

*Hamlet's Boyhood**Seth Lerer*

Hamlet is a play of many things, but it is first and foremost a play about generational change and the passage of human time.¹ The dynastic failures of the Danish court stand out in sharp relief against the triumph of the Norwegian succession. Old Hamlet haunts his son, while Polonius remains incapable (for all his meddling and advice) of keeping his own children safe. And at the play's close, as Hamlet himself sits among the dirt and bones of the elder dead, he reflects upon the boyhood that has passed. Holding Yorick's skull, he remembers how he had "borne me on his back a thousand times," and yet, "now, how abhorred in my imagination it is!" (5.1.175–6). Here, Hamlet offers a complex reminiscence of what it meant to be a boy at court, of what the relationship could be between a princeling and a jester. Is courtly boyhood but a world of gibes, gambols, and songs? And if so, where were the instructions of tutors, the moralisms of a Polonius, or the exemplary lessons of a father-king?

Boyhood for Hamlet (play and persona) may be a historical and cultural condition. But it is also a rhetorical one. Much research into sixteenth-century education has revealed its profound focus on the arts of argument and the structures of interrogation that controlled instruction in verbal performance.² Who, what, why, for what reason, where, when, how – these were the questions at the heart of teaching. As Peter Mack has put it, in his masterful survey of Elizabethan rhetoric, the teacher asks for an approach to texts "embedded in the relation between speaker, audience, purpose and occasion which is rhetorical in the broadest sense."³ *Hamlet* is not unique among the early modern dramas that explored these relations, but it remains distinctive in the ways in which the questioning perspectives and performances of the schoolroom stay vivid in the minds and mouths of adult characters. Maynard Mack's famous description of it as a play "in the interrogative mood" may now be reassessed as a description of its hero as a perpetual student.⁴

My chapter looks at Hamlet's boyhood in these social, literary, and rhetorical ways. After a survey of the broad contexts for my exposition, I focus on two moments in the play when Hamlet himself looks back on relationships of his youth and how the habits of reading and recitation, teaching and questioning, refigure his sense of adult self. The pastness of the past is ever on his mind, and in his sparring with old schoolmates and in his graveyard eulogy of Yorick, Hamlet reflects on the ways in which his youth was made out of tropes and turns of language and how growing up remains not just a way of seeming but a way of speaking.⁵

Education and the Theaters of Boyhood

From antiquity through the early modern period, boyhood was an age of performance. The rhetorical structures of education privileged memorizing and reciting, and the student often found his success in the verbal artistry of classroom speech. Such training often led to a forensic life in Rome – a career in the law court or the Forum, arguing and showing evidence. In the early Christian world, such training led to a pastoral life – a career as a preacher or a church administrator, sermonizing and interpreting the scriptures for a congregation.⁶

St. Augustine famously drew out the tensions between piety and performance in his *Confessiones*, where he represented himself, as a youngster, having to recite Juno's speech from Book I of the *Aeneid* or perform scenes from Terence's *Eunuchus*.⁷ His was a life of constant theatricalization. At times, he would escape the classroom to watch others act, as if the recitations of his classmates could not satisfy his need for drama: "Many and many a time I lied to my tutor, my masters, and my parents and deceived them because I wanted to play games or watch some futile show or was impatient to imitate what I saw on the stage."⁸ The young Augustine's was more than a simple love of spectacle. It was a desire to imitate, to reproduce what he had seen. He was enraptured with it all, and after leaving his hometown for further schooling at Carthage, he reports, "*Rapiebant me spectacula theatrica.*" Augustine's verb is *rapiebant*: ravished, captured, carried away, raped. The spectacles of the stage grabbed him. He found passion in theater. The play, to anticipate the language of Hamlet, always was the thing to him.⁹

The play's the thing to Hamlet, not just because it will be the means for catching Claudius's "conscience," but because it is the thing that pulls him from his funk. Like Augustine, he relishes performances, and like Augustine, too, he turns again to *Aeneid* as his source for public

recitation and private sorrow. But while the young Saint-to-be may quail at having to recite the speech of Juno, the never-to-be-king grabs the opportunity to speak Aeneas's words: "The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms . . ." (2.2.448). And when the Player takes up the rest of the performance, comes upon Hecuba, and has his color turn and has his eyes tear up, Hamlet himself stands astonished. He sees how actors can be swayed by passion. He sees, too, how audiences can be moved to action. He recognizes, much like Augustine, how in a "fiction, in a dream of passion," the performer can lose control. These are the very words of the *Confessiones* as the grown man there recalls that boy who wept for Dido, who loved "fancies dreamed up by the poets" (*poetica illa figmenta*), and for whom the "wooden horse," as much as for Hamlet, "made a most enchanting dream" (*dulcissimum spectaculum vanitatis*).¹⁰ *Rapiebant* is the verb both for the student arriving in Carthage and for the one returning from Wittenberg.

