

guilty Claudius has also killed Hamlet's mother)? Why indeed? All the responses to that question constitute an essential, if rather unmanageable, skein in our culture.

"Who's there?" It's the opening line—and by the end has become a tantalizingly profound question.

What follows that question is the most fascinating story in literature.

Ahead, the reader will find a conversation about the play conducted, partly, by the light of the silvery moon of recent critical thinking, by OU Shakespearean Niels Herold and OCC science professor and former OU student Joe Kelty; then, a filmography, a study of the major film versions of the play, by former student and current adjunct faculty member Pamela Mitzelfeld—to which I have added an analysis of the most recent of the film versions.

—Brian Murphy

Interminability and Overdoing in Teaching *Hamlet*: *An Exchange of Views between Niels Herold and Joe Kelty*

Whether it is Freud writing in 1899 in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that he had discovered the oedipal complex by reading Shakespeare, or Jacques Lacan writing about the language of the post-structuralist unconscious, Shakespeare's works—and *Hamlet* in particular—have dominated the foreground of theoretical discovery and application. I asked one of my former graduate students, Joe Kelty (himself a veteran teacher at Oakland Community College), to engage with me in a dialogue about the ways in which our understanding of *Hamlet* has been extended, deepened (or in fact radically transformed) under the interpretive gaze of recent critical theories. Before we begin, I want to say first, by way of instigating this exchange of views, that Joe Kelty's interest in critical theory focuses on the concept of *interminabil-*

ity), which he sees at once as a textual condition of deferred or never completed meaning and as a necessary condition of academic pedagogy, of any meaningful educational exchange between teacher and student. By “meaningful” Kelty doesn’t mean effective teaching so much as the mutual recognition by both teacher and student that the exchange of knowledge about Shakespeare is always open-ended, preemptive of the usual rituals of academic closure; pre-emptive, in the most radical sense, of grades and degrees, publications and reputations. That’s not to say that interminability eschews the interpretive conventions of a rigorous act of critical practice; rather, interminability cultivates the Freudian notion that triangulated relations between teachers and students and texts are privileged relations because they are internalized and ongoing, not discursively fixed and institutionally concluded.

[Herold] Joe, I wonder if you could give us, in a summarizing paragraph or two, a sense of the volatile history of critical approaches to studying Hamlet, those summarized for instance in the recent Bedford edition of the play edited by Susanne Wofford, which has been widely used in university courses on Shakespeare and theory. Perhaps we could refer this historical précis to one or two specific dramatic scenes in Hamlet, in order to show how our understanding of the complexities of Shakespeare’s play has been transformed by different contemporary critical theories. I’m thinking of one scene in particular, Hamlet’s second great soliloquy which concludes the long series of competitive conversations he has had with his interrogators in the second scene of the second act of the play. Act 2 scene 2 culminates in Hamlet’s soliloquizing interrogation of himself, where he begins (in a customary act of self-reproach) by comparing himself with the Player whose dramatic performance he has just beheld:

*O what a rogue and peasant slave am I . . .
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
In a fiction, in a dream of passion.*

[Kelty] That Hamlet is a classic, says Susanne L. Wofford, is demonstrated by its “capacity to require interpretation” (181) and by its complexity and subtlety, which are sufficient to have rendered the work newly meaningful, generation after generation. Over a span of four centuries, a succession of prevailing interpretative conventions, each vogue fronting a theoretical backdrop, repeatedly raised the curtain on renewed versions of the play. Wofford notes that even in terms of contemporary criticism alone “the changes in the critical landscape of Shakespeare studies have been dramatic” (203). She distinguishes three major twentieth century approaches to Hamlet: psychological, metatheatrical, and metaphysical, emphasizing respectively, sexuality, theatricality, and mortality. Furthermore, the long history of radically different responses to Hamlet in particular attests to the ephemeral nature of declarations about the play’s meaning and character and belies any hope that a critical denouement could ever be achieved. Criticism of the play began in Shakespeare’s lifetime and has continued, unabated, to the present, making *Hamlet* very likely the most talked about work in English literature. Critical emphasis has shifted constantly, putting stress in one period on characterization, for example, in another on the aesthetic or formal aspects of the piece, and in still other times, on Hamlet’s ability to reflect the psychological or metaphysical concern of human life.

