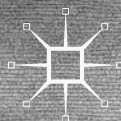


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*Hamlet and*  
**Emotions**

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Paul Megna · Bríd Phillips  
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# *Hamlet* and Emotions

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## Horatio as Author: Storytelling and Stoic Tragedy in *Hamlet*

*Jeffrey R. Wilson*

How did Shakespeare view himself as an artist?<sup>1</sup> This question is difficult to ask of any artist, but it is especially difficult to answer in the case of Shakespeare because he wrote almost nothing in his own voice.<sup>2</sup> He can't be interviewed and, in contrast to most of his contemporaries, he wrote no prefaces, no treatises, and only a couple of dedicatory epistles. The only words we have from him are those he attributed to his characters—even in his poetry the line between 'author' and 'speaker' must be firmly maintained—leading to questions of how much the statements of any given character might overlap with the thoughts of the author himself.

For example, the Hamlet who pronounces on 'the purpose of playing' (3.2.20) and stages 'The Mousetrap' (3.2.233) is readily available to be seen as an avatar for Shakespeare and his own thoughts on drama.<sup>3</sup> In this reading, Shakespeare is 'the poet of nature' who believes drama should be naturalistic (should 'o'erstep not the modesty of nature' [3.2.19]), should be mimetic (should 'hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' [3.2.21–22]), and should be more nuanced than the

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popular kind of drama that appeals to ‘the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise’ (3.2.10–12).<sup>4</sup> But Hamlet’s habit of interrupting ‘The Mousetrap’ to tell its audience what it means—he is, Ophelia says, ‘as good as a chorus’ (3.2.241)—does not gel with Shakespeare’s habit of strategically writing himself and his own voice out of his drama. The Hamlet who anxiously and aggressively interprets his art for his audience seems uniquely unfit for the Shakespeare who, with a quiet confidence, always lets his art speak for itself.

At the same time, there is another storyteller hovering around Elsinore who seems more Shakespearean in spirit. I am referring not to King Hamlet’s Ghost, the part Shakespeare may have played, but to Hamlet’s friend Horatio. If we want a symbolic representative for Shakespeare himself, Horatio much more than either of the Hamlets matches up with Shakespeare’s artistic personality. If that link can be established, moreover, a close reading of Horatio’s character may provide us with some insight on Shakespeare’s image of himself as an artist and a man.

## I

Horatio serves several functions in *Hamlet*.<sup>5</sup> Most obviously, he is Hamlet’s schoolmate from Wittenberg and best friend, yet he is still an outsider in terms of class and possibly nationality (he’s not royal, and his Danishness is open to question).<sup>6</sup> As an outsider, Horatio is an astute observer, as in Act III when he watches Claudius while Hamlet stages ‘The Mousetrap’. He is also a good listener, as in Act V when he patiently hears Hamlet’s story about the pirates. With his Italianate name, Horatio stands for a southern Europe more closely connected to the classical Greco-Roman tradition than the Nordic Denmark which has names like Hamlet. In the name Horatio, moreover, we hear the Latin *ratio*, ‘reason’, for Horatio is the rational foil to Hamlet’s emotional suffering. Both are scholars and sceptics, though Hamlet’s scepticism is more manic, Horatio’s more stoic. Perhaps the mathematical sense of *ratio* even informs Horatio’s calculating judiciousness. Hamlet says Horatio is ‘as just a man / As e’er [his] conversation coped withal’ because Horatio does not react to fortune’s blows whether good or bad (3.2.53–67).<sup>7</sup> Horatio is even, just, measured, passive, and detached if not cold and indifferent.<sup>8</sup> If Horatio is supposed to be Hamlet’s best

friend, therefore, he is the kind of friend who is ‘just there’, and he is ‘just there’, nearly silent, in several scenes. At his worst, he is something of a do-nothing and a yes-man for Hamlet in contrast to the friends who actually try to help Hamlet like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia.