What did it mean to hover, then, on the cusp of actor and spectator? The schoolboys of the Middle Ages and the early modern period staged their lives as both reciters and listeners. Medieval monastic schools took boys as young as eight or ten and set them in the crafted shows of Christmas plays and festival dramas. The so-called *Play of Daniel* from the twelfth-century monastic community of Beauvais was made and played by the young boys (*invenit hoc juventus*, the text states: "young people wrote it"). It is a perfect subject for the schoolroom: a biblical account of decoding hidden signs, the mastery of reading, and the temptations of theatre. The king adorns himself in costumes; all of Babylon applauds. Daniel here, in his reading of the handwriting on the wall, comes off as something of a prize student, stepping up to the head of the class: *Est autem haec solutio*, here is the answer.¹¹

Such episodes of education fill the early drama. Moralities, such as the fifteenth-century English *Mankind*, brim with classroom Latin and mockeries of pedagogy. By the Tudor period, the children's companies of players had become a mainstay of the school and court. Boys' plays entertained the courts of Henry VII and VIII. William Cornish oversaw the children of the Chapel Royal in shows from the 1510s, and even the great Thomas More acted as a boy.¹²

Behind the rustics' playfulness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the Virgilian posturing of the players in *Hamlet*, then, lie these traditions of boys playing for the school and court. And, of course, whatever fictions Shakespeare's theater offered, there were real boys onstage playing female roles. So Cleopatra imagines her literary afterlife as one of "scald rhymers" and "quick comedians," as she sees a future "squeaking Cleopatra boy my

greatness” (5.2.220). A history of children’s theater and the theaters of boyhood come together at the close of this great tragedy, as the Egyptian queen (played by a boy) takes the asp to her breast and with her death invokes the newborn: “Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / that sucks the nurse asleep?” (5.2.308–9). Hamlet’s boyhood intertwines with Hamlet’s acting self. The sense of what it means to “seem” is constantly at play within the play, and its consistent meta-theatrical quality offers entry into meditations on how acting and action dovetail in the making of the young man.

They also dovetailed in the making of the new royal family when James ascended to the English throne in 1603. As Jonathan Goldberg put it, the “Renaissance family is inevitably a public unit,” where theatrical representations of family life in the Jacobean period, in particular, could link “the generative powers of virtue, ideas, poetry, and monarchy.”¹³ Such ideologies took on new force after Elizabeth – for James’s was the first intact familial unit to govern England since the time of Henry VIII (and even then, using the word “intact” is stretching it). There was a Prince of Wales for the first time in nearly seventy years. The royal investiture of Prince Henry and the wedding of his sister, Elizabeth, became occasions not only of public and political celebration, but of theatrical performance as well, and several of Shakespeare’s plays were apparently performed as part of those celebrations in the first years of the 1610s.¹⁴

The literary culture that emerged around the Stuart family was, in many ways, deeply performative. The king’s children grew up not just in the private rooms of family life but on the public stages of courtly performance. Princess Elizabeth’s performances in masques and processions, for example, helped define the daughter’s role as one beheld: moving and speaking by a script, the costumed object of courtly eyes. And when the family had something to commend or celebrate – a wedding, an engagement, a return – plays and music lifted courtly celebration to the level of artistry.¹⁵

Hamlet sits on the cusp of these political and literary changes. It balances on a fulcrum between the older Elizabethan models of royal performance (where the queen set herself up as the powerful, performing self, beheld by all) and the newer Jacobean habits of royal spectatorship (where the king established himself as the true audience for all performances, as he was watched not in the act of playing but in the act of watching).¹⁶ It is a commonplace criticism to reflect on how the play self-consciously presents the arts of acting as the arts of rule. The play’s the thing; all is a costumed world of seeming: speak the speech, I pray you, as

I pronounced it to you. *Hamlet's* metatheatrics have been critically celebrated for over a century. And yet, what seems to be lost in such discussion is the place of Hamlet himself as a kind of superannuated boy actor – not merely the vehicle for virtuoso adult performance, but the fictional occasion for an understanding of what such performances may mean for both the actor and the viewer.

Hamlet's boyhood is thus a boyhood of the book and of the theater. It is a boyhood remembered as one of play, performance, and recitation. It is a boyhood re-enacted among friends and peers, all of whom seem to have outgrown this prince's play. To speak of Hamlet's boyhood, then, is to speak of something that happened before the play's action. But it is also to speak of something ever-present in the play's real time.¹⁷

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Schoolroom Rhetoric

Midway through Act 2, scene 2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek Hamlet's audience. "My excellent good friends," Hamlet addresses them. "Good lads," he calls them, and his joking bonhomie suggests that these are the companions of his youth. The three go back and forth for over 150 lines of prose as Hamlet tries to tease out the pair's mission and their motives. In the now-standard text of the play (an editorial amalgam of the second Quarto and First Folio versions), theirs is a scene of complex verbal manipulation. Pun and wordplay, syllogism, and interrogation fill their lines. Whatever the personal history these three may have shared, they speak, on coming back together, like all-too-clever schoolboys miming their masters.

Their interchange builds on a question and an answer. "How do you both?" Hamlet begins, and every answer generates another query. This is a world of *quis*, *quid*, *cui*, and *causa*, a dialogue effectively structured according to the stipulations of schoolroom performance.

If the structures of that performance were interrogation and response, its subject matter often hinged on definition. A Latin textbook of the 1560s, John Case's *Summa in dialectiam*, expounded in detail by Peter Mack, illustrates the ways in which the process of defining honed the student's rhetorical skill.¹⁸ Mack's example comes from an argument about defining man, where the textbook parses the sentence "man is a rational animal" as follows:

The thing defined, for example man
 The copula, is
 Genus, which is like the matter, animal
 Differentia, which is like the form, rational

Mack goes on, distinguishing description, notation, and interpretation, and affirming that truth should be considered “the whole essence of the thing explained” and that perspicacity should be considered as the principle “that everything obscure is cleared up by the definition” (62).

