

Jeff Wilson

Dr. Wilson

Expos 20.043

31 January 2022

Response Paper 1.1:
Problems and Questions

1. According to Horatio, King Hamlet once slaughtered some Pollocks while in “parle” (1.1.62), or peaceful negotiations. Horatio also describes how King Hamlet entered into a duel with Old Fortinbras, a Norwegian lord, each king placing his claim to a piece of land on the line such that the victor would gain control over it, a duel King Hamlet partook in, Horatio says, because he was “pricked on by a most emulate pride” (1.1.83). These two passages, coming in the first scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, provide an unflattering initial image of King Hamlet (an image that Prince Hamlet would surely dispute). Old King Hamlet did not observe the rules of war, and he was willing to jeopardize a piece of his country in order to satisfy his personal pride. If we can consider the possibility (with apologies to young Prince Hamlet) that old King Hamlet was not a very good king, is it also possible to conceive of Claudius as a republican revolutionary? That is, can we think of Claudius as someone who believes (and is willing to fight for the belief) that nations should be governed by those who are most fit to run them as opposed to those who are born into royalty and a line of succession? Indeed, Claudius flouts the tradition of monarchy when he, the king’s younger brother, assumes the Danish throne over Hamlet, the King’s son and rightful heir to the throne. Moreover, in contrast to King Hamlet, King Claudius’s strategy for dealing with the embittered young Fortinbras is diplomatic, not heraldic nor even militaristic. Claudius writes a letter to the brother of the slain King Fortinbras and sends some Danish ambassadors to Norway, which works. It successfully ceases young Fortinbras’s march on Danish lands. How (if at all) does a critique of King Hamlet as a tyrant change our conventional view of Claudius as an ambitious, incestuous assassin? Can we think of Claudius as a virtuous political revolutionary? Can we conceive of his marriage to Gertrude not as a perverse and illicit sexual union but as a political marriage designed to stabilize the teetering state of Denmark in the eyes of its enemies? Can we see Claudius as an (unrecognized) symbol of modern politics in contrast to Prince Hamlet as the (over-emphasized) symbol of modern psychology?

2. According to the Penguin edition of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, there are 3,834 lines in the play. 325 of them are spoken by women, Ophelia (170 lines) and Gertrude (155 lines), the only two women in the play out of the more than 30 characters listed in the *dramatic personae*. In other words, although roughly half of the human population is made up of women, they make up roughly 7 percent of the characters in *Hamlet* and speak roughly 8 percent of the lines in the play. Why is the role of women so diminished in *Hamlet*? Is this evidence of sexism on Shakespeare’s part? Of sexism in Shakespeare’s society? What do we do with the fact that

the most famous play in the history of English literature systematically ignores half of humankind?

3. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as Laertes gets set to depart for school in France, his father Polonius prattles off a list of precepts by which his son should live, at the end of which Polonius concludes: "This above all, to thine own self be true" (1.3.77). In this passage, Polonius contradicts himself every which way. First, he tells Laertes to "give thy thoughts no tongue" (1.3.58) and "give ... few thy voice," precepts that are violated by Polonius himself in the extensive tonguing of his own thoughts and giving of his own voice. Second, Polonius tells Laertes, "Be thou familiar" (1.3.60), even as Polonius is excessively formal, or *unfamiliar*, to his own son, to someone in his own family. Third, Polonius heaps upon Laertes a list of rules by which to live, but concludes, "This above all, to thine own self be true," an antinomian move that would override the rules just enumerated (if, say, Laertes's "self" told him to do otherwise). Why did Shakespeare make Polonius's speech to Laertes self-contradictory? What does it say about the idea of the "self" if Polonius cannot even be true to his own rules, cannot even be true to his own self. In *Hamlet*, what is the status of ethics – understood as the study of right action – if Polonius cannot abide by his own ethical principles? If Laertes should be true to himself, why does Polonius refuse to extend this courtesy to his daughter, Ophelia, telling her, "You do not understand yourself" (1.3.95) and "Think yourself a baby" (1.3.104)?