But Horatio is also a storyteller. In his name we hear not only *ratio* but also *oratio*, from the Latin *orare*, ‘to speak’. Like the Shakespeare described in this chapter, Horatio is a certain kind of orator whose stories are grounded in reason. That is probably why Shakespeare made Horatio into the symbolic author of the entire Hamlet legend insofar as Horatio obliges when, at the end of the play, Hamlet begs him to ‘tell [his] story’ (5.2.332).<sup>9</sup> Beyond this meta-story, Horatio tells three other stories in *Hamlet*, two at the very beginning of the play and one at the very end. First he tells Marcellus and Bernardo (and us in the audience) the story of King Hamlet’s duel with Old Fortinbras; then he tells Prince Hamlet the story of the appearance of his father’s spirit; and then he tells Young Fortinbras the story of Prince Hamlet. Thus, where Hamlet’s overtly artistic moments—‘Aeneas’ Tale to Dido’ and ‘The Mousetrap’—are at the centre of things in Acts II and III, Horatio’s are on the periphery, framing things at the very start and very end, setting up and then punctuating the play, pointing both backward to before the play begins and forward to after it ends.

Hamlet’s association with emotion and Horatio’s with reason extend to the ways they tell their stories. ‘Aeneas’ Tale to Dido’ is performed because Hamlet asks for ‘a passionate speech’ (2.2.373), and during ‘The Mousetrap’ Hamlet is frantic, aggressive, and shoulders his way on stage. In contrast, Horatio’s scepticism surfaces in perspectivity and qualification during the three stories he tells. When Marcellus asks who can tell him why Denmark is on guard, for example, Horatio responds, ‘That can I, / At least the whisper goes so’ (1.1.79–80). Horatio doesn’t tell Marcellus what’s going on; Horatio only tells Marcellus what people *say* is going on. Moments later, when Horatio refers to ‘valiant Hamlet / (For so this side of our known world esteemed him)’ (1.1.84–85), he doesn’t describe King Hamlet; he only describes the way *other* people have described King Hamlet. What this means, in terms of telling a story, is that Horatio is constantly representing the voices of others rather than his own, a habit he shares with Shakespeare. While Hamlet waffles between action and contemplation, Horatio remains a thoroughly reflective person: ‘reflective’ in the sense of thoughtful, but also ‘reflective’ in the sense that Hamlet describes when he states that ‘the



purpose of playing' is 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature'. In the reflective, mimetic way he tells stories, Horatio does what Hamlet says to do but doesn't really do himself. Horatio reflects the world back to itself by habitually attributing ideas to others and writing himself and his own beliefs out of his stories. Even in the idea that Horatio is a 'foil' for Hamlet, we can detect his reflective nature.

Horatio is also the kind of sceptic obsessed with softening and moderating his statements with phrases such as 'A piece of him' (1.1.52), 'In the gross and scope of my opinion' (1.1.68), 'I take it' (1.1.104), 'I have heard' (1.1.149), 'And do in part believe it' (1.1.165), and—when he goes to tell Prince Hamlet of the Ghost of King Hamlet—'*I think* I saw him yesternight' (1.2.189, emphasis mine). None of the other stories told in *Hamlet*—the Ghost's story of King Hamlet's murder, for example, or Gertrude's story of Ophelia's death—exhibit this rhetoric of subjective perspective. To be constantly qualifying one's claims and stories with subjective softeners is to become what is sometimes called an unreliable narrator. It takes the grounds of certainty away from one's audience because the distinction between fact and the interpretation of fact cannot easily be drawn, a strategy Shakespeare also exploited. Shakespeare never said what he thought to be true; he only represented what men and women in the positions of his characters thought, said, and did. The effect of rigorously qualifying ideas and obsessively attributing them to others, for both Horatio and Shakespeare, is to increase the sense of irony in one's audience. Both Horatio's and Shakespeare's stories encourage audiences to recognize the possible separation between apparent and actual meaning—words, plays, and stories that seem to mean one thing can turn out, upon closer examination, to mean something else entirely. For example, Horatio's story of King Hamlet's duel with Old Fortinbras seems to be simple exposition of the backstory of the play. There is definitely a reading of this passage, however, in which Horatio is calling the supposed valour of King Hamlet into question. How 'valiant', really, is a King whose need to satisfy his 'emulate pride' (1.1.83) leads to a blood feud that puts his whole kingdom in jeopardy for generations to come? When an author like Horatio or Shakespeare refuses to take ownership of the claims and content of a story, it excites the interpretive faculty of his audience. That is why Shakespeare's plays are so malleable in their meaning and so resilient in modern culture: they not only allow but indeed encourage speculative interpretation that fills in gaps purposefully left by the author (that filling-in of gaps is the very thing I am