Hamlet transforms this kind of exercise into a broader disquisition on being. The simple question “How do you both?” becomes a springboard for a set of fine-grained verbal differentiations. What does it mean to “do”? Is our question one of acting or of being? Is it a question about states of social life or states of emotion? Indeed, because the word “do” was taking on new grammatical functions in the later sixteenth century, the very question becomes one of life and language. New periphrastic uses of the verb enabled both a fluency of idiom and ambiguities of reference.¹⁹ “Do” could, by the end of the sixteenth century, replace a previous verb in a sentence and also enable asking a question without reversing word order. Thus, phrases such as “Do you know?” became newly idiomatic (as opposed to the older interrogative, “know you?”). And simply saying “I do” could suffice in answer to such a question. “Do” emerged as a form of emphasis, and it also emerged as special verb of performance. “How dost thou, Guildenstern? . . . How do you both?” Hamlet – precise grammarian even in angst – preserves the old distinction between singular and plural forms of the second person (*thou* and *you*), but opens up a world of ambiguities with that verb “do.” And when Rosencrantz answers, he tries to say something deep and imagistic: “As the indifferent children of the earth” (2.2.226). Editors gloss this phrase as meaning “like the ordinary run of mortals,” but there is more here. For in the back-and-forth of question and answer, this catechism of motives makes everyone a child again in classrooms of “do.” To enact or mimic, to behave, to be, to translate from one language to another – all these are the emerging meanings of the verb “to do” by Hamlet’s time, and if this is a play of definitions and desires, then *how one does* becomes the central question of the play. Another way of putting it would be to return to the words of John Case, who saw such dialectical and definitional techniques as designed to teach “deception, not in order that you might deceive, but so that through understanding the art of deception you may avoid being deceived.”²⁰

This statement, in a nutshell, guides the drama of this moment in the play. Hamlet is always getting at the deeper meaning. His fellows speak of surfaces; he speaks of depth. Again and again, he cuts through the show.

GUILD: On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

HAM: Neither the soles of her shoe.

ROS: Neither my lord.

HAM: Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

GUILD: Faith, her privates we.

HAM: In the secret parts of Fortune? O most true, she is a strumpet.

(2.2.229–36)

Head moves to foot; political position moves to bodily condition. Rhetorical manuals present questions and replies that, according to Mack, “often depend on distinguishing different senses in which particular words can be applied” (63). Imagine a schoolroom disputation on the word “private” and you get something of the jejune thrill that Hamlet must have over catching his old friend in the word.

They go on. Almost every term becomes the object of redefinition. “Let me question more in particular,” Hamlet states, like a teacher leading his students through an exercise. The words “prison,” “ambition,” and “dream” keep getting redefined, until we cannot be sure what these words mean. Question and answer, reason and argument – the scaffolding is there, but the building blocks keep shifting. Notice, for example, how many times the word “then” appears in this episode. From Hamlet’s welcome in 2.2.225 to his long prose disquisition on the nature of his friends’ mission (containing the famous “What a piece of work is a man”), the word “then” punctuates repeatedly:

Then you live about her waist (2.2.232)

Then is doomsday near (2.2.238)

Then is the world one (2.2.244)

Why then tis none to you (2.1.249)

Why then your ambition makes it one (2.2.252)

Then are our beggars bodies (2.2.263).

Hamlet may claim he “cannot reason,” but his remark is less a lament for lost faculties than an acknowledgment of the gap between the form and content of rational conversation. And when he drops the ruses of dialectic and moves simply to the “beaten way of friendship,” he still cannot get the answers to his questions. “What make you at Elsinore?” may seem as simple as “how do you do,” but at its heart lies the manipulations of the verb “make.” Hamlet intuitively understands that his old friends are there precisely to make something: to construct a ruse, to trap the prince, to find him out. It takes him nearly twenty lines to get the pair to fess up. “Nay, speak,” he commands, and Guildenstern simply says, “What should we say, my

lord?” Again, Hamlet prompts them, and Rosencrantz asks, “To what end, my lord.” Finally, Guildenstern admits “we were sent for,” and Hamlet says “I will tell you why.” But what he tells is not a story of diplomacy but, once again, a rehash of the classroom. He starts off clearly enough, but soon loses himself in definition, synonym, and repetition. It is as if he has responded to a schoolroom prompt, describe the earth, and he describes it:

the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours (2.2.298–303).

This speech is less an argument or exposition than it is a string of redescriptions. And when we get to his interrogation of man himself, we get a version of a Renaissance rhetorical manual, strung out in self-parody.

What 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 (2.2.303–7).

Hamlet’s words echo many sources here, but what strikes the pedagogue in me is the exercise recorded for King Edward VI, remembered and written down in the 1560s: “If man excels the other animals because of being an animal which participates in reason, then that thing which proceeds from this part of man is the best and most beautiful.”²¹

My point thus far has been to show how, in this established text of *Hamlet*, the scene with the schoolmates reproduces forms and idioms of sixteenth-century English rhetorical education. Hamlet reverts to verbal performances of the classroom. In that reversion lies the dramatic core of this scene: the recognition that one can, quite simply, argue anything. Learning the arts of deceit may arm one against the deceptions of others. But it does not necessarily protect one from deceptions of the self. What we have learned in school may often fail us in the world of courtly commerce.