Hamlet’s personality emerges anew in each age. In the late seventeenth century, he is portrayed as heroic and bold, but in the following century, James Boswell calls him irresolute. Henry Mackenzie sees a man of sensibility and Goethe a prince unfit to carry out the action his situation demands. The Romantics, in their turn, give Hamlet a rebellious and meditative persona. In the twentieth century, his character appears diseased by virtue of Freud’s connecting him with psychological repression. Likewise, answers to the most debated question about the play—why does Hamlet delay?—vary considerably over time. The author of a critical essay written in 1736 explains Hamlet’s reluctance to act as a formal device de-

signed to extend the action. Later explanations tend to relate the delay to Hamlet himself: he is naturally averse to action; his meditative propensities make him unable to act; the delay represents noble resistance to his kingly power to kill.

Critical reinterpretation of Hamlet continues to flourish today—feminist, historical, and cultural approaches are prominent at the present time. In every case, Hamlet and *Hamlet* are transformed but never finalized; rather, they change again and again and in the process transform society.

[Herold] Joe, I want to come back to this central idea of delay in *Hamlet*, but what more immediately concerns me is your sense that recent critical theories about the play all point to its twin powers of solicitation and resistance—of engendering reinterpretation and of resisting any finally fixed and authoritative understanding. My own sense is that this is a particularly Shakespearean set of capacities, those which might account in part for culture's enduring interest in re-staging the plays, and at no time more vigorously than our own, when Shakespeare's star seems at its zenith. But I suspect you feel this endlessness about Shakespeare as a peculiarly Hamlet problem, not so much a problem really as an inherent fact of the play's cultural transmission across time and place. As you put it, Shakespeare's play and his character are transformed but never finalized. Do you see this endlessness as an endless frustration for readers and performers of the play, or is it an altogether positive experience of textual difficulties, difficulties that might provide an educative example for those of us—students and teachers alike—who are seriously concerned with the dynamics of classroom performance? Is the act of trying to teach *Hamlet* especially instructive to the practice and art of pedagogy?

[Kelty] In my opinion, the continuing popularity of *Hamlet* falsifies any claim that performers, audiences, or critics feel frustrated by their inability to achieve closure with respect to the play's meaning or value. Rather, they seem fascinated with the

work's endless possibilities. I think that one feature of the piece that makes it so intriguing is its interrogative nature.

[Herold] Can I interrupt you here just for a moment. I know you're about to follow up your generalization about the play's "interrogative nature" with some specific examples, but I wanted to make sure our audience understood the peculiar extent of how pervasively this particular play is riddled with questions. Not to preempt your own discussion below, but rather to show this extent, let me quote from William Kerrigan's powerful study of the play (*Hamlet's Perfection*) a passage which revels in Hamlet's "questionable state," a phrase Hamlet uses for the dubiousness of the ghost, but which extends to every narrative niche and resonating verbal corner of the play. Kerrigan provocatively writes that

Hamlet resists the fragmentation by limiting himself to the delay, for him, the problem of problems. But there are, of course, other problems. What do we make, what should Hamlet have made, of the ghost? Did Hamlet, does he, love Ophelia? Why does he put on the antic disposition? Does he really go mad? Is Horatio a Dane? If Horatio was at the funeral of King Hamlet, and the play opens about two months after his death, why has Hamlet not seen him until 1.2? What is the "election" that appears necessary to crown a king in Denmark? The problems keep proliferating. The impressive Jenkins edition of 1981 offers 164 "long notes," many of them worrying new mysteries, such as whether it could be significant that *Polonius* means "man from Polonia [Poland]." As early as 1979 J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps had written: "The more I read of the tragedy of Hamlet the less I understand it as a whole, and now despair of meeting with any theories that will reconcile its perplexing inconsistencies." An article published in 1898 lists ten theories of the delay, then adds to more of its own. All of the major *Hamlet* critics struggle to keep the play coherently before them and, with one major exception, try to find a way to write about

this work that avoids the potentially deadening sic et non of the crux solvers.