doing in this chapter). Horatio's story to Hamlet of his father's ghost is therefore followed by a long question-and-answer period in which Hamlet asks for details that the original story left out, something we only wish we could do with Shakespeare.

## II

None of this makes the connection between Shakespeare and his meta-theatrical Hamlet mistaken or meaningless. It would be silly to think that one character or the other were a clean allegory for Shakespeare, but Hamlet and Horatio offer two very different images of the author. Where Hamlet is specifically a dramatist, Horatio is more generally a storyteller, which sets the latter apart from Shakespeare. But where Hamlet is the aristocratic dramatist putting up plays at court, Horatio is something of an upstart on the outside of the nobility looking in. Where Hamlet is present in his art, interpreting it, Horatio is absent. Hamlet is also the artist who is himself the subject of high drama, while Horatio is the one removed from the action, the observer. And where Hamlet is associated with jangly Italian melodrama ('The Murder of Gonzago' [2.2.477]), Horatio becomes the voice of a more classically and philosophically oriented theory of tragedy at the end of the play.

Just before he does so, Horatio almost becomes, like Hamlet, a player in the tragedy when he, 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (5.2.324), goes to drink the poisoned liquor and kill himself. Hamlet begs Horatio not to do it specifically because of Horatio's penchant for telling stories: 'Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story' (5.2.330–332). Here the telling of stories is configured with pain, something that would have made sense to the Shakespeare who wrote a play about dealing with death titled *Hamlet* shortly after the death of his own son named Hamnet.<sup>10</sup> If there was a connection between Hamnet and *Hamlet*—and that connection seems hard to deny—then it would be Horatio who is in Shakespeare's place experiencing the death of a loved one, living to tell the story, and telling it as tragedy:

Give order that these bodies  
High on a stage be placed to the view,  
And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world  
How these things came about. So shall you hear



Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
 Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,  
 And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads. (5.2.360–368)

Horatio here comes to stand for Shakespeare because what Horatio identifies in Hamlet's story—what Shakespeare himself identified when looking at his sources—is that it lends itself to a telling that exploits the conventions of tragedy as practiced by the ancients. Horatio does not tell of Claudius's murder of King Hamlet; he tells of 'carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts'. Horatio does not tell of Prince Hamlet's unintended murder of Polonius; he tells of 'accidental judgments'. Horatio does not tell of Hamlet's death during his duel with Laertes; he tells of 'deaths put on by cunning'. Horatio does not tell of Ophelia's descent into madness and suicide; he tells of death by 'forced cause'. Horatio does not tell of Claudius and Laertes's deaths during their plot against Hamlet; he tells of 'purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' heads'. The content of Hamlet's story completely falls away here as Horatio theorizes it into the shape of tragedy just as, potentially, the content of the story of the death of Shakespeare's son fell away when it was reconfigured in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*.<sup>11</sup>

The point here is not simply that Horatio voiced the tradition of tragedy as Shakespeare was embarking upon his period of great tragedies, with plays like *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* on the way. The point is also that Horatio is the author—rational, sceptical, stoic, surreptitious—who makes sense of things by identifying in them generic form. Taken together, the telling of stories and the identification of genre seems to give Horatio purpose and value in life. Specifically, the formal structure of tragedy seems to give Horatio a way to make sense of and cope with the death that surrounds him and that prompts him to consider taking his own life. It is not hard to imagine *The Tragedy of Hamlet* playing a similar role in the life of Shakespeare.