But there is more here. Our text is an editorial construction, grown out of generations of decisions about performance, copying, and printing. We want the complex, verbally manipulative Hamlet such editions give us. But, for a potential audience and readership in the early sixteenth century, at least one version of the play stripped these manipulations down to a more linear, descriptive form. The First Quarto of 1603 is best known for its fast-paced plot, its garbling of famous soliloquies, and its

occasionally revelatory stage-directions. Many of its scenes have been discussed and compared with the later versions of the play, but this exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has received relatively little critical attention.²²

In Q₁, Hamlet greets his friends: "Welcome, kind schoolfellows, to Elsinore." There is no elusive questioning, no "how do you do." The text lays out directly what Q₂ and F present rhetorically: that is, that these are schoolfellows. While Q₂ and F *show*, Q₁ simply *tells*. Guildenstern (called Guilderstone here) replies: "We thank your grace, and would be very glad you were as when we were at Wittenberg" (Sig. E 2 verso). He makes clear what they want. They notice Hamlet's change; they wish he was as they had known him; and where they had known him was not at school in Denmark but at university in Wittenberg. These are university friends. The back and forth of elementary classroom rhetoric is absent from their idiom. There is no language of if/then, no disquisition on the nature of man. What takes nearly 200 lines in Q₂ and F takes less than thirty here, and the scene moves directly to the Players' entrance. Q₁ sets out the issues clearly and concisely: the players are itinerant because the public does not like the kind of tragedy they do. They now prefer "private plays, and . . . the humour of children" (Sig. E 3 recto). Embedded in this reference may well lie a jab at the contemporary uses of the children's companies around the year 1600 and the questions of fashion and taste opposed to quality and theatrical substance.

But within the fiction of this moment in Q₁, however, the purpose of this reference is to separate the childish from the adult. A much fuller version of this exchange appears in Q₂ and F, but in Q₁, it takes on different force: university compeers condescending to a taste for children's companies. Just as when Polonius (here Corambis) enters and Hamlet calls him "yonder great baby" (a phrase that also survives in both Q₂ and F), Hamlet's goal here is to bond rhetorically with schoolmates as grownups. There is very little sense in Q₁ of the boyish playfulness of Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the longer episodes. And there is almost no sense that their conversation hinges on the dialectics of the schoolroom and the iterated definitions and redefinitions of the manual.

Hamlet's boyhood seems elided or effaced in Q₁, possibly because, in some sense, he is still in it. For it is only in Q₂ that we may deduce Hamlet as a thirty-year-old. In F, the Gravedigger says, "I have been sixteene here, man and Boy thirty years" (5.1). Rhodri Lewis reads this line as affirming that it is the Gravedigger who is thirty, while Hamlet is sixteen.²³ And in

Q₁, the Gravedigger holds up the skull saying: “Look you, here’s a skull hath been here this dozen year” (Sig. I r). All of this textual confusion may suggest that Hamlet, in two of the three surviving texts, comes home barely out of boyhood. He is, unlike in Q₂, very much a creature of the university, a young man of action, less of argument. He is no superannuated princeling-student. He does not look back on childhood foibles and fantasies. On one occasion, in Q₁’s unique version of the poem he has written to Ophelia, his phrasing echoes the latest debates among European scholars on the nature of earth itself.²⁴ For that First Quarto, if its title page is to be trusted, the version acted was “in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford.” What would it mean to take this statement seriously: to imagine a Hamlet for undergraduates, impatient with the elementary interrogations of old masters, eager for resolution? Hamlet’s boyhood in Q₂ is one remembered, haunting, and rhetorically enacted. Hamlet’s boyhood in Q₁ is, by and large, dismissed. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” That is a statement for student raised on classroom dialectic and debate. “To be or not to be, ay there’s the point!” That famous garbling of Q₁ may be not so much, in the end, the problem of the text than the condition of the student, having put aside old questions and impatient to get to the point.²⁵

Yorick’s Skull, York’s Head, and Aesop’s Fables

The Hamlet that we want remains a character unable to put old questions aside. He cannot, it would seem, get to the point – either in argument or action. The Hamlet that we want struggles with boyhood memory, and nowhere is that struggle more compelling or more vivid than in the graveyard scene of Act V. Hamlet’s address to Yorick’s skull remains one of the iconic representations of *memento mori*. The man and the skull – in centuries of portraiture, performance, and parody – embody much of what we think of as the early modern confrontation with mortality. Vanity, all is vanity, says Ecclesiastes, and young men and skulls filled the canvases of Dutch and English artists for a century before Hamlet picked up Yorick’s head.²⁶

But Hamlet’s gesture has a source in the schoolroom lessons of impersonation learned from Aesop’s fables. Grammar school statutes throughout the sixteenth century list them as among the earliest texts for student study, and the early modern student would have come to these stories through a variety of venues, some Latin, some English.²⁷ For though they were originally written down and circulated in Greek, the fables quickly became Romanized into the Republican and Imperial schoolroom. Quintilian, in

the first century AD, recommended them for “paraphrasing” by the youngest students.²⁸ They were known to Martial from the Latin verse of the poet Phaedrus, and they passed on through the early Christian schools as object lessons for the allegorists.²⁹ St. Augustine saw them at the baseline of literate education, and throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, they were continually copied, annotated, moralized, and eventually translated into virtually every European vernacular.³⁰ By Shakespeare’s time, there already had been translations and editions done by England’s printers and by European scholars, publishers, and pedagogues.³¹ Aesop was so well known that Prince Edward, in 3 *Henry VI*, could let fly this off-hand remark:

Let Aesop fable in a winter’s night
His currish riddles sort not with this place. (5.5.25–26)

Aesop may have been read on many winters’ nights, but he was studied in the schoolroom by daylight. John Brinsley’s *Ludus Literarius* takes Aesop as one of his key authors for discerning “what is truth [and] what is false in most matters.” And if the student cannot read them in the original, Brinsley encourages him to read the fables “translated.”³²

At the most poignant of his moments of boyhood remembrance, Hamlet returns to Aesopic allusions to recall his thrills on Yorick’s shoulders – the joys of a seven-year-old prince with his courtly jester. There, among the bones of fools and fellows, the Gravedigger calls up one who had lain in the earth for twenty-three years. “This same skull, sir, was Yorick’s skull, the King’s jester.” Hamlet picks up the skull and turns it in his hands. The extended version of this speech, in modern editions, reads:

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now – how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady’s chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.178–89)

One of the most popular of Aesop’s fables throughout the medieval and the early modern period was that of the wolf and the actor’s mask. In its earliest forms, it is a tale of the fox and the mask, and the oldest surviving version of the story comes from the Latin verse of Phaedrus:³³

VVLPIIS AD PERSONAM TRAGICAM

Personam tragicam forte vulpes viderat:

“O quanta species,” inquit “cerebrum non habet!”

Hoc illis dictum est quibus honorem et gloriam

Fortuna tribuit, sensum communem abstulit.

A fox, upon looking by chance at a tragic actor’s mask: “O what a face is here,” he said,” but it has no brains!” This is an example for those to whom Fortune has granted rank and renown, but denied them common sense.

This little story – more an exemplum than a fully developed fable – had a rich literary afterlife in Latin and vernacular Europe. By the twelfth century, when it appeared in school texts and commentaries, the fox had been replaced by a wolf. And, as the medieval classroom lost the lived experience of the classical stage – with its masked actors – the little fable’s premise would have lost its material meaning. In these later versions, then, the wolf comes not upon an actor’s mask but rather a disembodied head. In some texts, it is an actual human head, ornately embellished with jewelry, curled hair, and a face colored with makeup. In the version of Walter of England from the mid-twelfth century, the wolf addresses his found object: *O sine voce gene, o sine mente caput* (“O cheeks without a voice, O head without a mind”). The prose commentary following the poem clarifies the meaning of the wolf’s exclamation (I translate here): “O head with great beauty and ornamentation, your cheeks proud, but without voice. Your head made up with rouge and hair curled, as if to say, beauty is a lie.”³⁴ It then glosses this encounter by comparing the beauty of certain books with the inanity of their readers: there are many who would want to have very beautiful books, but they will not study them. Such people are like heads without minds.

A fable about honor and common sense is now a lesson for the student. But the theme of artifice was not lost on later readers. A later version of this poem in a Latin-French text of the fourteenth century has the wolf find not a human head but a painted piece of sculpture. This later revision and interpretation makes the fable about art and representation: about beauty and truth and the labor that goes into putting on a face before the world. *Biauté ne vaut riens sans bonté* (“Beauty without goodness is worthless”). There is no value in artistry without the labor that goes into making it meaningful.³⁵

Throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth century, this fable was reprinted, translated, and illustrated. English, French, and German books show pictures of the wolf coming upon the beautified head:

sometimes it lies in the dirt; sometimes, it seems to float on water. Prose paraphrases filled school texts, sometimes circulating under Aesop's name, and sometimes under the names of redactors or translators. William Caxton's edition of 1484 calls it the fable "of the wulf and of the ded mans hede." Heinrich Steinhöwel's German edition of 1521 has the wolf pawing a dead body.³⁶

And so, when Hamlet comes upon the disinterred skull of Yorick, he picks it up and turns it in his hands, much as the wolf would turn the old head in his paws. All the Aesopic imagery is here: the cheeks without a voice, now chapfallen; the painted head, now transferred to the lady; the verbal performances that are the mark of acting.³⁷

This fable provides more than just a source for a single scene. It stands behind the story of the play itself. For what is *Hamlet* but a play of lupine or vulpine characters coming upon tragic masks? Polonius recalls his student performance as Julius Caesar. The prince gives advice to player kings. Heads without reason conspire in Denmark. The Aesop of the schoolroom was a guide to life. It was the core text for grammar and rhetoric, and in this most grammatical and rhetorical of plays, this little fable opens up a door to our understanding of its episodes.