[Kely continued] In the context of the narrative itself, the characters ask questions, tentatively answer them, and then test their answers. Claudius and Gertrude, for example, wonder about the cause of Hamlet's melancholy. "What it should be," says the king, "More than his father's death, that thus hath put him / So much from th'understanding of himself, / I cannot dream of" (2.2.7–10). They suspect that the prince is overcome with grief and ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to help them find out if, indeed, grief is the cause of his strange behavior. Polonius has a different answer and a different test. "Your noble son is mad" with love-sickness for Ophelia, he tells the monarchs (2.2.92). He proposes that he and the king secretly observe Hamlet's reaction to Ophelia in a staged encounter of the two putative lovers. In like manner, Hamlet questions the identity and intentions of the ghost: "The spirit that I have seen / May be a [dev'l], and the [dev'l] hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.578–83). He tests the veracity of the ghost's story and of his own doubts by arranging a play in which he plans to have the "players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle." Then, he thinks, "I'll observe his looks, / I'll tent him to the quick" (2.2.574–77). The characters may be satisfied that the results of their tests support their hypotheses, but the members of the audience are seldom completely satisfied. They see other plausible explanations. They have their own answers to propose, answers which the critics can test. Moreover, each generation embraces new theoretical stances which not only support new answers to old questions but raise entirely new questions as well. The application to Hamlet of Freud's psychological insights, for instance, puts the questions and answers of the characters and of former audiences and critics into a new framework. As Wofford shows in her historical sum-

mary of *Hamlet* criticism, the conclusions derived from critical analyses are inevitably rejected or modified by succeeding generations of theatergoers and critics. There is no reason to anticipate an end to this evolution of interpretation or to regard the interminable nature of it as anything less than a stimulus which intensifies interest in and enjoyment of the play.

An unending stream of questions and answers insinuates itself into the minds of people whenever they watch or read the play. *Hamlet* is, like a koan, an unsolvable puzzle capable of transforming those who give it thoughtful consideration. Questions initiate and sustain the discourse within the play and about the play. Answers tend to terminate the discourse, but there has never been nor will there in all probability ever be a consensus about answers. All answers lead to further questions. Any piece of good literature is able to engender questions, but *Hamlet* seems outstanding in its ability to do so.

What has *Hamlet* to do with education? I believe that teaching *Hamlet* with no end in sight, so to speak, is, as you suggest, especially instructive to the art and practice of pedagogy. That you should mention art and practice is fortuitous or perhaps intuitive, for in fact pedagogy is an art similar to dramaturgy, and like the creations of the dramatist, the creations of the teacher require a practiced performance in order to be effectively communicated. Indeed, the world of the classroom is not dissimilar to the world of the theater. The two overlap: pedagogy can be theatrical, drama instructive. The teacher has roles equivalent to those of playwright, director, and performer. Like a playwright, a teacher carefully crafts academic courses for presentation to an audience, and each classroom session is like an act in a play. Every professional teacher has a repertoire of courses that he or she first writes and subsequently revises and teaches again and again. Successful teachers will painstakingly prepare a sequence of lessons and rehearse their presentation until what is premeditated appears spontaneous, and they will engage in appropriate histrionics to get a point across. The pedagogic drama, if I may call it that, is most true to itself when it is

open-ended in the same way that *Hamlet* is; that is, when it causes the members of the audience, the students, to question what they know even as it attempts to clarify what they do not know.*

Dialogue between characters in the play helps to move the plot along the trajectory determined by the text; just so, dialogue between teacher and student moves the pedagogic process along a path established by the course outline. However, a course of study or a play such as *Hamlet* cannot have predictable results or effects. Neither of them is subject to a conclusive scientific or logical analysis. Written works, be they the lesson plans of a teacher or the products of Shakespeare's genius, do have a physical, determinate structure. Nevertheless, the structure is always experienced individually and never enacted definitively. At this point, I would be interested in learning whether your practical experience in teaching *Hamlet* at Oakland corroborates these rather theoretical connections which I have made between performance in the classroom and performance on the stage. Are these two acts analogous, and if so is *Hamlet* a privileged work for supporting the analogy?

