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## SHAKESPEARE'S HEROES

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Let me begin with a rare original account of the death of a hero on the Elizabethan stage:

How would it have joyed brave Talbot, the terror of the French, to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times) who in the tragedian that represents his person imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. I will defend it against any collian or clubfisted usurer of them all, there is no immortality can be given a man on earth like unto plays.

To set this in context and parse it: brave Sir John Talbot was a heroic figure during the Hundred Years' War against France in the time of Joan of Arc, early in the ill-fated reign of the boy king, Henry VI. He won victories against the odds at Pontoise, Harfleur and on the Somme, gaining high renown, being created the first Earl of Shrewsbury, and becoming known as the English Achilles. Eventually, though, he was defeated and killed in Bordeaux during the battle that marked the end of English rule in Aquitaine. A century and a half after his death ("two hundred years" is a rhetorical exaggeration), his heroic deeds were celebrated on stage in a play called *Harry the Sixth*, performed to packed houses in the Rose theatre on London's south bank in 1592. His death scene was so powerful that spectators imagined that the actor who played Talbot really was the heroic warrior, "fresh bleeding". They were moved to tears and those tears were a metaphoric embalming of his body. The stage thus became a second tomb, closer to home than his actual tomb faraway in Bordeaux. Noble warriors were traditionally buried with their military "achievements" – sword, shield and helmet – above their tomb, as a way of immortalizing their deeds (in Shakespeare's time, you could see those of King Henry V in Westminster Abbey). In the case of Talbot, by contrast, it is the retelling of his story on stage that gives him renown: "there is no immortality can be given a man on earth like unto plays".

As that nickname "the English Achilles" suggests, ever since ancient times, epic poetry was a medium for immortalizing heroic deeds on the battlefield: Homer's *Iliad*, with the death of Achilles on the field of Troy, was the foundation stone of western literature. When Talbot urges his men into battle, the hearts of an English theatre audience in the war-torn 1590s would have been truly stirred:



How are we parked and bounded in a pale,  
A little herd of England's timorous deer,  
Mazed with a yelping kennel of French curs!  
If we be English deer, be then in blood;  
Not rascal-like, to fall down with a pinch,  
But rather, moody-mad and desperate stags,  
Turn on the bloody hounds with heads of steel  
And make the cowards stand aloof at bay:  
Sell every man his life as dear as mine,  
And they shall find dear deer of us, my friends.  
God and Saint George, Talbot and England's right,  
Prosper our colours in this dangerous fight!

You can sense Shakespeare getting into his stride, as if he is having a dry run for the rhetoric of his greatest military hero, King Harry the Fifth, in whose rhetoric the deer gives way to the greyhound:

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:  
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge  
Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"

The theatre loves an action hero, whether it be King Henry V at Agincourt or Martius Caius in primitive Rome, penetrating the city of Corioles alone, and emerging to win the name Coriolanus:

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,  
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I  
Fluttered your Volscians in Corioli:  
Alone I did it.

But wait. In Shakespeare's case, the story is always more complicated.

The account of the thousands of spectators cheering and weeping at the figure of Talbot on stage quite probably refers to a version of the play *Harry the Sixth* that was performed before Shakespeare had a hand in it. We cannot be sure about this, but for over two hundred years scholars have been fairly certain that the majority of the play we now call *Henry VI Part 1* is not by Shakespeare. It seems to have been a collaborative work, with a leading part in the writing undertaken by Thomas Nashe – who just happens to be the man who wrote the passage



about the stunning success of the play. He was almost certainly engaged in a piece of self-promotion. There is, however, little doubt that the bulk of act four in the surviving text of the play, including the “God and Saint George, Talbot and England’s right” speech, *was* written by Shakespeare. We don’t know what Talbot’s death would have been like in the original version by Nashe and others. What is striking about Shakespeare’s version of it is that he mingles the heroic rhetoric with another kind of language, much more tender and elegiac. Talbot’s son fights alongside him, and dies before him. My guess is that the son was a Shakespearean innovation in the script. Talbot’s last lines are those of the father, not so much the warrior:

O, thou, whose wounds become hard-favoured death,  
Speak to thy father ere thou yield thy breath!  
Brave death by speaking, whether he will or no;  
Imagine him a Frenchman and thy foe.  
Poor boy! he smiles, methinks, as who should say,  
Had death been French, then death had died to-day.  
Come, come and lay him in his father’s arms:  
My spirit can no longer bear these harms.  
Soldiers, adieu! I have what I would have,  
Now my old arms are young John Talbot’s grave.

