Hamlet before Its Time

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No work in the English literary canon has been so closely identified with the beginning of the modern age as Hamlet. By speaking his thoughts in soliloquy, by reflecting on his own penchant for thought, by giving others cause to worry about what he is thinking, Hamlet draws attention to what is putatively going on inside him. It is for this psychological depth and complexity that Hamlet has been hailed as the inaugural figure of the modern period, “the Western hero of consciousness.”¹ That he has retained this status for a good two hundred years is remarkable, for what constitutes modern subjectivity has continued to change. It is not the same in 2000 as it was in 1950 or 1900, much less in 1800. All the same, Hamlet has kept pace with the advancing time; he is timeless in value precisely because he is found timely by each successive age. He remains perennially at the vanguard of the contemporary, anticipating back in 1600 the cutting edge of the most recent now. Quite a feat—especially for a character famous as a procrastinator.

But what a strange prolepsis. How can a work be anachronous with its own time and contemporaneous with one several centuries later? What does it mean when a work has to wait several hundred years before history catches up with it and it can be properly appreciated and understood? Are we assuming a typological relation by which Hamlet must await its recognition and fulfillment in the present, as the Old Testament awaits its own in the New? Or do we still believe in the sen-

timental but no less mystical genius of Shakespeare’s “prophetic soul / . . . dreaming on things to come”? Or does the name early modern guarantee a special affinity with the late modern or the postmodern, as if by grammatical necessity? In an attempt to understand this prolepsis, I will focus on the work that possesses perhaps the longest history of being ahead of its time. What follows may be no more than a demonstration of the obvious: Hamlet acquired its precocious modernity only with the arrival of the modern period itself. Yet without such a demonstration, what appears modern in Hamlet seems not to have been acquired at a later point in history but to have been present from the start. This essay centers precisely on the period between that start in 1600 and that later point in 1800. These interstitial two centuries tend to be phased out by Hamlet’s identification with the modern, not unlike the millennium-long interval between the Renaissance and antiquity that we still call the Middle Ages.

Hamlet was decidedly not always considered modern. Early allusions suggest that it was regarded as behind the times. To begin with, it was a recycling of an earlier play. Even the supposed original, the Ur-Hamlet, was remembered not for its novelty but for its tired formulas and stock devices. A remark from 1589 satirizes the play for its dependence on the Senecan elements of murder, madness, and revenge and for its timeworn diction, fraught with commonplaces (“good sentences”) and

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3 John Lee argues just the opposite: Hamlet’s interiority is present from the start in the 1604 and 1623 texts (Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Controversies of Self [Oxford: Clarendon, 2000]).

set pieces ("handfuls . . . of tragical speeches").\(^5\) Another reference, from 1596, indicates that the play was already so familiar that the ghost’s injunction—"Hamlet, revenge!"—registered as a byword.

These responses to the Ur-Hamlet might just as well have greeted Shakespeare’s Hamlet when it was first staged several years later. Like its precedent, it was set in the remote times of Nordic legend. It, too, depended on the Senecan formula of murder, madness, and revenge. It, too, was made up of old-fashioned stage conventions (the dumb show and the play-within-the-play), stiff set pieces (like the Player’s speech), and a grab bag of sententiae (e.g., “All that lives must die” [1.2.72], “To thine own self be true” [1.3.78], and “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” [5.2.10]). Of course, it retained the most archaic feature of all: the ghost of old Hamlet, returning from an old-faith purgatory, enjoining the old-law revenge of both the Old Testament and the primitive lex talionis. Shakespeare’s Hamlet, it might be said, was old on arrival. Its sententious rhetoric and venerable topoi may explain why the play particularly appealed to “the wiser sort.”\(^6\) In any event, as the majority of the seventeenth-century allusions indicate, it was the old ghost rather than young Hamlet who attracted the most attention.\(^7\) In 1604 one author does attribute the play’s popularity to the Prince and wishes that the same acclaim would greet his own work: “Faith it should please all, like Prince Hamlet.”\(^8\) Yet the pleasure Hamlet gives derives not from what he has within (“that within which passeth show”) but from what he puts on (his “antic disposition”). If to “please all” requires a man to be “moone-sicke” and “runne madde,” better to have “displeased all,” concludes the author. Indeed, several references suggest that Hamlet’s “running mad” was a favorite stunt, literally enacted on the early stage. A character named Hamlet makes a brief appear-

\(^5\) For evidence of the Ur-Hamlet see Harold Jenkins, ed., Hamlet, Arden ed. (London: Methuen, 1982), 82–85. All quotations from Hamlet are taken from this edition.