[Herold] These are fascinating questions, but I'm sure I have only non-conclusive answers for them. You must be right in asserting some instructive analogy between the subject of drama and the dramaticity of teaching. Shakespeare teachers know that their classroom is inescapably a sort of theater. Saying this makes me a bit uncomfortable, and maybe the admission is a good departure point. What I mean is that when you're not rigorously trained as a professional actor of Shakespeare, hamming it up before a class can easily slip into a disingenuous evasion of pedagogical responsibilities, which ought nearly always, it seems to me, to be putting before students the intellectual and emotional complexity of Shakespeare's dramatic art, rather than putting on the voices and habits of his creatures in order to elide or occlude a student's engagement with textual difficulties. In no way should the classroom try to replace or compete with theatrical performances of Shake-

spare. So your questions really ask us to finesse the idea of pedagogical performance to the point where drama in and of the classroom becomes not only admissible but also even desirable as a powerful provoker of important Shakespearean equivocations of meaning. I think the best teachers know instinctively how to do this, how to provoke student minds into equivocations of thought and feeling. Not that ambiguity and ambivalence, or deconstructible binary oppositions, are the only objective of such provocations. Teaching a Shakespeare play ought to be dramatizing the effort to pull all these words and lines into purposive relations with each other, so that the drive toward unity of artistic intention (which is different from authorial intentionality) is purposely and constantly plagued by these equivocations of text and meaning. Another way to put this is to say that there's a strong incitement in teaching Shakespeare to ventriloquize his characters as a histrionic mode of pedagogy, one that intends to force engagement with Shakespeare's language and compel an appreciation for his charismatic characters. This is a healthy incitement of the pedagogical reason and blood, but it ought to be checked and creatively frustrated by a complementary desire to destabilize and decenter what things mean in Shakespeare. I know these are politically hip critical terms, but let's put it more plainly this way: in a real theater, there is no question that the triangulated relations between actor, character played, and beholding audience is one of domination. That's why we go to the theater, to be mastered into submission by and to an alternatively imagined reality. But in a classroom, one must be reproducing as a pedagogical act of fidelity to the subject one is teaching these relations of power even as one deconstructs them (undermines them), so that students feel empowered by their joint engagement with unity and uncertainty.

In the early nineties when I first came to Oakland, there was emerging what was advertised as a whole new school of Shakespeare scholarship: performance criticism. The central notion of this approach was that Shakespeare's art is three dimensionally a performance medium, and restorations of that

medium to students' view will necessarily provide an interpretive engagement with Shakespeare's performance text. Not only were the newly available videos and movies helpful in furthering this approach to Shakespeare in the classroom, but the classroom itself was turned into a sort of theater, with students acting out the political and emotional conflicts of Shakespeare's characters and situations. As effective a tool as this approach can sometimes be, especially for young people whose mediatized consciousness of the world is more vitally focused by a visual performance medium, one certain drawback is a kind of wholesale acceptance of the text that prevents deeper engagement with the creative difficulties of Shakespeare's language. But another consequence of wholesale acceptance is the avoidance, by both teacher and student alike, of the political opportunity for understanding the historical specificity of Shakespeare's particular play moment. The rage to make Shakespeare our contemporary—make the plays relevant by acting them out—blinds us to certain political issues involving national, racial, religious, and sexual identities, primogenitural conveyance of power and wealth, the degraded place of women in Renaissance patriarchal society, etc.

But there is an example in *Hamlet* itself, of what I'm trying to talk about. Let's not forget that the Prince himself is a theater lover; his misanthropic and manic spirits rebound as soon as the players arrive at Elsinore. Immediately (before they even have time to drop their baggage!) Hamlet craves from them a taste of their quality. "Come, a passionate speech." But at other times, curiously, we hear him counseling restraint (to the players—"is it the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature") and celebrating self restraint in his fellow philosopher Horatio: "Give me that man/ That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him/ In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,/ As I do thee." Now performance criticism can help put students of the play in touch with Hamlet's ambivalent attitude toward histrionic acting out, but there is an even wider or deeper ambivalence that needs to be

studied—that of the play itself toward its own theatrical excess, the excess of theater that *is Hamlet*. A feeling for this kind of performance ambivalence can only be cultivated in students by training their attention to extraordinary, minute aspects of the poetic text. In fact, I like to introduce the subject of overdoing as not only one of *Hamlet's* principal thematic obsessions, but one of its technical modes of construction, which is everywhere in the play, once you start (and you never stop) looking for it. Dare we make the connection now, that *interminability* and *overdoing* are somehow versions (of each other) of interpretive excess, well, of excess in many sorts? And that interminability and overdoing are the opposite side (of the *Hamlet* coin) to Hamlet's famous problem of delay? So that overdoing and delay mirror each other as principles of over-and-in-action in the play?