There is a gentleness, and a wit, here that draws the audience away from the image of the valiant hero and towards consciousness of the human cost of war. The young should not die before their parents: few images are more poignant than that of a father bearing his dead child in his arms. Thinking forward in Shakespeare’s career, we look to eighty-year-old King Lear, carrying onto stage the dead body of his beloved youngest daughter Cordelia, who has been executed in prison after she and her father’s forces have been defeated in a bloody civil war.

Civil war – a great fear in the Elizabethan age – is a great theme in Shakespeare’s plays. A scene in *Henry VI Part 1* that is certainly attributable to Shakespeare is the encounter in the Temple Garden, here in the city of London, where representatives of the houses of York and Lancaster pluck white and red roses, and symbolically prepare the way for the civil strife that will rip England apart in *Henry VI Parts 2 and 3*. The rupture in the fabric of the nation is nowhere more powerfully visualized than in a scene in *Part 3* when first there enters a son that has killed his father and then there follows a father that has killed his son. The division of the kingdom brings the division of families. When the father realizes that the body he is bearing is that of his son, he delivers a reprise of Talbot’s elegy over his dead boy, though here with the added poignancy of the inadvertent filicide, the fact that they have been fighting against each other, not standing together for their country:



These arms of mine shall be thy winding-sheet;  
My heart, sweet boy, shall be thy sepulchre,  
For from my heart thine image ne'er shall go;  
My sighing breast shall be thy funeral bell;  
And so obsequious will thy father be,  
Even for the loss of thee, having no more,  
As Priam was for all his valiant sons.  
I'll bear thee hence; and let them fight that will,  
For I have murdered where I should not kill.

Personal loss leads this soldier to reject the pursuit of military glory. The line that interests me here, and leads me into my main theme, is the simile “As Priam was for all his valiant sons.” According to Homer, King Priam of Ilium had fifty sons, the vast majority of whom were slain on the field of Troy by the Greeks. Priam is the archetype of the father who has the horror of witnessing the death of his sons in battle.

It is this process of comparison with an example from classical antiquity that I want to explore, as a way of revealing Shakespeare’s complex, critical attitude to heroism. Let me go back to the place where I ended my first lecture: to the idea of rhetoric in the age of Shakespeare. A quick recap for those of you who weren’t here (you can catch the full lecture on the Gresham College website). The art of rhetoric, which meant the persuasive use of words to affect an audience emotionally and to change their ideas, was the essential building block of education in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare would have been taught basic rhetorical techniques at school. And when the Gresham Professorship of Rhetoric was established in the late 1590s, public lectures on the art of eloquent speech were offered to the citizens of London. Those of you who were here for the first lecture will remember that I pointed out that at the time of the first Gresham lecture on rhetoric Shakespeare was actually a resident in the very parish, St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, where the professor delivered his talk, in the house that had belonged to Sir Thomas Gresham.

The content of that inaugural Gresham rhetoric lecture of 1598 is lost, but it was delivered by an Oxford don who was not known for original ideas, so it would not have been innovative. It would have been an exposition, and perhaps an application, of the classical ideas of rhetoric that went all the way back to Aristotle. In his treatise on rhetoric, the great Greek philosopher had divided rhetoric into three classes, each of them appropriate for a particular purpose: *forensic* rhetoric for legal cases, *epideictic* rhetoric (epideictic means the language of praise), which was especially useful for public ceremonies, and *deliberative* rhetoric. We still have the English word “deliberate”: it means to think carefully, to ponder a question, to weigh a case. For Aristotle and his most influential successor, Cicero in ancient Rome, deliberative rhetoric took place in the political arena: its purpose was to offer counsel about appropriate actions in pursuit of the public good.



Deliberation relied especially on a technique whereby an argument was made using examples from the past to predict future outcomes in order to illustrate that a given policy or action would be either harmful or beneficial. Aristotle makes a key distinction when he writes that “enthymemes are most suitable to forensic speeches” (the enthymeme is a form of syllogism, a mode of argument relying on logic), whereas “examples are most suitable to deliberative speeches; for we judge of future events by divination from past events.” Examples (for which Aristotle’s Greek word was *paradeigma*, our “paradigm”) are of two kinds: the mention of actual past facts (i.e. the historical example) and the invention of facts by the speaker. Of the latter, Aristotle explains, there are two kinds: “the illustrative parallel and the fable (e.g. the fables of Aesop)”.