Hamlet's recovery of Yorick's skull enacts the cultural recovery of childhood recitation and performance. It is a fable of remembrance, a recollection not just of an earlier experience in the tragic persona's life, but of an earlier experience in literary history. As with so many of the other moments of theatrical self-reference in the play, this episode reflects on what has passed: older performance styles, texts out of fashion, recitations of the schoolroom or the university or the Inns of Court. It is less a moment of unselfconscious histrionics than an allusion to past traditions of such histrionics. The play's constant self-theatrics look back to patterns of performance that, by the first years of James's reign, would have appeared provincial or antiquated (most famously, the reference to the ranting Herod of the Cycle Plays). Where be your gibes now?

If Hamlet looks back to his courtly childhood, so too may Shakespeare be looking back to his own theatrical youth in this passage. Readers have long heard an echo of one of Shakespeare's earliest plays in Denmark's grave. "Alas, poor Yorick" chimes with the memory of Queen Margaret's cutting dismissal of Richard, Duke of York, in 3 *Henry VI*, 1.4.85: "Alas, poor York."³⁸ Is this an echo meant for audiences or a buried shard of rhetoric, unearthed by a remembering playwright? Does this scene take us back, not just to Hamlet's boyhood, but to Shakespeare's early aspirations: a remembrance of a theatrical youth long gone?

By Act 1, scene 4, of 3 *Henry VI*, Richard Duke of York has been defeated. Queen Margaret's army has control; his relatives are dead; and he must yield. Captured and humiliated, he is brought before the Queen, and she assails him with a blast of rhetorical questions:

Where are your mess of sons to back you now?

...

And where's that valiant crookback prodigy,
Dickie, your boy, that with his grumbling voice
Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies? (1.4.74–78)

She sees him start to weep, and offers up something to “dry thy cheeks withal.” And then she apostrophizes:

Alas, poor York, but that I hate thee deadly,
I should lament thy miserable state.
I prithee, grieve, to make me merry, York.
What – hath thy fiery heart so parched thine entrails
That not a tear can fall for Rutland's death?
Why art thou patient, man? Thou should be mad,
And I, to make thee mad, do mock thee thus.
Stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance.
Thou wouldst be fee'd, I see, to make me sport. (1.4.85–93)

She has him now, badgered into silence, and to add insult to her verbal injury, she puts a paper crown on his head. “Ay, marry, sir, now looks he like a king” (1.4.97). She then goes on, mocking and manipulating, until she knocks the paper crown off of his head. York gets his great speeches, though, before he dies, and when he does, Margaret commands:

Off with his head and set it on York gates,
So York may overlook the town of York. (1.4.180–81)

Taken together, Hamlet's graveyard scene, this moment from 3 *Henry VI*, and the Aesopic fable of the actor's mask triangulate a play of heads and power. They all interrogate relationships of reason and the mind. They all ask just what lies in our skulls. They all trade on the idioms of childishness and memory to question what makes one worthy of reason or of rule. Yorick's disembodied skull lies there as mock repayment for pouring a jug of wine on the Gravedigger's own head. Margaret crowns her rival king of children's games, and she knocks his paper headdress off before commanding that his own head be severed. Aesop's fable bears as much on her dismissal as on Hamlet's reminiscence. For what she does is transform York into a head without a mind, cheeks without voice. He is now father only to

a *mess* of sons – a word that in the sixteenth century connoted a group of four people to be served a meal together, but, in this context of disparagement, must resonate with its contemporary meaning of a pile of food.³⁹ His children are dehumanized, a brood of boys acting on emotion (wanton Edward, lusty George) or living only to amuse. That “Dickie . . . wont to cheer his dad” transforms the future Richard III, in Margaret’s mouth, from heir to jester. *Dickie* was a relatively new pet form of Richard, coming into use in the second half of the sixteenth century, often in alliterative phrasings shaped for laughter or derision.⁴⁰ *Dad* was, by the later sixteenth century, so forcefully associated with the voice of childhood that it makes the Duke of York head of a very childish household. *Dad* was a word that “infants call their fathers,” a word a child calls “with “his swete lispng words.”⁴¹ “Where are your mess of sons?” “Where be your gibes now. . . that were wont to set the table on a roar?” Richard is but a duke of dinner now, and Margaret’s words come hauntingly back into Hamlet’s mouth. “Make me merry, York,” Margaret commands, but he cannot.

These echoes back to 3 *Henry VI* are meaningful and memorable. As Emrys Jones showed long ago, “the early history plays. . . became rich repositories of structural paradigms” for the later tragedies.⁴² Shakespeare, as Jones argued, repeatedly borrowed from himself, and in that borrowing, he transformed not just lines but scenes. To follow Jones’s example, I would say that Hamlet’s scene with Yorick’s skull takes Margaret’s scene with York and transforms its “whole complex of action and feeling” (94). Heads, power, memory, and parenthood: all come together to turn an earlier display of histrionic threat into a haunting episode of individual self-reflection.

Jones makes much of 3 *Henry VI* as fodder for late, tragic Shakespeare, and he notes that “probably few readers or playgoers remember” its scenes, specifically in later transformations (his particular cases are *Othello* and *Julius Caesar*, 94). But the *Henry VI* plays would, in fact, have been much in readers’ and playgoers’ minds. The epilogue to *Henry V* recalls how “oft our stage hath shown” their narratives. Even earlier than that, Robert Greene pulled a line out of the early play to mock the author himself. In his 1592 *Greene’s Groats-worth of Wit*, he flipped York’s words from this scene, “O tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide,” into barb: a “tiger’s heart wrapped in a player’s hide.”⁴³

Again, there is the language of Aesop, the return to the schoolroom for a gibe and mock at a pretender to the stage. Greene’s line has long been valued only for its reference to Shakespeare – to its vision of the upstart Crow, the Shake-scene, and the notions that, by the early 1590s, Shakespeare was already known and envied enough for this venom. But

there is more. Read in the context of the whole expostulation, Greene's words are part and parcel of a broader, fable-like discourse.

those Puppets (I mean) that speak from our mouths, those Antics garnished in our colours. Is it not strange that I, to whom they all have been beholding; is it not like that you, to whom they all have been beholding, shall (were ye in that case that I am now) be both at once of them forsaken? Yes, trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger's heart wrapped in a Players hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country. O that I might entreat your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions.

Greene draws precisely on the questions raised by the fable of the wolf/fox and the actors mask. The images of the puppet speaking, of the clowns in colors, of the beautified crow, of the ape imitating excellence – this is the language of Aesopica. It is as if Greene has gone back to his own school-room exercises and has transformed the most ambitious player/playwright of the day into a character out of a beast fable, a man not quite thirty made into a boy comedian again. And at the close of his invective, Greene explicitly bids farewell with another fable “of that old comedian Aesop,” here, the story of the grasshopper and the ant.

Hamlet's remembrance of Yorick unearths more than just a buried skull. It brings back idioms and scenic structures from the earliest of Shakespeare's plays. It recalls words that stuck to Shakespeare himself a theatrical generation before. It brings the past immediately before the present, evoking in Hamlet's boyhood a theatrical youth far different, now, from that of a later decade. In the process, it contributes to the growing sense that Hamlet is a play of old, remembered things: of lines out of old plays by traveling players, of lyrics out of courtly compilations, now reserved for gravediggers.⁴⁴ It is a play that constantly asks rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses, measuring the present apery of courtiers and kings against the past excellence of a young man's remembrance.

Hamlet's boyhood is therefore many things: a reminiscence of a friendship, the anxieties of a son, the fractured memories of a princeling. But at its heart, his boyhood is the sum of schooling and performing, of answering how one does in acting and in action, of reading books and asking what is man. Language can turn an old skull into an icon of memory. But it can also make a vanquished duke into a badgered schoolboy, and in 3 *Henry VI*, it can offer up a foil for Shakespeare's later

drama of the body and the head. There is no single answer to the questions Hamlet asks, just as there is no single text on which we can rely to quote them. Hamlet's boyhood changes with every reading and rereading, every playing of the play. Like memory itself, it sometimes comes in focus, and then fades. Like St. Augustine, this young man was ravished by the spectacles of theatre. And perhaps, in the end, that remains the most boyish thing about him.

Notes

1. All quotations from the modern, edited text of *Hamlet* are from The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd Series, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982). Quotations from the First Quarto (Q1) text are from *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Cengage, 2006). All other Shakespeare quotations are from Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller, *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare* (Baltimore: Penguin, 2002).
2. Joel Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978); Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter, From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, "Studied for Action: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 30–78; Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Raphael Lyne, *Shakespeare, Rhetoric and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
3. Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*: 19.
4. "Hamlet's world is preeminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed." Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *The Yale Review* (1952): 502–23 (504–5).
5. For a review of the history and dramatic representations of boyhood in Shakespeare, see Katie Knowles, *Shakespeare's Boys: A Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), a study largely concerned with the intersections of the boy actor and the boy character on the stage. For the argument that Hamlet is a late teen returning from the university and that textual issues associated with the Gravedigger's chronology point to a potential critique of that character's innumeracy, see Rhodri Lewis, "Young Hamlet," *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 31, 2016, online at www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/young-hamlet/.
6. H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); S. F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977);

- George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
7. St. Augustine, *Confessiones*: I.16–17. Latin text from the edition and commentary prepared by J. J. O'Donnell, online at faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/latinconf/latinconf.html. The translation is R. S. Pine-Coffin, *St. Augustine Confessions* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961): 36–8.
 8. St. Augustine, *Confessiones*: I.19; Pine-Coffin, *St. Augustine Confessions*: 39.
 9. St. Augustine, *Confessiones*: III.1; Pine-Coffin, *St. Augustine Confessions*: 55. See, too, Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967): 39. An equally rich discussion of the power of theater appears in Augustine's early dialogue *Soliloquia*, where he reflects on the skills of the Roman actor Roscius in playing both male and female roles with equal prowess and folds discussion of theatrical mimesis into a broader discussion of artistic representation: "On the stage, Roscius wants to be a false Hecuba, but by nature he is a true man . . . How could Roscius be truly a tragic actor if he refused to be a false Hector, Andromache, Hercules or the like?" (*Soliloquia*: II.x.18). St. Augustine, *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. J. H. S. Burleigh (SCM Press, 1953): 51.
 10. St. Augustine, *Confessiones*: I.13. Pine-Coffin, *St. Augustine Confessions*: 34–5.
 11. "The Play of Daniel," *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975): 137–54.
 12. See Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, *The Child Actors: A Chapter in Elizabethan Stage History*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, vol. II, nos. 1–2 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1926): II, 324–5; Suzanne Westfall, *Patrons and Performance: Early Tudor Household Revels* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990): 41; Nicholas Orme, "Children and Literature in Medieval England," *Medium Aevum* 68 (1999): 218–46 (236); and Chapter 5 by Bart van Es in this volume.
 13. Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989): 86, 88.
 14. Goldberg, *James I*; Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975); and Deanne Williams, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
 15. Williams, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood*.
 16. Orgel, *Illusion of Power*: esp. 10–16.
 17. And thus my approach differs from the kinds of fictional imaginations of a prior life for Shakespeare's characters after the fashion of the mid-nineteenth century's Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (first published in 1851–2). For some critical reflection on the impulse to imagine a prior life for Shakespeare's women and not his men, see my *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 233–41.