\(^6\) For a transcription of this manuscript note in Gabriel Harvey’s 1598 copy of Chaucer’s Works see the appendix in Jenkins, 573–74.


ance in George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston’s *Eastward Ho!* (1605): “Enter Hamlet a footeman in haste,” reads the stage direction, and, as an attendant’s response indicates, his haste is quite frantic: “S’foote Hamlet; are you madde? Whether run you now?”9 In two works Thomas Dekker also alludes to Hamlet in distracted motion: “break[ing] loose like a Beare from the stake” and “rush[ing] in by violence.”10 In the early decades of the play’s performance, then, Hamlet’s signature action appears to have been not paralyzing thought but frenzied motion, which would have linked him more with the knockabout clown of folk tradition than with the introspective consciousness acclaimed in the modern period.11

Hamlet continued to appear old after 1660, when Charles II, returning from exile in France, reopened the theaters—after an almost twenty-year hiatus—with the formation of two theatrical companies. When the repertoire of English plays was divided between them, those of Shakespeare, consisting of “antiquated manners, morals, language and wit,” were considered more old-fashioned than those of Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shirley. John Evelyn, after seeing a performance in November 1661, jotted in his diary, “I saw Hamlet, Prince of Denmark played, but now the old plays began to disgust this refined age.”12 In the “refined age of the Restoration,” Hamlet, like all Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, belonged to the cruder previous period or “last age” before the regnal shift from Charles I to Charles II.13 Beyond that unprecedentedly long, hard shift, English letters appeared back-

12 Evelyn, diary entry of 26 November 1661, quoted in CR, 1:14.
ward or even barbarous, as Samuel Johnson noted: “The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity.”14 Shakespeare, according to David Hume, was the product of such backward times: “born in a rude age, and educated in the lowest manner, without any instruction, either from the world or books.”15 England, because of Shakespeare’s widespread reputation for “rudeness,” continued to suffer the reproach of barbarism, especially in France, where Voltaire notoriously panned Hamlet as “grosière et barbare.”16 The basis of the later century’s contempt for the earlier was clear. Prior to the interregnum the English stage largely lacked or ignored the canons of taste newly culled after the Restoration from Aristotle, Horace, and their sixteenth-century Italian and seventeenth-century French redactors. What had been written without classical models was considered “gothic,” that is, in the manner of the Goths, the barbarian hordes who had destroyed the Roman Empire. According to William Warburton, while Shakespeare would have liked to write Hamlet in the classical style, he had fallen back into the “old Gothic manner” to please vulgar tastes.17

Thus Hamlet, timeworn on arrival, was regarded after the Restoration and well into the eighteenth century as “antiquated,” “old,” “barbarous,” and even “gothic.” So when did it become the herald of the latest modern?

In perhaps our first reference to Shakespeare’s version, Hamlet is classified as “moderne.” Gabriel Harvey discusses the best works in English, “auncient & moderne”; Lydgate and Chaucer represent the ancient, while Hamlet and other works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries make up the modern.18 In this earlier and still current sense of the word, Hamlet was modern from the start.19 Our frequent use of modern

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18 See n. 7 above.
19 Shakespeare himself uses modern interchangeably with recent to imply a comparison with something prior. When Jaques refers to “wise saws and modern
to designate the modern period and its defining features tends to obscure its original referent in both Latin and its vernacular translations. The word’s function was once exclusively deictic: its signification, like that of *today, now,* and *at present,* depended on the time of its utterance. Thus in the Middle Ages, Charlemagne’s Holy Roman Empire was *modernum* as opposed to Constantine’s, and Gentiles were *moderni* in contrast to Jews, as were medieval theologians in comparison to the church fathers.20 In this earlier sense, *modern* implied its own inevitable supersession. In 1555 Mary was the “quene moderne,” but she remained such only until succeeded by Elizabeth in 1558.21 Shakespeare himself ceased to be modern in English literary histories after the Restoration, when he became “our old Dramatick Poet,” in contrast to such playwrights as Dryden, Congreve, and Rowe;22 the quartos of his time were considered “ancient” and were replaced in the eighteenth century by “modern” editions.

In one sense, however, Shakespeare’s status as modern could not be overtaken. In the debate over the relative achievements of ancients and moderns, Shakespeare invariably represented the modern drama. In an account of the ancient and modern stages in 1699, Sophocles is

instances” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.155), a contrast is assumed between the former (axioms formulated of old) and the latter (recent examples that confirm their truth). Similarly, the “modern friends” for whom the captive Cleopatra sets aside a few trifling jewels are of slight and passing importance, we must assume, compared to tried-and-true alliances (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.163). So, too, the “modern grace” by which Bertram claims that Diana seduced him has resulted, to his mind, from makeshift, superficial artifice as opposed to the inbred attraction of aristocratic lineage (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, 5.3.218). In all of these instances, *modern* suggests the derivative and ephemeral, generally implying a decline from what came before. This is especially so when poetry is the subject. In sonnet 83, when Shakespeare disparages the “modern quill” that cannot match its subject—“How far a modern quill doth come too short”—he undoubtedly intends it to be measured against the more skillful pen of an Ovid or a Horace (see John Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets and “A Lover’s Complaint”* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981], 277 n. 7). Sonnet 59 explicitly invokes the contrast when the poet looks “in some antique book” to determine “whether we are mended, or whe’er better they.”