The centrality of “examples” to deliberative rhetoric explains why in his rhetorical treatise *The Arte of English Poesie*, written just at the time Shakespeare was beginning his career in the theatre, George Puttenham gives a climactic place to the technique:

***Paradigma, or a resemblance by example:*** Finally, if in matter of counsell or perswasion we will seeme to liken one case to another, such as passe ordinarily in mans affaires, and doe compare the past with the present, gathering probabilitie of like successe to come in the things wee have presently in hand: or if ye will draw the judgements precedent and authorized by antiquitie as veritable, and peradventure fayned and imagined for some purpose, into similitude or dissimilitude with our present actions and affaires, it is called resemblance by example: as if one should say thus, Alexander the great in his expedition to Asia did thus, so did Hanniball comming into Spaine, so did Cæsar in Egypt, therefore all great Captains & Generals ought to doe it.

Shakespeare parodies the pedantic use of the figure of *paradigma* as a form of argument when Fluellen compares King Henry V to Alexander the Great (“If you mark Alexander’s life well, Harry of Monmouth’s life is come after it indifferent well, for there is figures in all things”), but when Titus Andronicus reads his daughter’s fate through the memory of Ovid’s Philomel Shakespeare is signaling that “resemblance by example” – comparing “the past with the present” and drawing “judgements precedent and authorized by antiquity as veritable” – is one of his principal methods of storytelling. He would have agreed with Puttenham that “no one thing more prevaileth with all ordinary judgements than persuasion by *similitude*” – and that there is no more powerful similitude than a comparison with an exemplar from the past.

Such an art is applicable in any public forum, not merely a court or council, senate or parliament. Deliberative rhetoric thus had a very wide application. And in Shakespeare’s London, the theatre was a new and democratic space for open debate about both public goods and private lives. One might even go so far as to say that all the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were exercises in deliberative rhetoric, in which the audience was invited to make up their own minds on matters of morality and politics. Shakespeare practised the deliberative



technique in almost everything he wrote. It is in this sense that his imagination was shaped by the art of rhetoric in general and “divination” from the classical past in particular.

The uses of history, of illustrative parallel, and of tale or fable: these were key weapons in Shakespeare’s rhetorical armoury. More than this, however, at a very profound level Shakespeare constructed his characters’ selves by means of what I would describe as a *personalised rhetoric of illustrative parallel*. Let me demonstrate what I mean by considering the case of his most famous character, Hamlet.

The first occurrence in the play of the word “Hamlet” occurs during the opening scene, when Horatio names the ghost who has initially been identified as bearing “that fair and warlike form / In which the majesty of buried  
Denmark /

Did sometimes march”. Horatio describes the dead king as “our valiant Hamlet”. The ghost appears to be wearing the very armour in which he killed old Fortinbras on the battlefield, in a war between Denmark and Norway. Old King Hamlet is thus set up as the archetype of the warrior hero. The audience then learns that there is also a “young Hamlet”. Horatio says they will go and tell him about his father’s ghost.

The ghost – in a very literal sense, a figure from the past – is thus not only Hamlet’s father, but also his paradigm, his illustrative parallel. However, when we see young Hamlet in the next scene, he is anything but a warrior hero. He is wearing black, which is not only a signal that he is still mourning when the rest of the court is not, but also the habitual dress of the melancholy man, the very opposite of the man of action. In addition, he is identified as a student, a scholar: a man of thought rather than action. And as a lover: Polonius believes that Hamlet is suffering specifically from love-melancholy, the malady of unrequited desire. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton would write of its symptoms: distraction, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, a disheveled appearance – exactly the way Hamlet represents himself to Ophelia.

