude (3.2.379-90; 3.4.65-101), and his ranting attempt to outdo Laertes's grief over Ophelia's death (5.1.247-79). That is, Hamlet is guilty of precisely the sort of "o'erdone" performances against which he cautions the players prior to "The Murder of Gonzago": "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings.... I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it" (3.2.8-14). Thus, the line between authenticity and inauthenticity, between being and seeming, is blurred. Is Hamlet

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"really" ready to "drink hot blood" (3.2.381) or does his love for Ophelia "genuinely" exceed that of 40,000 brothers (5.1.264-5). It is impossible to know for certain.

Perhaps, the play implies, an obsessive concern with authenticity in defining the self is counter-productive, and one should be content merely to play one's role with integrity and skill. Under the aspect of *homo histrio*, the self is neither a fixed, timeless unity nor a void. In playing a role, the actor engages in a form of self-fashioning, as Pico would have it, but it is not creation *ex nihilo*. In the formation of character, the actor enjoys a measured rather than boundless freedom; his choices are limited by a variety of factors: the dramatic text, theatrical convention, collaboration with other actors, and his own talent. The self, as exemplified by *homo histrio*, might be described as fluid and mutable, but this is not to say, as has sometimes been claimed, that the actor has no identity whatsoever.<sup>36</sup> As Richard Hornby observes, the recognition that human identities are not innate but are rather, like theatrical roles, relative, acquired, constructed, and revisable, does not therefore render the self an arbitrary fiction; in fact, people with a weak sense of identity generally make poor actors, while an actor with a strong sense of identity can afford a flexible ego boundary so that the "role extends his sense of self but does not displace it."<sup>37</sup> The acquisition of human character, as in Hamlet's exhortation to Gertrude, is a disciplinary process involving imagination, imitation, and rehearsal:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.

That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,

Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,

That to the use of action fair and good

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<sup>36</sup> Colin McGinn, for example, interprets the actor as a figure for what he variously calls Shakespeare's pessimism, skepticism, nihilism, and naturalism. In a rather gross overstatement, he claims that, early in the play, Hamlet has no character whatsoever, and that he turns to acting to fill the abyss he finds within (*Philosophy*, 15, 45-6, 49).

<sup>37</sup> Hornby, *Metadrama*, 71, 72, 113.

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He likewise gives a frock or livery  
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,  
And that shall lend a kind of easiness  
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;  
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,  
And either curb the devil, or throw him out  
With wondrous potency.

(3.4.162-72)

The phrase "put on" suggests an actor putting on a mask or a costume, working from the external to the internal. Later, Hamlet describes in a letter to Horatio another theatrical assumption of virtue: "Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valor, and in the grapple I boarded them" (4.6.17-8). The key question, from the standpoint of *homo histrio*, is not, "Who am I, really?" but "What does the occasion require me to be?" The actor is committed to the principle of decorum or propriety, and must accordingly thread the needle between discretion and indiscretion, deliberation and rashness: "Rashly --/ And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know/ Our indiscretion sometime serves us well/ When our deep plots do pall.../ . . . / Being thus benetted round with villainies -- / Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,/ They had begun the play -- I sat me down, / Devised a new commission, wrote it fair" (5.2.4-9, 29-36). Plots, prologue, play – the passage is unquestionably metadramatic and a powerful counterpart to Hamlet's earlier exhortation to the actors, "let your own discretion be your tutor" (3.2.16-7). *Homo histrio* recognizes that sometimes decorum requires performing the lines as they are set down in the script (3.2.38-9) but other times requires inspired improvisation.

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Finally, *homo histrio* constitutes an imaginative solution to Hamlet's anxieties about human agency or the lack thereof. Hamlet longs for freedom and autonomy, and can imagine nothing worse than being a kind of musical instrument "played upon" by Fate, Fortune, or another human being. But, as the play demonstrates, not even the most eminent among us are free in the absolute sense; human nature is conditioned and the human will bounded by powerful determinative forces:

...these men,  
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,  
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,  
As infinite as man may undergo,  
Shall in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault. The dram of evil  
Doth all the noble substance often dout  
To his own scandal.