set against Shakespeare, “the Proto-Dramatist of England.” Any English dramatist might have qualified as modern in this context, for in its widest sense the term referred to the period after the fall of Rome, specifically to the vernacular languages spoken after the demise of the classical ones. But Shakespeare’s special claim to modernity initially resided in his alleged ignorance of the ancients. As the front matter to the 1623 Folio edition of his plays emphasized, his literary achievement was to be credited to nature, not art, to his native gifts rather than his acquired learning. Jonson’s emulous pronouncement that Shakespeare possessed “small Latin and less Greek” may well have contained a thinly veiled charge of barbarism; like the barbarian tribes, Shakespeare lacked fluency in the classical tongues. Without the guidance of the ancient languages, canons, and models, his writing was repeatedly judged after the Restoration to be irregular, unruly, extravagant, and wild. As a result, his works provided the perfect objects for the new art of criticism, whose business was, after all, to be critical. In Johnson’s words, “The great contention of criticism is to find the faults of the moderns and the beauties of the ancients.” Even when he drew on an ancient subject, as in the Player’s recitation from “Aeneas’ tale to Dido” (Hamlet, 2.2.442–43), Shakespeare was accused of having turned to an account “daub’d and bungled by one of his Countrymen” rather than to the ancients: “How comes it then that we hear nothing from him of the Oedipus, the Electra, the Antigone of Sophocles, of the Iphigenia’s, the Orestes, the Medea, the Hecuba of Euripides?” The Player’s speech became a critical focal point throughout the century as critics debated whether it demonstrated Shakespeare’s ignorance or his knowledge of the ancients. Dryden, judging its style uncouthly vocational, found traces of a “wheelwright” in the description of “the spokes and felleys” of fortune’s wheel and of a “ragman” in Hecuba’s “clout and blanket.” Warburton, however, insisted that the speech

26 John Dennis, An Essay upon the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare (1711), in CR, 1:50.
27 Dryden, preface to his adaptation of Troilus and Cressida (1679), in CR, 1:15–16.
bore evidence of Shakespeare’s ability to write a “Tragedy on the model of Greek Drama” (CR, 1:154).

In comparisons between ancient and modern dramas, Shake-
speare’s plots were thought to have particularly suffered from his neglect of the classics.28 Derived from the wrong sources—from modern rather than classical fictions and histories—they hopelessly viol-
ated the unities of time and space. But as critics repeatedly main-
tained, Shakespeare’s shoddy plots were offset by his excellent characters. His plays inverted Aristotle’s celebrated priority, “Plot is the origin and as it were the soul of tragedy, and the characters are sec-
ondary.”29 The inversion was especially obvious in a comparison intro-
duced in the first edition of Shakespeare’s works by Nicholas Rowe (1709): “Hamlet is founded upon much the same Tale with the Electra of Sophocles”; in both cases, a son must avenge his father’s death on the murderer who has married his mother.30 Yet their treatment of char-
acter, not plot (or tale or fable), primarily interested Rowe, for here Shakespeare excelled Sophocles: Hamlet, unlike Orestes, refrained from killing his own mother and thereby demonstrated Shakespeare’s greater respect for “the rules of manner [or morality] proper to Per-
sons.” This comparison of ancient Electra to modern Hamlet was repeated throughout the century, almost invariably to distinguish Hamlet’s decorousness or “decency” from the lack of it in his ancient matricidal counterpart.31

30 Rowe, Life of Shakespeare (1709), in CR, 1:30.
31 Charles Gildon takes issue with Rowe, denying the superiority of Shake-
speare’s play (with its “abundance of Errors” of both character and plot) and defend-
ing Sophocles against the charge of “Barbarity” by pointing out that matricide was a requirement of the legend and not the dramatist’s invention (Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare [1710], in CR, 1:39). Most critics agree with Rowe, however, stressing Hamlet’s “decency” toward his mother as evidence that, at least in regard to charac-
ter, Shakespeare did respect the rules. George Stubbes twice insists on Shakespeare’s “great Delicacy” in having the ghost caution Hamlet to spare his mother and criti-
cizes Sophocles for overstepping the bounds of tragic terror: “There is something too shocking in a mother’s being put to Death by her Son, although she be never so guilty” (Some Remarks on “The Tragedy of Hamlet,” published anonymously in 1736 and recently attributed to Stubbes [New York: AMS Press, 1975], 24–41). Malone in 1790 and Boswell-Malone in 1821 reproduce much of Stubbes’s essay in their editions of
By the end of the century, however, the comparison had broken down. The two characters ceased to be comparable:

The Orestes of the Greek . . . interests us for the accomplishment of his purpose; but of him we think only as the instrument of that justice which we wish to overtake the murderers of Agamemnon. . . . but when Horatio exclaims on the death of his friend, “Now crack’d a noble heart!” we forget the murder of the King, the villainy of Claudius, the guilt of Gertrude; our recollection dwells only on the memory of that “sweet prince.”

