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Expos 20

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Response Paper 1.2:
Evidence and Analysis

“To be, or not to be”

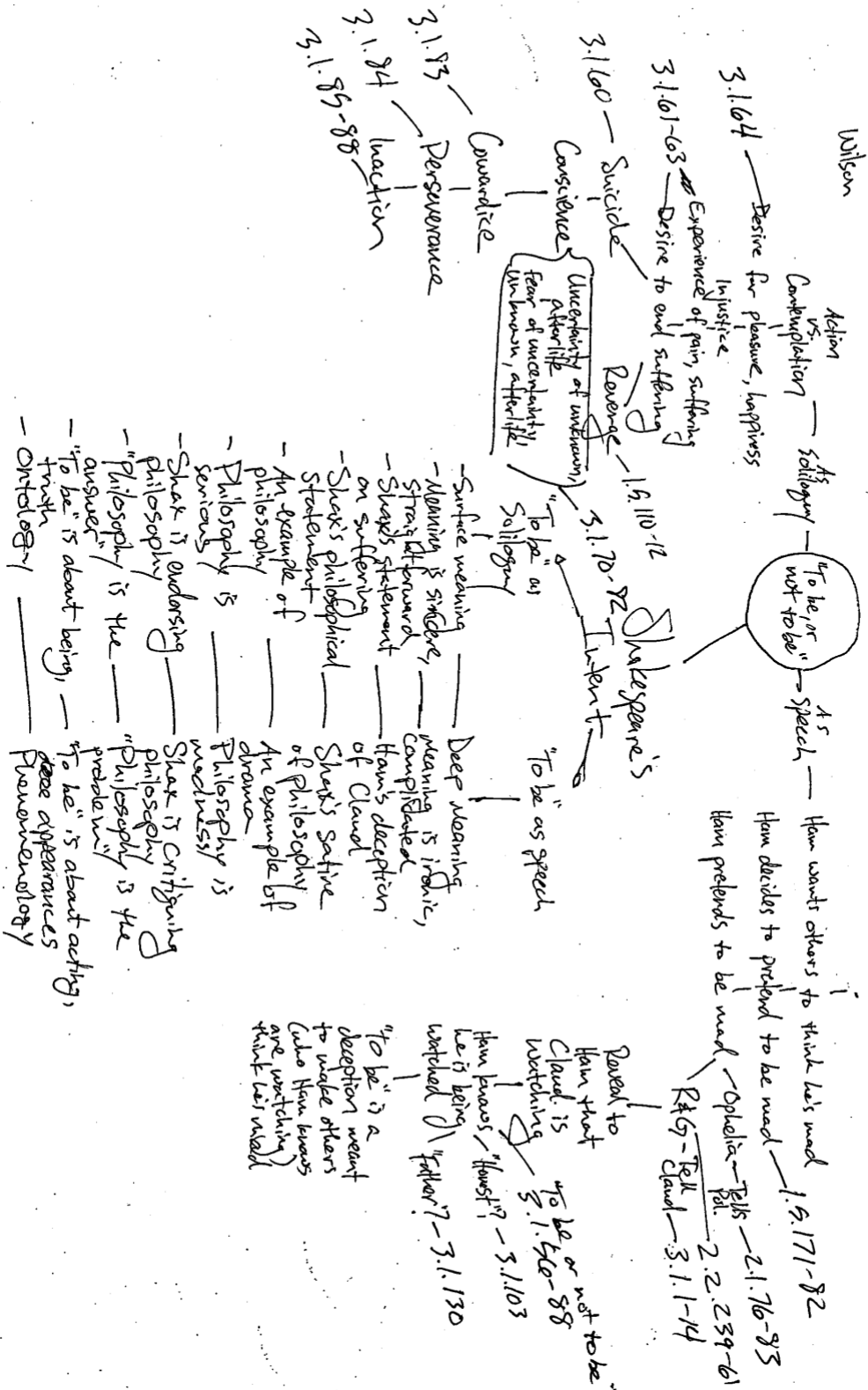
Part A:
Timeline

- 1.5.110-12 Hamlet vows revenge against Claudius.
1.5.144 Hamlet makes Horatio and Marcellus swear not to tell anyone about the ghost.
1.5.171-82 Hamlet says he is going to start acting mad.
2.1.76-83 Ophelia reports that Hamlet seems to be mad.
2.1.84 Polonius suspects that Hamlet is mad in love for Ophelia.
2.1.116-19 Polonius goes to tell Claudius of Hamlet’s madness.
2.2.1-39 Claudius and Gertrude ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to investigate Hamlet’s madness.
2.2.92-159 Polonius tells Claudius of Hamlet’s madness.
2.2.159 Claudius asks how they can be certain that Hamlet is mad due to his love for Ophelia.
2.2.160-67 Claudius and Polonius plan a ruse in which they’ll watch Hamlet interact with Ophelia so that they can tell if it’s love that’s making Hamlet mad.
2.2.168 Hamlet enters reading a book. Polonius sends Claudius and Gertrude away.
2.2.171-203 Hamlet frustrates Polonius with puns and equivocations.
2.2.204-05 Polonius says that there is method in Hamlet’s madness.
2.2. Polonius exits; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter.
2.2.239-61 Suspicious, Hamlet asks if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were sent for.
2.2.262 Guildenstern admits that they were sent for.
2.2.263 Hamlet says that Claudius has sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to investigate Hamlet’s madness.
2.2.285-486 The players enter; Hamlet gets very excited about acting.
3.1 Claudius sends for Hamlet (see 3.1.29).
3.1.1-14 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius that Hamlet is only feigning madness; they don’t know why.
3.1.15-28 Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius tell Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet is excited about the players.
3.1.42 Gertrude exits.
3.1.43-49 Polonius instructs Ophelia to walk about and read a book to appear vexed.
3.1.55 Hearing Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius hide to watch.
3.1.56-88 Hamlet enters, gives his “To be, or not to be” speech.
3.1.88-89 Hamlet sees Ophelia, approaches her.
3.1.93-102 Ophelia gives Hamlet his love letters back.
3.1.103 Hamlet asks Ophelia, “Are you honest?”
3.1.130 Hamlet Asks Ophelia, “Where’s your father?”

Part B:
Explication

1. When Hamlet delivers his famous speech, Claudius is watching him. And Hamlet knows that Claudius is watching him. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have told Claudius that Hamlet knows that he is being watched, Claudius knows that Hamlet knows that Claudius is watching him. And, insofar as we can assume that Hamlet expected (because he wanted) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to report their interaction back to Claudius, we can conclude that Hamlet knows that Claudius knows that Hamlet knows that Claudius is watching him.
2. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" is not a *soliloquy*; it's a *speech*. A soliloquy occurs when someone is alone on stage, but Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia are all on stage with Hamlet.
3. When Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be – that is the question," he poses the "question" of suicide as a rhetorical disputation, the kind of thought exercise that he would have been assigned in his university classes back in Wittenberg.