(1.4.30-8)

This tragic circumscription of individual will and agency is analogous to the actor being cast in a dramatic role; both constitute the imposition of a narrative destiny: "but heaven hath pleased it so,/ To punish me with this, and this with me,/ That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.175-7). Hamlet is evidently dissatisfied with his own role; he does not wish to play the clichéd revenger's part, for which he is unsuited in terms of disposition and inclination. And if he must play the role, he wants to dictate the conditions of performance: that his actions be

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honourable and just in his own eyes, and perspicuous to those who are "but mutes or audience to this act" (5.2.340):

Report me and my cause aright

To the unsatisfied.

.....

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,

Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

(5.2.344-5, 349-54)

Just as he interpolates "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.535) into "The Murder of Gonzago" and, chorus-like, interrupts it (3.2.240), Hamlet attempts to rewrite the revenger's role from within, imposing his will on recalcitrant materials and questioning the assumptions on which the revenge play is based. Rather than perform the role according to the standard cultural "script," Hamlet resists and delays. He monologues incessantly, bringing the action to a standstill. In the scene where he refrains from killing the praying Claudius, Hamlet not only delays, but appears to usurp the role of cosmic playwright by judging Claudius's inner motivations and insisting that he be eternally damned for his crimes (3.3.73-96). Yet these resistance efforts are largely futile, producing a string of lost opportunities, blind alleys, and unintended disasters.

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The question of agency is tentatively resolved, however, after Hamlet returns from the sea voyage. As Marjorie Garber notes, instead of speaking soliloquies full of questions, conditionals, infinitives, and passive constructions, Hamlet now engages in dialogue with others, and his language is full of active "doing" verbs.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, he apparently ceases to "write" the play from within and accepts the more limited role of being "directed" by Providence: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.9-10); "even in that was heaven ordinaunt" (5.2.48); "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow....The readiness is all" (5.2.215-6, 218). As Maynard Mack observes in his classic essay "The World of *Hamlet*,"

Till his return from the voyage he had been trying to act beyond these, had been encroaching on the role of Providence, ....He had been too quick to take the burden of the whole world and its condition upon his limited and finite self. Faced with a task of sufficient difficulty in its own right, he had dilated it into a cosmic problem -- as indeed every task is, but if we think about this too precisely we cannot act at all...Hamlet has sought to play at God....Now, he has learned that there are limits to the before and after that human reason can comprehend....[T]he roles of life are not entirely self-assigned....Hamlet is ready now for what may happen, seeking neither to foreknow it nor avoid it."<sup>39</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that *homo histrio* is an all-purpose solution to the enigma of human nature in *Hamlet*, a play whose complexity and richness are inexhaustible. Hamlet himself appears to warn the would-be critic to beware of reductive interpretations which presume

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<sup>38</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 502.

<sup>39</sup> Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, Rev. Ed., Ed. Leonard F. Dean, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 260. See as well Kernan, *Playwright*, 109-10.

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to know the unknowable: "Why look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass....`Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.371-80). Within the play, there are obvious failures of theatricality as a strategy, and the players are not held up as paragons.<sup>40</sup> But in fact this evident imperfection makes *homo histrio* more representative than *homo rationalis* in an age of indeterminacy where radical critique like Montaigne's was unsettling established patterns of thought. As Hornby argues, the signature metadramatic trope – the play within the play – engenders perceptual estrangement by inviting the theatrical audience to consider their own existence as illusory and thus tends to be widely used during periods when root notions are being questioned and challenged.<sup>41</sup> *Homo histrio*, as *Hamlet* depicts it, is a figure which mediates between optimistic and pessimistic perspective on human nature, providing a modest and tentative solution to the human enigma in an age of uncertainty, "grounds/ More relative" (2.2.599-600), not absolute.

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<sup>40</sup> See for example, Hamlet's anti-theatrical "heckling" of the players during "The Mousetrap" (3.2.135, 137-42, 147, 246-8).

<sup>41</sup> Hornby, *Metadrama*, 46, 180.

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