While we evaluate Orestes in terms of the plot (will he accomplish his purpose?), we appreciate Hamlet only as a character (we forget everything but that “sweet prince”). Two other critics in the same decade concur: one dismisses the plot as having “slight importance,” insisting that our involvement with the play “exclusively spring[s] from our attachment to the person of Hamlet.” Another imagines that Shakespeare “finding the character of Hamlet to grow upon him . . . eventually threw more interest into the person than into the plot . . . Hamlet, in his sole person, predominating over, and almost eclipsing the whole action of the drama.”

By the time of Coleridge’s lectures in 1811, there is no need for the qualifying almost: Hamlet does eclipse the plot. Coleridge imagines that Shakespeare constructed a highly charged plot solely to dramatize his main character’s resistance to it:

The poet places [Hamlet] in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in. He is the heir-apparent of a throne: his father dies suspiciously; his mother excludes her son from his throne by marrying his uncle. This is not enough; but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the effect upon the son?—instant action and pursuit of revenge? No: endless reasoning and hesitating.
The shocking plot produces no effect in Hamlet. Hermetically sealed off by his “excessive thought” or “ratiocinative meditativeness,” Hamlet is immune to plot. So, too, is Coleridge’s criticism of him. What need for plot “among such as have a world in themselves”?35

Character now is not only superior to plot but independent of it. Its newfound autonomy emerges in response to a new critical problem: delay. In answering the question “Why does Hamlet delay?” critics came up with an interior—or, rather, innumerable interiors—that preempt or subsume the plot. Hamlet’s delay is seen as symptomatic of some acute emotional or mental state—“exquisite sensibility,” “extreme delicacy,” or “excessive meditation”—that later develops into disorders, pathologies, and neuroses. This is not to say that delay had not been recognized before as a feature of the play.36 Clearly, there was a long lag between Hamlet’s breathless resolution to swoop to his revenge at the play’s start and his killing of Claudius at its end. (Hamlet himself draws attention to this delay; so does the ghost.) Thus George Stubbes, in the first sustained critical treatment of Hamlet (1736), duly commends Hamlet’s character over Orestes’ and finds in this delay “an Absurdity in [Shakespeare’s] Plot.”37 The reason is familiar: Shake-

35 Coleridge, “Notes on Hamlet” (1836), in CR, 2:72, 55.
36 None of the major eighteenth-century editors, from Rowe to Malone, mentions delay; in the 1821 Boswell-Malone edition James Boswell the younger refers to Hamlet’s “incurable habits of procrastination” and to “that irresolution which forms so marked a part of his character” (The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, 21 vols. [London: R. C. and J. Rivington, etc., 1821], 7:535). Boswell cites Schlegel, whose Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature had been translated in 1815, and quotes extracts from Goethe’s William Meister’s Apprenticeship provided “by my friend Mr. Talbot” (7:539).
37 Some Remarks, 5. If Stubbes is the first to comment on delay in Hamlet, it may be because he was the first to use Theobald’s 1733 edition (see Some Remarks, 3), the first edition substantially to conflate the Quarto and Folio Hamlets. As many have noted, it is not likely that the problem of delay was noticed in the highly truncated 1603 version (Q1), and it is less likely in either the 1604 quarto (Q2) or the 1623 folio version (Q3) than in the composite text. The “Players’ Quarto” (1676), attributed to Davenant, cut eight hundred lines from Q2, some of them from the soliloquies; only “To be or not to be” was neither cut nor omitted. The cuts were preserved in the theater for nearly three hundred years. In the seventeenth-century German version of the Hamlet story, Der bestrafte Brudermord or Fratricide Punished, Hamlet gives a simple circumstantial explanation for delay: “I cannot attain my revenge because the fratricide is surrounded at all the time by so many people” (Horace Howard Furness, ed., A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: “Hamlet,” 2 vols. [New York: American Scholar, 1965], 2:139).
speare turned to old rather than ancient models, in this instance, “the wretched old chronicler Saxo” instead of one of “the noble Originals of Antiquity” (6). In Saxo, Hamlet’s counterpart must wait for years—until he has grown up—to exact revenge, and he bides his time by feigning idiocy. In following him, Shakespeare “was obliged to delay his Hero’s Revenge” (27), and through the same expedient, by having him put on a dilatory “antic disposition.” But in the play “there appears no Reason at all in Nature, why this young Prince did not put the Usurper to Death as soon as possible” (27; italics added); however, a reason does appear in Plot: had he done so, the play would have ended as soon as it began.

But by the end of the century the problem has migrated to character. Delay is now a psychological rather than a dramaturgical problem, symptomatic of character rather than inherent in plot. No longer is it the plot that drags, but the protagonist who hesitates. Henceforth inaction becomes Hamlet’s primary characteristic. As Goethe observes, “How he twists and turns, trembles, advances and retreats, always being reminded, always reminding himself, and finally almost losing sight of his goal.”38 As Coleridge also notes, “After still resolving, and still deferring, still determining to execute, and still postponing execution . . . resolving to do everything, he does nothing.”39

It has been noted before that Hamlet is not seen as a character of psychological depth and complexity until the end of the eighteenth century.40 What has not been remarked, however, is the degree to which his problematic interiority depends on the shift of delay from plot to character. Once delay has been internalized as a feature of character, what was once perceived as an irregularity of plot is converted to an excess or a disorder of character. Plot then drops out, except insofar as it expresses character.41 By internalizing plot, Hamlet


40 E.g., William Kerrigan begins his account “Hamlet in History” with the psychologizing accounts of the German Romantics (*Hamlet’s Perfection* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994], 1–33).