### III

We are on shaky ground here. Any speculation about Shakespeare's life and attitudes toward art runs the risk of the biographical fallacy that scours and sometimes invents personal experience as a *roman à clef* for

literary expression. We have better footing talking about the text than the author. Yet it would be absurd, given the scarcity of historical facts we know about Shakespeare, to act as if his artistic output weren't an important resource for knowledge about the man. It would also be absurd to act as if Shakespeare's personal experiences didn't influence his art simply because we don't and can't know what they were with much certainty. The most balanced approach is to weigh what little biographical information we have about Shakespeare against the massive corpus of literary output that we have to determine what might, plausibly, have been the case.

When we do so, there is reason to believe that Shakespeare wrote some of himself into the character of Horatio. Specifically, there is reason to believe that, like Horatio, Shakespeare found solace after the death of a loved one in the telling of tragedy. By rationalizing pain and suffering as tragedy, Horatio and Shakespeare were able to avoid the self-destruction entailed in Hamlet's emotional response to life's hardships and injustices. In this line of thought, the sceptical and stoic storytelling represented by Horatio may have been, for Shakespeare, a coping mechanism against the radical and erratic scepticism of a Hamlet who looks at the world and finds no fairness, certainty, stability, or joy. If, in the Aristotelian tradition, the social function of tragedy is to purge the emotions of pity and fear from us in the audience who see those emotions represented on stage, it should also be noted that tragedy provides a *catharsis* for the author as well.<sup>12</sup> Here we can start to theorize 'authorial catharsis' as the notion that literary authors, especially when writing tragedy, express emotions of pain and suffering, thereby purging those emotions, and thus experience a release of troublesome passions. It works much like psychotherapy: expressing one's sadness leads to an exploration of the root causes of that depression, which can generate an understanding of why one feels as he or she does—in other words, to self-consciousness. Understanding is an inherently pleasurable phenomenon, and it is what writers of tragedy experience when they craft their stories: understanding of why bad things happen. It feels good to tell stories of bad things happening because those stories allow authors to exercise a degree of understanding, if not control, over the causes of pain and suffering, emotions which are usually acutely confusing (causing more of the same). If talking in psychotherapy is one effective means of fighting depression, the analogous act of writing tragedy may be as well.

Writing tragedy purifies the troubled mind by purging emotions of grief and anger. Writing tragedy allows us to go on living in the face of pain and injustice without killing ourselves or others.

#### IV

Shakespeare has often been called the ‘poet of nature’ in contrast to a ‘poet of art’. If the connection with Horatio holds up, however, Shakespeare may have thought of rationalism as the definitive feature of his artistic vision, this in contrast to the emotionalism displayed by Hamlet as well as the naturalism advocated in his ‘purpose of playing’ comment. Rather than a ‘poet of nature’ in contrast to a ‘poet of art’, Shakespeare could be a ‘poet of reason’ in contrast to a ‘poet of emotion’. This new construct does away with the opposition between a bookish author who sees literature as a technical craft (the poet of art) and the wood-note warbling genius whose authorship is unstudied inspiration (the poet of nature). In place of this opposition emerges a different distinction between the poet who attempts to imitate the world in which he lives and the one who focuses on expressing his own values and beliefs.

Perhaps the terms *reason* and *emotion* do not quite capture this distinction. Perhaps it would be better to speak of a ‘poet of the other’ and a ‘poet of the self’. Both kinds of poet would have a background in scepticism regarding the relationship between perspective and truth, but storytellers like Horatio (and, I would add, authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Keats) respond to the sceptical crisis by attempting to know, understand, and represent the ideas, feelings, and experiences of others; sceptics like Hamlet (or Montaigne, Jonson, Milton, or Wordsworth) respond with an interest in the self. The poet of the other, associated with the mirror that reflects a world back onto itself, represents the context and logic of multiple perspectives. In contrast, the poet of the self, associated with the lamp that illuminates the world, represents the distinctiveness and superiority of his own viewpoint.<sup>13</sup> These two different personalities manifest in clearly distinct authorial modes—the poet of the other is grounded in self-effacing irony, while the poet of the self strives for egotistical sublimity.