When the actors arrive later in the action, Shakespeare reminds his audience of the way that plays depend on character types: “He that plays the king shall be welcome: his Majesty shall have tribute of me; the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh gratis; the humorous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o’ th’ sere.” For the audience of *Hamlet*, these character types constitute a ready set of illustrative parallels within the theatrical repertoire: paradigms for the king, the warrior hero (“the adventurous knight”), the lover, the melancholy or “humorous” man, and the clown. The pleasure taken by Hamlet in his enumeration of these roles suggests that he quite fancies the idea of playing all of them – which in the course of the play he does, save that his reign as king lasts only a few seconds. But it also suggests that he does not know which role to play. Or, more precisely, that he detects a massive disjunction between the turmoil of his inner life and the public roles offered to him by history, custom and theatrical



example. As he says in his first substantial speech, “these indeed seem / For they are actions that a man might play; / But I have that within which passeth show.”

Hamlet cannot show us what he has within, but he can tell us. *Hamlet* is the play in which Shakespeare develops as never before the full art of soliloquy, the revelation of the individual mind to the listening audience. If we look at Hamlet’s first soliloquy, we find that it is through the rhetorical art of illustrative parallel that he reveals himself. First he compares his father to his uncle, the old king to the new: “that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr.” Shakespeare expects his audience to know that Hyperion was the god of the sun (sometimes used as an alternative name for Apollo), the sun being the appropriate emblem for the majesty of a true king, and that a satyr was a mythical creature, half-man, half-goat, an emblem for the bestial element in man and especially for goatishness, which meant uncontrolled sexual desire. Then Hamlet compares Gertrude following her first husband to the grave to “Niobe, all tears”. Shakespeare expects his audience to know that Niobe was a mythical figure who wept uncontrollably for her many dead children, becoming “all tears” – but the audience would also know that Niobe then turned to stone, symbolically suggesting that after such grief she would forever be numb and incapable of further emotion. Here the comparison turns to contrast, in Puttenham’s terms from similitude to dissimilitude: whereas Niobe turned cold, Gertrude has moved swiftly from watery tears to the heat of renewed sexual passion. Dissimilitude is also the ground of Hamlet’s final illustrative parallel in his first soliloquy: Claudius, he says, is “no more like my father / Than I to Hercules”. Hercules was the archetypal action hero, the muscular demi-god. By saying that he is not Hercules, Hamlet is identifying himself as a man of contemplation, not action; a scholar, not a soldier.

Hamlet’s method of thinking, then, is to find a paradigm in the repertoire of book learning that he has derived from his humanist education. The problem for a good student such as him is that there are so many possible models of behavior that it is hard to choose between them. So, in his second soliloquy, he says that he will erase them all. He has just encountered the ghost, whose last words before disappearing were “Remember me”:

Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain.



“Saws of books” refers to the “sentences”, the proverbial wisdom that one was supposed to write down in one’s “table” or commonplace book – Polonius gives a whole list of them in his advice to Laertes (“neither a borrower nor a lender be”, “to thine own self by true” and all that). And among the “forms” and “pressures” (mental impressions) past would have been that repertoire of behavioral examples. Hamlet vows to wipe the slate clean and fill his mind with one image alone, that of his father’s armoured ghost.

This creates a new problem for him. We need to remember here that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was his distinctive reworking of an old tragedy of *Hamlet* that was in the repertoire at the beginning of his career. The old play is now lost, but the one thing that survives is the Ghost’s catchphrase: it was “Hamlet, revenge!” Carried within that command is a rhetorical paradigm: if Hamlet were to ask “what do you mean by ‘revenge?’” or “how shall I do it?”, the answer would have been “behave like the past avengers you have read about or seen on stage” – classical literature and early modern drama are full of action heroes avenging their fathers’ deaths. But by replacing the catchphrase “Hamlet, revenge!” with “Remember me!”, this ghost is depriving his son of his models and reducing him to brooding paralysis, since remembrance is a thought, not an action.

So it is that in his next soliloquy Hamlet requires the stimulus of an actor to set him on the course of action. He witnesses the player weeping as he delivers a dramatic speech about Hecuba driven to madness by grief following the slaughter of her sons and her husband in Troy. The image of Hecuba is in itself a classical paradigm, but the presence of the Players adds a layer of complexity. The audience in the theatre witnesses the actor playing Hamlet witnessing the actor playing the actor playing the part of an actor in a play about the fall of Troy, describing Hecuba going out of her senses. The layers of performance are almost enough to make us go out of our senses, but at least the remembrance of the power of the imagined Hecuba play is enough to give Hamlet the inspiration for an action: namely, inserting a speech into another play in order to turn it into a “Mousetrap” to catch the conscience of King Claudius.