41 On plot as so many “characteristic deeds” or “acts or omissions thoroughly expressive of the doer,” see A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on “Hamlet,” “Othello,” “King Lear,” “Macbeth*” (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 29. In lecture 4,
overturned the classical definition of tragedy.42 Hamlet consisted primarily not of a plot that represented an action but of a character incapable of performing an action; Schlegel famously termed it “a tragedy of thought.”43 So radical was the difference that Coleridge, following Schlegel, proposed that Shakespearean drama be regarded as “a different genus, diverse in kind, not merely different in degree,” and therefore, requiring new nomenclature, “we must emancipate ourselves of a false association from misapplied names, and find a new word for the plays of Shakespeare.”44 And so he did: “I have named the true genuine modern poetry the romantic.” Critics who had censured Shakespeare’s genius as rude and uncultivated had confounded a drama governed by “mechanical regularity” imposed from the outside with one shaped by “organic form” developing from within (53). Because the Romantic drama has no connection “with this or that age, this or that country,” the dramatic unities—“the iron compulsion of time and space”—were irrelevant, “imagination [providing] an arbitrary control over both” (51). The neglect of dramatic rules that had made Shakespeare look old-fashioned after the Restoration now hurled him to the vanguard of modern Romantic drama.

It is now that Hamlet starts to appear modern in the sense intended by almost every recent introduction to the play: it is seen to dramatize the “inward nature” that remains aloof from the coordinates of time and place. At this point, modern is more than the shifting chronological term that sets the present against the past, modern Hamlet against ancient Chaucer, and it is more than the ever-enlarging historical span that pitted what came before the fall of Rome against what came after it, modern Hamlet against ancient Electra. Hamlet is now modern because it conforms so readily with the inwardness newly assigned to

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42 William Kerrigan notes how the Romantics used Hamlet as “their rallying point” in their opposition to neoclassicism (7–8).

43 Schlegel, Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, quoted in CR, 2:49. For Coleridge’s use of Schlegel’s criticism, which he had read in German in 1811, see Thomas G. Sauer, A. W. Schlegel’s Shakespearean Criticism in England, 1811–1846 (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1981), 80–100.

nonclassical or Romantic drama. It is now, too, that modern takes on a new temporal orientation as it breaks from the bygone past of the ancient-modern rivalry and opens itself to the upcoming, ever-advancing future. In “The Difference between Ancient and Modern Dramatic Poetry,” Hegel divides modern or Romantic from ancient along similar lines by returning to the familiar contrast between Orestes and Hamlet. While Orestes’ dilemma exists outside himself in the realm of the ethical, Hamlet’s conflict arises in the “particular personality or inner life of Hamlet.” While Orestes is driven by external agents or principles in the form of Apollo or Justice, Hamlet is prompted by his own “prophetic soul.” No longer tied to the exigencies of plot driving the ancient “tragedies of fate,” Hamlet is self-determining, arduously struggling toward the emancipatory future of absolute consciousness.

It is, I suggest, from this construal of Hamlet as a tragedy disembodied from plot and residing in Hamlet that the play acquires its anticipatory outreach. It is then that it assumes its ability to represent a time long in advance of its own production, to dramatize what Harold Bloom has hailed as “the internalization of the self” at a time “before anyone else was ready for it” (429). Freed of time and place, Hamlet is open to any inward postulate that might manifest itself as delay. Without being grounded in his own plot, he accommodates whatever theory of mind, consciousness, or the unconscious can explain his inaction. Thus abstracted, Hamlet is footloose and fancy-free. Bearing the seed of his own destruction, he is inwardly programmed. What need, therefore, of an outward program—of a plot? Once Hamlet has been pried loose from the constraints of time, place, and action, he is free to escape not only his dramatic fiction but his historical period. At this point the expression “Like Hamlet without the Prince” becomes current. Take away the character and precious little remains. The play needs the Prince, but not the other way around. The Prince is so independent of the play that in any context a young man with skull in hand stands iconlike for the self-reflexive, freestanding Hamlet. At this time, too, the verb to hamletize is coined to describe Hamlet’s signature form

46 On this formulation as “the symbol of extreme absurdity” see Bradley, 94.
of expression: the soliloquizing that takes place, quite undramatically, in the absence of both action and other characters.

Hamlet is now ready to take on the image of each new turnover of the modern. Disengaged from his dramatic circumstances, he steps out of his own 1600 into the present of 1800, then of 1900, then of 2000. No longer must a resemblance to Hamlet depend on plot: it is not necessary, as it was for Orestes, to have a father killed and a mother stained. For Coleridge, Hamlet bears witness to “Shakespeare’s deep and accurate science in mental philosophy,” what Coleridge himself has accessed through his “turn for philosophical criticism,” particularly via Kant’s treatment of the primacy of thought in Critique of Pure Judgment (“Notes on Hamlet,” 60). Coleridge claims that to understand Hamlet, “we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds,” and when Coleridge himself does so, he finds there a “smack of Hamlet” (61).47 Hazlitt marvels that Shakespeare could have taken Saxo’s remote Hamlet, “who lived . . . five hundred years before we were born,” and converted him into such a familiar character that “we seem to know [his thoughts] as well as we do our own.” He ascribes to the play “a prophetic truth, which is above that of history,” emanating from Shakespeare’s “prophetic soul,” which could foresee as in a crystal ball Hazlitt’s own present: “It is we who are Hamlet.”48 German critics similarly hail Hamlet as “epoch-making,” providing “a mirror of our present state as if this work had first been written in our own day.”49 For Emerson, the entire nineteenth century’s “speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet,” whose “mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see.”50 At the turn of the nineteenth century George Brandes notes that Hamlet will always be at the vanishing point of our perceptions: “Hamlet, in virtue of his creator’s marvelous power of rising above his time . . . has a range of significance which we, on the threshold of the twentieth century, can foresee no limit.”51 A. C. Bradley in

47 Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, 24 June 1827, in Foakes, 89.
1900 appears to be the first to observe that Hamlet’s importance was not recognized until the Romantic dawn ushered in the modern period: “It was only when the slowly rising sun of Romance began to flush the sky that the wonder, beauty and pathos of this most marvelous of Shakespeare’s creations began to be visible!” (95). Hamlet was so far from “being a characteristic product of [Shakespeare’s] time” that he could only have issued from the visionary powers of a “prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.”

Coleridge initiated the long tradition of addressing the question “Why does Hamlet delay?” on the basis of the latest construal of how the psyche works. Indeed, a genealogy could be traced in which each new identification of Hamlet’s “mystery” shows him anticipating an ever more remote point in the future. Hegel assigns Hamlet the same epochal position in his Aesthetics as he does Descartes in History of Philosophy and Luther in Philosophy of History. All three represent inaugural moments in the final or “modern” phase of the struggle of consciousness toward self-determination. For Hegel, the play is an allegory of the bumpy trajectory of the dialectic. The plot sets up an obstacle course of “colliding factors” through which Hamlet advances against his own irresolution, until in the final scenes he is “bandied from pillar to post” and ends up “sandbanked.” While he sets the process of dialectical self-realization into motion, Hamlet himself can go only so far. In 1600 he exists only at the brink of modern consciousness, before the advances of Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and, of course, Hegel himself.

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53 At the conclusion of History of Philosophy Hegel turns to Hamlet for a metaphor by which to describe philosophy’s hard, twenty-five-hundred-year trajectory and finds an unlikely one: “Well said old mole. Cans’t work in the earth so fast?” The old mole, like the spirit of consciousness, like Hamlet himself until the play’s end, tunnels arduously through earth toward the light that is the freedom of absolute self-determination. For further discussion of the mole’s importance to Marx’s materialism as well as to Hegel’s idealism see Peter Stallybrass, “‘Well Grubbed, Old Mole’: Marx, Hamlet, and the (Un)fixing of Representation,” Cultural Studies 12 (1998): 3–14; and Margreta de Grazia, “Teleology, Delay, and the ‘Old Mole,’” Shakespeare Quarterly 50 (1999): 251–67.
Nietzsche loathed the Hegelian teleology that hubristically placed modern man at the pinnacle of an advancing history, as if he were the be-all and end-all of time, yet for him, too, Hamlet gives direction to the future. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche doubles back to ancient ritual for the Dionysian ideal he projects onto the future. Wagner in 1872 is the modern culmination of that ideal, but Hamlet in 1600 is its first reincarnation. Nietzsche sees in Hamlet the self-negating capacity to penetrate into reality; the absurdity and cruelty Hamlet perceives there make him recoil in disgusted paralysis: “Understanding outweighs every motive for action.”54 Hamlet also makes an anachronous appearance in another counter-Hegelian genealogy of tragedy, of baroque Germany rather than of ancient Greece. Walter Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924–25), sees Hamlet as the exemplary melancholic of the baroque period, the forgotten analogue to the Weimar Germany of his own present. The Hamletian figure provides the basis for what Benjamin, in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” terms the “constellation” that the historical materialist forms between his own era and an earlier one.55 Like the *Melencolia* of Dürer’s engraving, Hamlet is the sorrowful contemplator, withdrawing from a world of evacuated spirituality and mourning, in the aftermath of the Reformation, the loss of meaningful action required by Lutheran *solafideism* or “the philosophy of Wittenberg.”56 With the renunciation of good works, “human actions were deprived of all value,” and a numbing achedia, or “contemplative paralysis,” set in (139, 140). Only one figure in the vast repertoire of German mourning drama could overcome this world-weariness, and he was not German: “The figure is Hamlet” (157). Through the unique intensity of his self-awareness, he alone could discern the messianic signs—“the reflection of a distant light,” “Christian

sparks” (158)—by which the alienated world of the post-Reformation might be redeemed.

The most influential of all proleptic readings is Freud’s. As he records in his “Autobiographical Study,” “Hamlet . . . had been admired for three hundred years without its meaning being discovered or its author’s motives guessed.”57 As his disciple Ernest Jones reiterates, “Shakespeare’s extraordinary powers of observation and penetration granted him a degree of insight that it has taken the world three subsequent centuries to reach.”58 Three hundred years brought the time up to 1900, the year affixed to Freud’s analysis of Hamlet in The Interpretation of Dreams. (The book was in fact published in 1899, but Freud had the title page postdated to the more momentous 1900.) Hamlet’s meaning could not be known before 1900 because Freud had not yet developed the theory of repression: “It was a novelty, and nothing like it had ever before been recognized in mental life” (“Autobiographical Study,” 18). With this theory Freud could explain Hamlet’s delay in terms of unconscious guilt. The history of human civilization could be divided into two great epochs: that of ancient Oedipus, who enacted his patricidal and incestuous desires, and that of modern Hamlet, who repressed his. Freud considered the shift from enactment to repression an advance “in the emotional life of humanity,” and psychoanalysis through transference would advance it farther still.59

Another of Freud’s disciples, Jacques Lacan, contributes to the development of psychoanalysis in his 1958–59 seminars on Hamlet by reidentifying Hamlet’s problem. His delay is caused not by repressed desire but by inexpiable loss; the play is not about guilt but about mourning: “I know of no commentator who has ever taken the trouble to make this remark. . . . from one end of Hamlet to the other, all anyone talks about is mourning.” It can be no mere coincidence that Hamlet’s problem is also that of “modern society.” The truncated, furtive rites of mourning in the play (the death of King Hamlet without final unction, Polonius’s “hugger-mugger” burial, Ophelia’s abbre-

58 Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus (New York: Norton, 1976), 68.
viated service) all gesture toward the present abandonment of the rites and ceremonies by which loss was once accommodated. Death, when not followed by rituals, leaves a gap or “hole in the real” that activates the “scar of castration,” the primary oedipal loss of the phallus. The mourner tries in vain to patch the loss with imaginary projections or mirages (signifiers, images, symbols, embodiments), but it can never be made good. Freud’s failure to appreciate the wound, scar, or stigma that remains after one yields to the threat of castration allows Lacan to boast of going “much further than anyone has before.”\textsuperscript{60} Similarly, Freud disciples Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok set out to pursue what Freud began by undertaking “a fresh psychoanalysis of the hero.”\textsuperscript{61} They subject Hamlet to an analysis that locates guilt not in the son’s desires but in the father’s crimes. To treat Hamlet’s symptomatic delay, they append to the play a sixth act in which the truth is extricated from the prevaricating ghost: old Hamlet overcame old Fortinbras not with chivalric might but with a poisoned sword. What afflicts Hamlet in the dramatic realm of 1600—“the phantom effect”—brings to light a post-Holocaustal transgenerational neurosis, so that only now (in 1975) can we understand the “secret” that “spectators and critics alike have, for nearly four hundred years, failed to consider” (188).

As Hamlet must await, before it can be understood, Freud’s theory of repression, Lacan’s language of the other, and Abraham and Torok’s “phantom effect,” so, too, it must tarry for Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. In \textit{Specters of Marx} the ghost of Hamlet is the presiding figure of Derrida’s “spectropoetics,” which might be said to perform \textit{avant la lettre} the deconstructive project of recent decades, eluding the binaries of ontology (to be or not to be) and of metaphysics (spirit and matter) but also of temporality (past and future). Returning in the present from the past to direct the future, ghosts mess up the temporal continuum, throwing time out of joint: “What seems to be out front, \textsuperscript{60} Lacan, “Desire and the Question of Desire in \textit{Hamlet},” trans. James Hulbert, in \textit{Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading, Otherwise}, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 39, 40. For a discussion of Lacan’s reading of \textit{Hamlet} as a rehabilitation of Freud’s that “both propagates and distends the Freudian legacy,” see Halpern, 254.

the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back.”

Circling erratically back and leaping precipitately ahead, ghosts belong less to a temporality than to an “anachronicity” or an “untimeliness.” It is typical of this loopy chronology that Hamlet slips out from the past to indicate a future direction for Marxism after the collapse of communism. Hamlet’s hesitation in this anachronous configuration prescribes for the present (defined by its “non-contemporaneity with itself” [xix, 25]) not a course but a stance: “a waiting without horizon of expectations” (168) for an alternative justice to that of global democratic liberalism. In avenging his father’s murder, Hamlet performs the messianic delay called for now in expectation of a justice barely on the horizon. It is a justice that has nothing to do with the retribution of the revenge tragedy. If it did, Hamlet would execute it without hesitation, automatically, since the logic of tit for tat requires no deliberation; the incommensurate justice of a future yet to come, however, demands hard calculation (26).