I like to argue to my students that *Hamlet* (one of Shakespeare's longest and wordiest of plays) is overdone from its very start, but the word itself enters the text of the play (as if *Hamlet* needed to become conscious in language of its own theatrical processes, only after the patterning of this process had been inordinately established) as a past participle in the second scene of act three where Hamlet is advising the players against any histrionics (i.e., *overdone*) whose excessive display would mar the representational truth of the theater—"to hold the mirror up to nature," in Hamlet's famous phrase about the purpose of playacting:

For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing,
whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold,
as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own
feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body
of the time his form and pressure.

For all of Hamlet's good reasoned sense here, the fact is—I like to point out to my students—Hamlet is still very much in character, in that part of his character which is ethically high minded and above the fond multitude (who choose merely by show) ("who for the most part are capable of noth-

ing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. Hamlet's literary criticism here insists—Platonically—that theatrical representations should describe virtue precisely and expose the scornful to themselves. He asks his players to tailor their performances not for the popular audience but for the judicious critic like himself, whose opinions “must o’erweigh a whole theater of others.” However Shakespeare’s popular audience might have accommodated itself to Hamlet’s patricianism, they must have done so by avoiding the implication that he was not one of their common fellows, great lovers of the theater all. Elsewhere in the play we hear Hamlet distancing himself from commonness and popular taste, in his opening scenes with Gertrude and in his yearning for a passionate speech from the players, one from a play that proved not “caviar to the general.” And also in Hamlet’s apostrophe to the theater:

. . . this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this
brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted
with golden fire: why, it appeareth nothing to me but a
foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

The zodiac of the heavens canopied the stage of the Globe theater, where *Hamlet* was probably one of Shakespeare’s first plays in performance there.

Hamlet’s later warning to the actors against playing to this congregation of vapors, this “whole theater of others,” singles out the clown especially, who needs to constrain himself from improvisationally going out of his text for a few extra laughs. Hamlet puts the point precisely enough: let not the clown laugh in order to provoke laughter in his audience (barren spectators). What begins to show itself as a rhetorical pattern throughout this scene is the idea of mirroring effects: laughter produces laughter, which Hamlet condemns as mere narcissistic playing. In fact, much of the scene is shaped in rhetorical language that suggests the shape of mirrored imagery: Suit the action to the word and the word to the action . . . The chiasmic rhetorical shape (word/ action ~ action/ word) of Hamlet’s utterance seals off the performing self of

the actor in a verisimilitude of theatrical effect, an effect Hamlet clearly projectively admires, as a style of behavior he himself is not capable of. The key phrase here, that which leads to us Hamlet's narcissistic motivation, is "special observance":

Suit the action to the word and the word to the action,
with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the
modesty of nature.

Observe, observance, observation: these words are deployed consistently throughout the play to cast a grand net of systemic espionage, which catches all the characters in Hamlet, observed and observer alike. So Hamlet's advice to the players is really to keep a watch over their performing selves; add this "special observance" to the voyeuristic brew of the play with the play scene, and you have something so completely *overdone* as this: we the audience watch Shakespeare's audience watch Hamlet watch Claudius watch the players who are watching themselves (and their many audiences at the same time). The effect here is of a system of theatrical gazing that extends *interminably* in both directions—into and away from the self—because there is no escape from the collective gazing of a "whole theater of others."

[Kelty] I want to articulate a few thoughts of my own about why I think pedagogical performance and classroom exegesis ought, as you say, to complement each other. When we teach *Hamlet*, we eschew any pretense of parity between classroom acting and theatrical production, and we shun the notion that we are able to tell students what the play means definitively. Instead, we do what I gather you are suggesting we must do to be pedagogically responsible; that is, we try to show students how to feel the wholeness of the play and how to make the experience mean something new each time they do it.