After Claudius’s reaction to that play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, convinces Hamlet of his uncle’s grief, the young prince delivers another soliloquy in which he tries to turn himself into the embodiment of an avenger. The trouble is, he chooses the wrong paradigm. He should have remembered the revenge tradition that ran from Seneca’s *Thyestes* to the drama of the 1590s and said something like “Let the soul of Atreus enter this firm bosom” or indeed “Let the soul of Andronicus enter this firm bosom”. Instead, he says “Let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom”. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius had made Nero into the archetype of a tyrant: to mention his name is to summon up a paradigm for violent action. But Hamlet checks himself. Remembering in an instant that Nero secured his position by killing his mother, he modifies the comparison: “Let me be cruel”, he says (that is to say, let me be like Nero), but then the modifier: “Let me be cruel, not unnatural” (that is to say, let me be unlike Nero – killing the person who gave birth to you is about the most unnatural thing imaginable). Hence Hamlet’s conclusion: “I will speak daggers to her, but use none.” The





personalised rhetoric of comparison and differentiation, similitude and dissimilitude, proceeds with the speed of thought.

I will return to Hamlet later, but here I want to note that everywhere in Shakespeare, we find characters comparing themselves or others to figures from the mythology and history of Greek and Roman antiquity, in order to find positive or negative role models. What I am describing as his *personalisation* of deliberative rhetoric as a form of character creation does not always rely on *explicit* historical comparison. The technique of illustrative parallel can also be applied to a speaker's invention of his or her own imaginary past. Consider Lady Macbeth's scornful tirade of her husband, contrasting his backsliding with her resolution:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this.

Our tendency on hearing this might be to ask a narrative question such as “how many children had Lady Macbeth?” But for Shakespeare and his audience, the speech is essentially a device of deliberative rhetoric. A past action is described: “I have given suck”. The action is put to the service of an argument in favour of a future action: be a man and proceed with the bloody business. A supporting paradigm is then introduced in the form of an imagined history in the form of the past conditional image of a loving mother turned infanticide: “I would ... Have plucked my nipple ... And dashed the brains out”. Notice how the delayed internal rhyme of “suck” and “plucked” links the two contrasting images of mothering. In processing the gruesome picture of a mother dashing out her baby's brains, rhetorically-minded audience members of Shakespeare's original audience would have looked to the classical past for analogies. The obvious one would have been Medea: at the end of Seneca's tragedy about her, Medea, in furious vengeance for her husband Jason's infidelity, ascends the palace roof, kills their two children and flings their bodies down to her husband below. Dashed brains indeed. At this point in Shakespeare's play, it seems to me that his original spectators would have thought “Lady Macbeth is turning into a Medea” rather than “are the Macbeths bereaved parents suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder?” (which is what Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard made them into in the 2015 film version of the play).

If you want further evidence that the memory of Seneca's *Medea* was knocking around in Shakespeare's brain while he was creating the character of Lady Macbeth, you only have to ask: which dark goddess presides over the “unsexing” of both women, their rejection of traditional female values? The answer is Hecate. And then you



might attend closely to some lines in which Seneca's Medea imagines an act of self-harm – mutilating her own breasts – as a way of embodying that unsexing. Here are the lines in the Elizabethan translation that was available to Shakespeare:

With naked breast and dugges layde out Ile pricke with sacred blad  
Myne arme, that for the bubling bloude an issue may bee made,  
With trilling streames my purple bloude let drop on th' aulter stones.  
My tender Childrens crussed fleshe, and broken broosed bones  
Lerne how to brooke with hardned heart: in practise put the trade  
To florishe fearce, and keepe a coyle, with naked glittering blade.

Given the decisive parallel in the concatenation of breast, dugs (nipples) and “children's crushed flesh and broken bruised bones” in the context of hardening the heart and committing oneself to the imagined dagger that leads one on to murder, we may say with some confidence that Medea was a “paradigm” for Lady Macbeth.

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The monument to Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, erected shortly after his death in 1616, bears a Latin inscription proclaiming that the earth holds his body, the people mourn him and his spirit is on Mount Olympus. It praises his judgement as that of Nestor, the wise old man in Homer's *Iliad*, his mental powers as those of Socrates, the greatest philosopher of the ancient world, and his literary art as that of Virgil, the most admired of Roman poets. At the time of his birth in 1564, it would have been inconceivable that a provincial glover's son who started his career as an actor, turned playwright for the public stage and never published an epic or heroic poem could end his life being regarded as an English Virgil. In his lifetime, he was more aptly compared to Terence, Plautus, Seneca and Ovid. In his extant works, he never mentions Virgil by name, in the way that he refers to Ovid, Seneca, Plautus, Horace, Cicero and Mantuan. The claim that he had the art of Virgil (“*arte Maronem*”) is shorthand for “he was the best” and perhaps “he is, or will come to be seen as, our national poet”, not “his works were in the Virgilian style”.

Although Shakespeare never named *The Aeneid* or its author, he did allude on a number of occasions to the character of Aeneas, remembering him – as most educated Elizabethans remembered him – for three things: escaping from Troy with his father on his back, falling in love with Dido Queen of Carthage and then deserting her, and becoming the “great ancestor” of the Romans. Thus Cassius' simile for his action in rescuing the drowning Caesar from the Tiber: “as Aeneas, our great ancestor, / Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder / The old Anchises bear”. The bearing of Anchises – an image widely represented in engravings and emblem books – is explicitly reimagined on stage, though with the father dead, at the end of the battle of St



Albans at the climax of *Henry VI Part 2*. Young Clifford exits carrying the body of his father, who has been slain on the field in combat with Richard Duke of York:

Come, thou new ruin of old Clifford's house:  
As did Aeneas old Anchises bear,  
So bear I thee upon my manly shoulders:  
But then Aeneas bare a living load,  
Nothing so heavy as these woes of mine.

As for the desertion of Dido, this is remembered in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* – “False Aeneas”, “Widow Dido!  
/ What if he had said “widower Aeneas” too?” – and, most memorably, *The Merchant of Venice*:

In such a night  
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand  
Upon the wild sea banks and waft her love  
To come again to Carthage.

In its dramatic context, this allusion is highly ironic: it is supposed to be a romantic moonlit scene with lovers (Lorenzo and Jessica) at the beginning of their relationship. A broken-hearted woman about to commit suicide is not exactly an auspicious augury. This is a first hint that Shakespeare just might have had what could be described as a counter-Virgilian, or at the very least an anti-heroic, imagination.

To demonstrate this further, I want to consider the most Virgilian speech he ever wrote. It comes in *Hamlet*. The players have arrived at Elsinore. Hamlet welcomes his old friend, the lead actor. He asks for an instant taster of the players' quality, “a passionate speech”.

“What speech, my lord?”

O, says Hamlet, one from a play that was either never acted or that bombed after a single performance, because it was too sophisticated, “caviar to the general”. “One speech in it”, he continues, “I chiefly loved: 'twas Aeneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter”. Then off he goes, Hamlet beginning it, and the Player picking up from him: “The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms, / Black as his purpose, did the night resemble ... With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus / Old grandsire Priam seeks”. Pyrrhus is the son of Achilles, determined to avenge his father's death on the battlefield. The player takes up the narrative:



Anon he finds him  
Striking too short at Greeks: his antique sword,  
Rebellious to his arm, lies where it falls,  
Repugnant to command. Unequal matched,  
Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide,  
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword  
Th' unnervèd father falls. Then senseless Ilium,  
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top  
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash  
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear, for, lo, his sword,  
Which was declining on the milky head  
Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick:  
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,  
And, like a neutral to his will and matter,  
Did nothing.  
But as we often see against some storm  
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,  
The bold winds speechless and the orb below  
As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder  
Doth rend the region, so, after Pyrrhus' pause,  
Arousèd vengeance sets him new a-work,  
And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall  
On Mars his armour forged for proof eterne  
With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword  
Now falls on Priam.

Certain details such as Priam's "antique sword ... repugnant to command" seem to be taken from Virgil's second book ("inutile ferrum") and others from the dramatization of Aeneas telling his tale in Marlowe and Nashe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*, notably the image of Priam being knocked to the ground by the "whiff and wind" of Pyrrhus raising his sword. But the particular verbal parallels are of little importance; the significant aspects of the speech are the contrast between its style and that of the surrounding play, and a particular Shakespearean innovation that is without precedent in either Virgil or the Marlowe-Nashe play.

In Virgil, Pyrrhus' actual slaying of Priam is dispatched in two swift lines: "implicuitque comam laeva, dextraque coruscum / extulit ac lateri capulo tenuis abdidit ensem", translated by Thomas Phaer as "And with his left hand wrapt his lockes, with right hand through his side / His glistringe sworde outdrawn, he did hard to the hiltes to



glide”. In Aeneas’ speech in Marlowe and Nashe’s play, there is a delay whilst soldiers remove Hecuba, who has sought to protect her aged husband by attaching her fingernails to Pyrrhus’ eyelids. But then, as soon as Priam is felled by the air-rush of the whirring sword, the end is equally swift: “Then from the navel to the throat at once / He ripped old Priam” (and in so doing presumably gave Shakespeare the hint for Macbeth unseaming Macdonald “from the nave to the chaps”). But in the Player’s recitation to Hamlet, Pyrrhus’ raised sword is held suspended in an effect anticipating a cinematic freeze-frame: during the imagined suspension Pyrrhus “Did nothing”. Even the beat of the iambic pentameter is interrupted: this is a much-abbreviated line. The hearts of Pyrrhus, the reciting Player, the listening Hamlet and the audience skip several beats, just as the pentameter can only be filled by missing beats.

The gap before the fall of the sword is filled by two lengthy similes: a five-line analogy with a lull before a storm and then, picking up on the thunder clap with which the storm breaks, a comparison with the noise of the hammer of the Cyclops as they forge the sword of Mars. The elaborate comparison to the storm is what is known as an epic simile. Because epic poetry is an extended form that moves at a leisurely pace, the narrative is frequently punctuated by such comparisons. There is a good example in Aeneas’ tale to Dido where he speaks of Priam’s slaughter. When Pyrrhus arrives at Priam’s door in his “brazen harness bright with burnished brand”, there is a five line comparison to a serpent raising itself up in readiness to strike:

Before the porch all ramping first at th’ entry dore doth stand  
Duke *Pyrrhus* in his brasen harneis bright with burnisht brand.  
And glistring like a serpent shines whom poysonid wéedes hath fild.  
That lurking long hath under ground in winter cold ben hild.  
And now his cote of cast all fresh with youth renewd and pride  
Upright his head doth hold, and swift with wallowing back doth glide  
Brest high against the sunne, and spits with toongs thre-forked fier.

(Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2.471-75, in Elizabethan translation by Thomas Phaer)

At the end of the Pyrrhus speech, which is the second longest in the play, longer than all but Hamlet’s longest soliloquy (42 lines to the 59 of the Hecuba soliloquy), Polonius has the immortal line: “This is too long.” This is not an entirely foolish observation: Hamlet agrees that the speech will have to be trimmed if it is to be performed: “It shall to th’ barber’s, with your beard”. This is Shakespeare’s way of saying that he recognizes that there is something inherently undramatic about the heroic idiom exemplified by Virgil: to pause for an epic simile is inevitably to slow down the action. The effect works brilliantly for the deliberate freeze-frame of Pyrrhus’ pause in the embedded narrative, but for a character to keep stopping to speak in lengthy similes and metaphors runs the risk of boring the audience. Given the parallels with Marlowe’s rendition of Aeneas’ tale in *Dido Queen of Carthage*, which actually incorporated chunks of direct translation from Virgil, Shakespeare may



even be teasing his dead rival over the excessive length and poetic elaboration of his speeches. The Virgilian style of *Dido Queen of Carthage*, written for court performance in the 1580s, is now, at the end of the 1590s, implicitly condemned as distinctly old-fashioned. Shakespeare's idiom may have aspired to the heroic in parts of *Henry VI* and indeed, more recently, in *Henry V*, but in *Hamlet* he deliberately brackets out the epic voice by giving it to the Player, contrasting it with his own more subtle style that switches between stretches of everyday prose and supple blank verse that moves with the rhythm of thought and the beat of conversational speech.

There is further significance to Pyrrhus' pause. Shortly after the king breaks up the play within the play, the audience is presented with the powerful stage image of Claudius kneeling in penitential prayer and Hamlet standing over him with sword drawn. This is a clear echo of Pyrrhus standing over Priam. It enacts precisely the freeze-frame moment that the Player has described. But Hamlet does not follow his role model. At this point, the classical inheritance clashes with the Christian, and in particular the Protestant, belief-system: Pyrrhus plunges in the sword and sends his adversary to Hades, but Hamlet stops to reflect that to kill a man at prayer would be to send him straight to Heaven, which would be no requital for the murder of old Hamlet, taken "full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown" as he slept, deprived of the opportunity of deathbed penitence.<sup>1</sup>

Hamlet's rejection of the pattern offered by Pyrrhus is of a piece with the play's broader questioning of the ethos of revenge. When we see Hamlet standing over the praying Claudius, he resembles for a moment the "painted tyrant" to whom Pyrrhus was compared in the Player's speech. The problem Hamlet wrestles with throughout the play is that to become a revenger, he must be a murderer and that potentially makes him a tyrant no better than Claudius. It is this thought that sparks his conscience – a key Christian idea. In this regard, it is notable that Hamlet's most famous soliloquy begins with canon law's proscription of suicide, "self-slaughter", and ends with the idea that conscience makes cowards of us all. The coward is the opposite of the hero. But, strikingly, in this soliloquy, for once, Hamlet does not measure himself against an exemplar – whether Hercules or Nero, the Player or Fortinbras. He represents himself as the quintessence of the individual, alone with his "conscience", a man thinking, making decisions for himself without the crutch of precedent or example. Ultimately, Shakespeare seems to be saying, we cannot rely on comparisons. Each of us must, as Polonius' sententious statement has it, to our own self be true. In this regard, Hamlet is a new and very modern, we might as well say an *existential*, hero.

The hero is traditionally, as is said of Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*, "a very man *per se*, and stands alone". Macbeth is increasingly isolated as his play progresses: as he himself says, he ends up like a lone bear tied to the stake in a

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<sup>1</sup> The added twist here is that old Hamlet is in Purgatory, a Catholic imagining, whereas Hamlet's education at Wittenberg has presumably led to him to accept the Protestant abolition of the idea of Purgatory and the idea of instant salvation as the reward for true penitence. Though, of course, the further irony is that Claudius' "words fly up" while his "thoughts remain below", since "words without thoughts never to heaven go".



baiting ring. Upon stabbing King Henry VI, Richard III announces himself with the words “I am myself alone” and in his last big speech, “my kingdom for a horse”, he uses the word “myself” no fewer than twelve times. So perhaps in his self-absorption and his isolation, Hamlet is not so different from the warriors who are his anti-type. Hector says farewell to Andromache, Aeneas to Dido, Coriolanus to his wife. The warrior-hero stands alone in single combat; his closest bond is, paradoxically, with his adversary – in *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius and Aufidius almost treat each other as bride and groom. Hamlet, too, says goodbye to love (thus sending Ophelia to despair, madness and death), stands alone in his soliloquies, then goes on his journey to England effectively alone, since he knows that his companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been suborned to betray him. He escapes alone, then goes alone into the fencing arena that takes the place of the battlefield. But he does have the close friendship of Horatio and, in regretful retrospect, the memory of his love-affair with Ophelia. And always he has his father’s injunction to remember. Shakespeare knows that the self depends on a network of connections, those of family, pair bond and friendship above all.

In this regard, he redoubles his doubts about the heroic idiom of the man *per se* who stands alone. We have seen in detail how Hamlet is not like Virgil’s Pyrrhus. Consider also the way that the supposedly exemplary Trojan and Greek heroes are represented in Shakespeare’s play about the war that Homer remembered in the *Iliad* and Virgil in the *Aeneid*: Hector is hen-pecked, Ajax is a blockhead, Ulysses is a scheming politician, Achilles is less interested in fighting than in playing charades with his camp lover Patroclus, and Aeneas himself is reduced to the status of a glorified messenger, whose messages often get things wrong: he marches into the final scene, announcing that the Trojans are “masters of the field”, only to be followed by Troilus with the news that Hector is dead and all is lost. Heroic masculinity does not get a good press in this play.

The play, moreover, is named not for the Trojan and Greek heroes, but for the lovers: *Troilus and Cressida*. As for Aeneas, when he is mentioned in other plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*, it is in the context of his affair with Dido and his desertion of her. For Shakespeare, love is a stronger force than heroism. And that will be my starting point in my next lecture, which will be about Shakespeare’s classical lovers.

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