If so, however, it must be remembered that a ‘poet of the other’ such as Horatio or Shakespeare takes his cue from a stoic rationality, while a ‘poet of the self’ draws his artistic energy from his own emotions.

Here, in contrast to the ‘poet of nature’ who never went to university and whose talents are mystical and innate, the ‘poet of reason’ is associated with the mind, with thought, with intelligence, and with deliberate study even if Shakespeare didn’t have a degree from Cambridge. As such, the notion of a ‘poet of reason’ retrieves Shakespeare from the suggestion that his art is unintellectual even as it broadens the sources and meaning of rational thought in the Renaissance.

## NOTES

1. The author would like to thank Justin Dower, a student in the *Why Shakespeare?* course at Harvard University, for his contributions to the ideas explored in this chapter.
2. See, for example, the essays recently collected in *On Biography*, ed. Rosy Colombo and Gary Taylor, in a special edition of *Memoria di Shakespeare* 2 (2015).
3. All references to *Hamlet* are to William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Group, 2001). For a reading that contrasts Hamlet-as-dramatist with Shakespeare-as-dramatist, see Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 43–44.
4. While anticipated by Ben Jonson and John Dryden, among others, Samuel Johnson was the most influential early critic to refer to Shakespeare as a ‘poet of nature’; see Philip Smallwood, ‘Shakespeare: Johnson’s Poet of Nature’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Glingham (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143–160.
5. The best review of the totality of Horatio’s surprisingly diverse and sometimes contradictory valences in the play comes from Andrew Hui, ‘Horatio’s Philosophy in *Hamlet*’, *Renaissance Drama* 41, no. 1–2 (Fall 2013): 151–171.
6. On Horatio’s complex status as both insider (classmate and friend) and outsider (poor and foreign), see Elizabeth Hanson, ‘Fellow Students: Hamlet, Horatio, and the Early Modern University’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 205–229.
7. On these lines, see the cluster of short essays entitled ‘Just Horatio’ by Lars Engle, Karen Newman, and Jonathan Crewe in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 256–278.
8. For a balanced discussion of Horatio’s interestedness amidst his disinterestedness, see Christopher Warley, ‘Specters of Horatio’, *English Literary History* 75, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 1023–1050.

9. This conceit formed the basis of a 2015 production of *Hamlet* by the Hyperion Shakespeare Company at Harvard University (directed by Lelaina Vogel). This production cleverly stipulated that Horatio has, as requested, been telling and retelling the story of Hamlet with every production of the play over the past four centuries, tellings that always end with Hamlet's request to tell his story again: 'Worn down by the force of centuries of grief', the director wrote in the playbill, 'Horatio calls upon the rest of the cast to do something a little different. Together, they will all perform the role of the Melancholy Prince. Maybe, Horatio hopes, this will be the last time'. Everyone in the cast played Hamlet at one point or another, while Horatio became both a member of the audience scrawling in his notebook and a director of the other actors.
10. See Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet', *New York Review of Books* (October 21, 2004), adapted from Greenblatt's, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), 288–322.
11. It is noteworthy that Horatio flat-out lies when, in his story, he says that Hamlet wasn't responsible for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths (5.2.357). On this moment and other issues relating to Horatio's partiality, see Christine Phillips, 'Speaking to the Yet Unknowing World: Hamlet, Horatio and the Problem of Imperfect Witness', *Medical Humanities* 36 (2010): 97–100.
12. On authorial catharsis, see Adnan K. Abdullah, *Catharsis in Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. 'The Historical Meanings of Catharsis' (12–25); and Rachel Darling, "'Written Out": The Autobiographical Novelist-Character and Writing as Catharsis in Evelyn Waugh's, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and Muriel Spark's, *The Comforters*', *STET* 4 (2014), <http://www.stetjournal.org//darling/>.
13. Here I am drawing, of course, from M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1953).

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