“Thou art a scholar, speak to it” (1.1.45), says Marcellus to Horatio at the appearance of the ghost. But Horatio, like all traditional scholars, is too grounded in the language of ontology, “the thinking of Being,” to know the language of hauntology, the thinking of specters. The dilatory scholar at the millennial close has no use for Horatio’s Latin (once used to exorcise ghosts); he needs to speak (or, better, to write) the language of Derrida’s deconstruction (used now to conjure up ghosts). Thus it is not until almost four hundred years later (in 1994, to be exact) that the right scholar finally comes along: “Marcellus was perhaps anticipating the coming, one day, one night, several centuries later, of another ‘scholar’” (12).

It is remarkable that such a lineup of forward-looking critics should continue to address a question framed two centuries ago. Each new theoretical formulation tests itself by accounting for a delaying Hamlet, yielding an updated diagnosis of his difficulty. It appears that we are still fixated on this “question of questions,” this “sphinx” or “Mona Lisa” of literature, this unplumbable “navel of the dream,” for even in our most theoretically sophisticated readings Hamlet remains

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proleptically in tune with the latest present. Indeed, a recent discussion of Hamlet in terms of mechanical failure rather than psychological disorder prepares him for a brave new world of technological readings. Hamlet remains perennially in the critical forefront as new (and newer still) explanations emerge to account for the symptom of delay. The question keeps the play modern, for the modern by definition must always look new, up-to-date, or, better yet, a bit ahead of its time, and Hamlet—one abstracted from plot and absorbed in himself—remains open indefinitely to modernization.

Yet for the first couple of centuries of its existence, Hamlet was modern not because it intimated things to come but because it contrasted with what had gone long before. It was modern because of its opposition to the ancient classical past rather than its anticipation of a distant modern future. Its purchase on the future was a subsequent development, a response to a modern need to replace classical closure with a new openness or freedom, a need that tilted the play forward in time.

In several recent studies of the play there may be signs of a turnabout. The focus of critical discussion seems to be shifting from Hamlet to the ghost, from the hero of modern consciousness to the ghost from a premodern system of belief. Can it be that criticism, after two

63 Janet Adelman attributes the paralysis of Hamlet’s will to “the psychic domination of the mother” (Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays [New York: Routledge, 1992], 30); Jonathan Goldberg sees the delaying tactics as “the result of [Hamlet’s] identification with his father’s words” (Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance Texts [New York: Methuen, 1986], 99); Garber argues that Hamlet’s inability to forget the paternal command is what impedes his action, “for action is inextricably bound with forgetting” (156); Halpern reconstrues Hamlet’s “dilatory tactics” or “internal entropy” as resistance to oedipal law, which in turn clears a space for new productivities (284, 287–88); and Stephen Greenblatt (with Catherine Gallagher) ascribes Hamlet’s difficulty to “the entanglements of the flesh” in a materiality “that stubbornly persists and resists and blocks the realization of the ghostly father’s wishes” (Practicing New Historicism [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 158).

64 In one such reading the play’s troubled fantasy of patrilineality returns as a “cyber-dream” of perfect self-replication through cloning as well as of the “effortless perpetuation of wealth” through multinational capital (Linda Charnes, “The Hamlet Formerly Known as Prince,” in Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium, ed. Hugh Grady [London: Routledge, 2000], 207).

65 Although Garber’s Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers focuses on the “ghostly” afterlife of Hamlet in modern theory, three more recent studies work to recover the material
centuries of pitching Hamlet toward the future, is turning its back on the modern present? For ghosts, it is safe to say, are not modern phe-
nomena. As Derrida has shown through the example of the ghost in Hamlet, ghosts confound “all the ‘two’s,’” or binaries, on which meta-
physics grounds itself. Neither alive nor dead, here nor there, material nor immaterial, they can be said to stand for what metaphysics has left 
behind, the unassimilable leftovers of an ontological system. “Spectra-
licity,” as Fredric Jameson observes in his essay on Derrida’s specters, 
“makes the present waver” and “shimmer like a mirage.” Might the 
ghost cause a similar effect on what has been identified successively 
for two hundred years as the present in Hamlet? What if we looked to the play for other givens of the past that the present no longer knows 
how to receive? What can we now make, for example, of purgatory, 
patrilineality, real presence, embodied memory, the justice of exact-
ing retribution, and the affinity between man and earth (human and 
humus)? Such noncontemporaneities—if we do not allegorize or psy-
chologize them away—may forestall our presentist approach to Hamlet 
and to the early modern itself, a period whose very name propels it 
headlong toward the modern, toward the late modern, and toward the postmodern.

and textual traces of ghosts in Shakespeare’s time and earlier: Anthony Low, “‘Ham-
Ghosts and Garments: The Materiality of Memory on the Renaissance Stage,” in Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge University 
Press, 2000), 245–68; and Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory (Princeton, N.J.: 