Accepting responsibility for balancing dramatic unity with hermeneutic uncertainty forces us, I believe, to respond affirmatively to your question: dare we connect interminability and overdoing as opposite sides of the same interpretive coin?

In teaching *Hamlet*, we must confront the fact that an excess of either passion or reason tends to terminate the interpretive process. For example, ham actors in the classroom—be they teachers or students—risk losing sight of intellectual issues in a cloud of histrionics. Conversely, textual theorists may fail to notice the neglect of emotional ambiguities in overwrought ratiocination. At their worst, the former leave students with trivial performances devoid of intellectual content, while the latter abandon them to speculations made insignificant by a want of emotional authenticity. Neither practitioner gives students the opportunity to engage the work's amazing complexity.

Let me take another approach that goes by way of an analogy between the act of teaching Hamlet and Hamlet's own behavior in the episodes leading up to the players' performance before court. If we were to judge Hamlet only by his restlessness following the ghost's revelations, we would likely conclude that a fit of anger had rendered the young prince unfit for palace intrigue, that his disquiet had overwhelmed his ability to think clearly and to act decisively. Consequently, we might regard his behavior as a neurotic acting out of unresolved internal conflicts. As Wofford has show, this interpretation, in one form or another, has been a common one over the centuries. However, when we carefully "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (2.1.16–17) in the text of the play, we discover in Hamlet the methodical workings of a supremely rational and subtle mind. Let me explain.

The interpretation I am proposing assumes that Hamlet initially conceives of the play-within-the-play on the spur of the moment, during his first conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Rosencrantz mentions the imminent arrival of the players and describes the unusual condition of the theater in the city, Hamlet makes the offhand comment that the condition there is no more incredible than the new political circumstances at Elsinore. The comparison suddenly inspires him with an idea for testing the ghost's story and setting a trap for the putative rat, Claudius. By the time the players ar-

rive, he is already contriving to conceal the trap in the entertainment to come. He cordially welcomes the players by declaring (in the lines you've already adduced) "we'll have a speech straight. Come, give us a taste of your quality, come, a passionate speech." (2.2.17–19). His enthusiasm for an immediate recital reflects his eagerness to get on with the task. He desires a passionate speech to determine whether the players have the ability to hold an audience of aristocrats accustomed to quality performances. The impromptu demonstration satisfies him that the troupe has sufficient skill to bait his trap. Furthermore, he arranges for the players to enact "The Murder of Gonzago" with a few lines he will insert into it. Hamlet is not behaving like an indecisive man who longs to relieve his anxiety, but rather like an impatient man who is thinking on his feet and moving with alacrity toward his goal: retribution.

Hamlet's choice of a text for the demonstration—a dramatic depiction of the slaying of Priam at the fall of Troy—is significant and supports this interpretation of his intention. A company of Greeks hiding in the belly of the Trojan Horse is not unlike the inserted lines lying in wait within "The Murder of Gonzago." Hamlet would have preferred to confront Claudius directly, like Achilles assaulting the walls of Troy, but he restrains himself. Despite the urgency that he feels and the self-condemnation he endures, he thoughtfully rehearses his plan. Instead of acting on impulse and attacking the king at once—a dangerous course in any event—he prepares to offer his own version of the Trojan Horse: "play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Having asked the players for a display of passion, the next day Hamlet cautions them not to overdo it, fearful lest theatrical exaggeration make his trap too obvious or thwart its function. He is careful, too, during the performance that evening, not to unwittingly reveal his purpose. When Claudius asks what the play is called, though, Hamlet cannot resist the opportunity to secretly taunt his uncle with an image of a trap, but "The Mouse-trap," is not the kind of trap this rat would

think capable of snapping with enough force to do any harm. The image does not immediately arouse Claudius' suspicion.