18. I quote from the translations in Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*.
19. On “Do-periphrasis,” see Matti Rissanen, “Syntax,” *The Cambridge History of the English Language 1476–1776*, ed. Roger Lass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 239–43. I discuss some of this material in *Inventing English: A Portable History of the English Language*, rev. edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), vol. 3: 129–40.
20. Quoted in Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*: 63.
21. Quoted in Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*: 29. For additional materials see the discussion in Ronald Knowles, “Hamlet and Counter-Humanism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 1046–69.
22. The bibliography and criticism of Q₁ is conveniently summarized in Thompson and Taylor, *Hamlet*.
23. Lewis recognizes that editors have traditionally emended “sexeteene” to “sexton” (Lewis, “Young Hamlet”).
24. In Q₂ and F, Hamlet’s poem begins, “Doubt thou the stars are fire.” In Q₁ it begins, “Doubt that in earth is fire,” reflecting an emerging university debate about whether the earth was an Aristotelian “cold body,” or if it actually had a hot and mutable core. I have developed this interpretation, with supporting historical and textual evidence, in “Hamlet’s Letter to Ophelia and the Theater of the Letter,” *ELH* 81 (2014): 841–63.
25. My phrasings should not imply, necessarily, that Q₁ is a later revision or adaptation of the play or that it is a prior version of the play. What concerns me is the existence of different printed texts circulating in close temporal proximity to each other which are introduced by material in their title pages that suggests certain performance contexts through which we can understand the differences between these texts. For a tantalizing set of suggestions about the possible chronological and developmental relationships of these versions, see Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare’s Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy, and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
26. For background, iconography, and later representations, see the discussion in Alan R. Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709–1900* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2002): 240–62.
27. See Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*: 13, 35. For broader discussions of the Aesopica, see the material in Laura Gibbs, *Aesop’s Fables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Klaus Grubmüller, *Meister Esopus: Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Funktion der Fabel in Mittelalter* (Zurich: Artemis, 1977); and Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
28. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, ed. and trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1921): 1.9.2.
29. *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Ben Edwin Perry, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
30. Edward Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000): 39.

31. For the transmission of Aesop in manuscript and early print, see Grubmüller, *Meister Esopus*; Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop*; and R. T. Lenaghan, *Caxton's Aesop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). For editions and reproductions of early printed editions throughout Europe, see the website maintained by Laura Gibbs, www.mythfolklore.net/aesopical/.
32. I quote from the English translation of Brinsley's Latin, first published in 1627, in the *Ludus Literarius or the Grammar Schoole by John Brinsley*, ed. E. T. Campagnac, (Liverpool: University Press, 1917): 175, 239. See Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric* for the value of Brinsley's 1612 work as a reflection of previous decades of practice.
33. *Phaedrus* I.7, in Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*: 201. I have modified Perry's translation here.
34. See the texts, translations, and discussion in *The Fables of "Walter of England,"* ed. A. E. Wright (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1997): 92.
35. See the texts, translations, and discussion in *Ysopet-Avionnet: The Latin and French Texts*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 5, no. 4, ed. Kenneth McKenzie and William A. Oldfather (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1921). I have developed this material in greater detail in my *Children's Literature*: 49–50.
36. See the materials collected under the reference *Phaedrus* I.7, at Gibb's website (see n. 27 above).
37. This and the next two paragraphs adapt material from my *Children's Literature*: 50–51.
38. Jenkins simply asks, "Does an echo linger in Shakespeare's mind? (*Hamlet*: 386). See the more developed but highly associative reading in Maurice Charney, *All of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 136–7; see too Seymour M. Pitcher, "Alas, poor Yorick!" *Philological Quarterly* 21 (1942): 240–1.
39. *OED*, s.v., *mess*.
40. *OED* s.v., *Dickie*.
41. The first quotation is from *OED*, s.v., *daddy*, 1562; second quotation is from *OED*, s.v., *dad*, 1553.
42. Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971): 89.
43. *Henry V*: Epilogue l. 9–13. Robert Greene, *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit* (London: William Wright, 1592). I quote from the edition online at www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/greener.html.
44. At 1.5.60–73, the Gravedigger sings "In youth when I did love," a garbled version of a lyric attributed to Thomas Lord Vaux and printed in Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes*, originally published in 1557 and reprinted frequently thereafter. For history and criticism of this scene, and for the impact of Tottel's book (known now as the *Miscellany*) on Shakespeare more generally, see Tom MacFaul, "Songes and Sonettes and Shakespeare's Poetry," and Seth Lerer, "Cultivation and Inhumation: Some Thoughts on the Cultural Impact of Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes*," both in *Tottel's Songes and Sonettes in Context*, ed. Stephen Hamrick (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate 2015): 131–46, and 147–62, respectively.