4. Thematically, "To be, or not to be" is a suffering man's account of the tension between action and contemplation – between the action of taking one's own life and the contemplation of an unknown afterlife which prevents that action from happening.
5. This passage casts an individual's personal struggle, a question of life and death, as an ontological problem, as a question of existence and nothingness. "To live, or to die" becomes "To be, or not to be."
6. Hamlet is not actively struggling with the question of suicide. By this point in the play, this struggle is old news. Hamlet is simply rehashing his earlier soliloquies, and he does not sincerely mean a word he says in this speech – not about killing himself, an option he already put to rest during his first soliloquy, "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt" (1.2.129-59), nor about his inability to act against Claudius, a dilemma resolved in his most recent soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" (2.2.488-44).
7. In this passage, Prince Hamlet cowers at the finality of death, of the afterlife, of "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.79-80). This line is acutely problematic because Hamlet has recently seen his Father's ghost return from the grave.
8. Hamlet connects the ideas that he introduces at the beginning of his speech to those he concludes at the end through continuing metaphors. For example, "to take arms against a *sea* of troubles" is continued in his conclusion with turning "currents awry."
9. Hamlet never uses the personal pronoun "I" in this passage. In contrast, he uses it 18 times in "Now I am alone."
10. Shortly after his famous "To be, or not to be" speech, Hamlet asks Ophelia, "Are you honest?" (3.1.103), and then, "Where's your father?" (3.1.130). In this scene, Ophelia is indeed acting as her father's agent: Polonius has sent her to see if Hamlet is really mad. As Hamlet's questions to Ophelia indicate, he knows she is working for Polonius and that he is being watched. "Are you honest?" *No*. "Where's your father?" *Behind the curtain*. But *when* does Hamlet know he is being watched?

Part C:
Conceptual Map



Part D:
Argument Statement

There are two possible readings of “To be, or not to be” – each viable, even plausible, yet each quite different from and even opposed to the other. On the one hand, there is the reading that appeals to those who value philosophy and abstract statements on the great *hows* and *whys* of life. In this reading, “To be, or not to be” is about the tension between action and contemplation during times of suffering. On the other hand, there is the reading that appeals to people who are suspicious of philosophy and who care more about the *in* and *outs* of human interaction. In this latter reading, “To be, or not to be” is not philosophy at all. It sounds like philosophy, but it is actually a satire of the philosophical enterprise. In this reading, “To be, or not to be” is about the ways that humans manage the ideas others have about them. In this reading, Shakespeare did not view philosophy as evil or inconsequential. He simply saw it as a less pressing concern than the acting we do in our everyday lives. Those who read “To be, or not to be” as sincere philosophy see it as great literature because it captures something profound about human being and its relationship with all existence. Those who read “To be, or not to be” as satirical drama also see it as great literature, but for a completely different reason. From this perspective, the speech is not a profound representation of the human condition; instead, it is a representation of the uses of profundity.