This interpretation of Hamlet's motivation and behavior allows us to draw an uncanny analogy between his situation and that of a pedagogue. In Hamlet, the king is drawn to the performance of the play-within-the-play by his curiosity about Hamlet's theatricality, and, once his attention is focused on the drama, the inserted lines compel him to recognize the play's discomfiting ambiguity. Hamlet's goal is to trap the king and give him a taste of justice. Just so, in the classroom, a teacher's responsible use of histrionics attracts students to the play, and once they are hooked on *Hamlet*, commentary inserted by the teacher leads them to appreciate the Play's complexity. The teacher's goal is to trap students and give them a taste of Shakespeare's quality. In the drama that is the classroom, *Hamlet* itself, becomes the-play-within-the-play. Teachers who enact *Hamlet* in the classroom can take to heart Hamlet's advice to the players: "come, a passionate speech" (2.2.419), but "speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you" (3.2.1-2) and "o'erstep not the modesty of nature." (3.2.17-18).

So, I come back again to an analogy, hoping it will teach us something about teaching the play.

[Herold] As I've already asserted, overdoing in Hamlet is much more than a theme; it's a technique of dramatic construction; of plot construction, for example, late in the play where Claudius and Laertes are done in by their overdone scheming against Hamlet. How shall they kill him? By a duel in which the fencers are not equally matched; by a sporting match that is really to the death; by a rapier which is really unblunted; by a point which is really potently poisoned; *hey*, as if that weren't enough; Claudius' hatching mind cannot stop itself:

*Let's further think of this,
Weigh what convenience both of time and means
May fit us to our shape. If this should fail,*

*And that our drift look through our bad performance,
 'Twere better not assayed. Therefore this project
 Should have a back or second, that might hold
 If this did blast in proof. Soft, let me see.
 We'll make a solemn wager on your cunning—
 I ha't!
 When in your motion you are hot and dry—
 As make your bouts more violent to that end—
 And that calls for drink, I'll have prepared him
 A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,
 If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck,
 Our purpose may hold there. —But stay, what noise?*

The noise ironically is this: it's Queen Gertrude herself who enters here to eulogize the drowned Ophelia, who will later drink this chalice for the nonce. She begins by sadly declaring, in a line of emotional exhaustion that calls up the whole last scene of the play: "One woe doth tread upon another's heel." Truly the last act of Hamlet *overdoes* it all!

[Kelty] We've been talking here as if complementarity were a positive thing, especially in regard to valorizing Shakespeare, Shakespeare the container of so many opposing views. We've been talking as if interminability were a kind of eternity of Shakespeare's, but there is another side to interminability, just like the side of "action to the word" can be said to mirror the phrase on the other side of it: "word to the action." They signify, as you say, a chiasmic unity of intentional self (action to the word and word to the action) whose cross is a mirror (left to right; right to left).

[Herold] Interpretive interminability may well be the other side to Hamlet is delay, but there is another way to regard interminability which doesn't bring into play the idea of the universal and timeless (always associated with Shakespeare's greatness of claim on us). I mean exhaustion—the very opposite of interminability. Can Shakespeare's plays—even such a

one as *Hamlet*—ever exhaust the possibilities for interpretive teaching, and critical and scholarly discourse? Peering ever more closely into the monumental plays themselves (as one of my own teachers has liked to put it) gives the impression that they were founded upon shifting sands. Stephen Greenblatt writes that

We want to believe, as we read the text, “This is the play as Shakespeare himself wanted it read,” but there is no license for such a reassuring sentiment. To be “not of an age, but for all time” means in Shakespeare’s case not that the plays have achieved a static perfection, but that they are creatively, inexhaustibly unfinished.

(The Norton Shakespeare, p. 67, 1997)

Certainly the next essays participates in that creatively frustrated sense of closure. For they look at *Hamlet the Movie* extending yet further in the direction of delayed closure the unsettled and disturbing complexity of Shakespeare’s infinite play.



**“The Abstract and Brief
Chronicles of the Time”**
*A Study of Four Film Adaptations
of Hamlet*

Pamela T. Mitzelfeld

Perhaps following Shakespeare’s lead as a successful adaptor, countless directors have taken his plays and attempted to imprint them with their own interpretations. Amongst the texts in Shakespeare’s canon, *Hamlet* has become a favored cinematic vehicle. In his book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan