Sincerity in Soliloquy: 
The Unraveling of Hamlet’s Murderous Identity

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Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Hamlet* invokes a myriad of identity questions throughout the course of the play, from the opening line of “Who’s there?” to the transfer of authority to Prince Fortinbras at the tragedy’s conclusion. Hamlet’s own struggles with identity are perhaps the most remarkable to readers, audiences, actors, and even the play’s *dramatis personae* themselves. The equivocal, enigmatic character of Hamlet, himself an incarnate question of identity, is a performer, prince, son, scholar, madman, lover, friend, swordsman, and, ultimately, a murderer. Each of these roles is uncovered through interactions with other characters, but the quandaries of Hamlet’s identity are difficult to solve through dialogue alone. The prince seems to reveal their identities and consciences without necessarily revealing his own; in fact, the more he unravels the secrets of the courtiers, the more they question his identity. The audience, however, is provided a glimpse into the internal discourse that shapes Hamlet’s identity—namely, his soliloquies; it is this glimpse that indicates the sincerity of the Prince of Denmark.

Hamlet’s initial role as the new stepson of Claudius, the current king of Denmark, demonstrates the first instance of his insincerity. Hamlet has become “a little more than kin” to Claudius, suggesting that the prince is no longer Claudius’ nephew, but his son. This newfound kinship, however, is problematic; it is “less than kind,” or disingenuous (1.2.65). Despite the familial relationship Claudius and Hamlet now inevitably share, Hamlet is not inclined to assume the role of a natural son. In his act of insincerity as a relative, he is sincere. Hamlet recognizes the lack of affection between the two, suggests that any feigned affection would be unnatural—again, insincere—and refuses to adopt the behavior expected of him as the son of Claudius. This exchange is one of the driving forces within the play, emphasizing the sincerity

of Hamlet in each of his soliloquies. Indeed, Hamlet’s brutal sincerity and intense contempt for Claudius propel his ultimate murderous revenge.

The altercation between Hamlet and the queen in act one, scene two prepares the audience for the genuine introspection of each soliloquy. It is as though Hamlet is aware of his audience as he introduces the dichotomy between his thoughts and his actions. Queen Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, responds to Hamlet’s melancholy, abrasive mood in an attempt to persuade him out of his bleak reveries. “Thou knowest ‘tis common, all that lives must die,” she explains (1.2.72), and Hamlet, often the equivocator, retorts in an indirect insult to Gertrude’s new marriage. “Ay madam, it is common,” he replies – common to die, but also “common” in the cruder sense of the word (1.2.74). Perhaps his condescending vocal tone, which for readers can only imagined, instigates the queen’s next line; she rebukes Hamlet and asks that if her son agrees death is inevitable, then why he has adopted such a gloomy disposition: “why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.76). Hamlet’s response—“Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems,’”—not only introduces his ontological obsession with determining the essence of things as they are, not as they seem, but it gives a bit of insight into his character’s identity as well. He explains to his mother that his gloomy temperament is not the essence of his character, and that although he is genuinely sorrowful, his tears, sighs, grievous moods, and behavior are not his true disposition, for such guises are easily assumed. His emotions act as a kind of response to the circumstances that occur. Hamlet’s assertion that, “These indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play,” declares that he is not only well aware of his own identity, but of his ability to assume alternate identities (1.2.83-84). With these two lines, the prince reveals to his audience that he is able to distinguish between the way he seems, or acts, and the way he truly is, as well as his mastery of false appearances. Herein lies the struggle of his conscious awareness of his conscience, as well as the dilemma between his physical being and his mental being—neither of which “seem,” they “are.” Hamlet’s exchange with his mother presents us with the dichotomy between his thought and his action, and prepares us for the sincere “being,” not seeming, of his soliloquies.
The audience or readers hold an advantage over the characters, such as Claudius and Gertrude, who surround Hamlet. The first exchange between Hamlet and his mother leaves us wondering, just as Claudius and Gertrude wonder: how do we know when Hamlet is acting and when he is sincere? One direct answer lies in his soliloquies. The characters of the tragedy do not see and hear what the audience sees and hears or read what the readers do when the prince is in solitude, alone with his thoughts. The best glimpse of Hamlet’s true nature is given when he is his own genuine audience, overhearing himself think—soliloquizing. The audience watches as he unravels his sincere conscience – and his consciousness. Hamlet’s introspective questions expose the play’s problems of identity. His awareness that the court is not what it seems encourages him to probe his own being and the way he seems to be, through his ingenuous soliloquies, which in turn reveal Hamlet’s progression towards his ultimate identity as a murderer.

In each of Hamlet’s seven soliloquies, the prince struggles with his personal reflections on existence. When Hamlet is alone, he abandons his antic disposition and adopts a sincere, ontological mind in its stead. In every soliloquy, the prince slowly reveals to himself and to his audience his identity as a murderer in a progressive pattern of question and resolution. There are three soliloquies in particular that best represent the genuine, internal conflict of Hamlet’s potential for murder.

In act two, scene two, the prince compares himself to a player who has just performed a monologue requiring great emotion. Hamlet observes the player’s capacity for simulating sorrow and despair, begins to speculate on his own passionate dilemma, and contemptuously chastises his cowardice and lack of action towards his father’s requested revenge. Hamlet’s anxiety stems from his aptitude for acting. He recalls his assumed antic disposition, his “madness” in the eyes of the court, and questions his sincerity where his father’s revenge is concerned. Hamlet’s awareness of his talent as an actor hinders his ability to act ingenuously towards the characters that surround him. At this point in the drama, he can only think, or soliloquize, sincerely.
The third soliloquy of the tragedy begins with Hamlet’s understanding of his solitude. He is physically alone—no one is near enough to hear him speak—but his solitude also signals the isolation Hamlet is subjected to during the course of the drama. He is under the surveillance of a court full of Claudius’ spies and has nothing to trust but his intense self-awareness and aptitude for introspection. Hamlet’s isolation is part of his identity; it is in his solitary soliloquies that he ascertains part of who he is. He is a “rogue and peasant slave,” a slave to his own obsessive self-reflection (2.2.550). The entire soliloquy is saturated in melancholy, as if to suggest Hamlet’s despair over his discovery that he has only his thoughts for consolation. But even they are no consolation; his thoughts are instruments of distress and torment, and the prince cannot rid himself of them.

At this point in the play, Hamlet questions his delay in action. His third soliloquy examines the cowardice he exhibits and the bravery he lacks. Until now, the prince has not taken any action, whether it is enacting revenge on Claudius or ensuring the validity of the ghost’s message. He is contemptuous of his own delay, and since, in his solitude, he has no one to reprimand for the deferral of any sort of action, he reprimands himself: “I should have fatted all the region kites / With this slave’s offal.” There is some ambiguity—consistent with his character—as to the person Hamlet is referring to here. Is he indicating himself, perhaps envisioning his own suicide, or is this “slave’s offal” the discarded remains of Claudius? Either way, Hamlet pictures the action he might take against his uncle and imagines himself using the waste of the “villain’s” body to feed birds of prey. A “kite” can also mean a person who preys upon others, very much equivalent to the way Claudius preys upon Hamlet, or even the way Hamlet preys upon Claudius. The term “kite” is also used to represent a feeling of detestation, as Hamlet further emphasizes in the assonance of the following line: “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (2.2.581).

But Hamlet is still distracted. He again reverts to self-contempt and mocks his inaction and obsessive thoughts, almost in disbelief that he continues to “unpack” his “heart with words” (2.2.586). Hamlet is persistent in his cursing, without any attempt at action. But in this
third soliloquy, despite his musing, the prince resolves to proceed with his inquiries in the form of a play. He contemplates murder and personifies it, saying, “though it have no tongue, [it] will speak / With most miraculous organ” (2.2.594). There is still no definitive action; Hamlet is, even now, only observing the actions of others, but his idea of the play is a progressive step towards identifying the sins of Claudius, determining the legitimacy of the ghost, and recognizing his own identity. Hamlet ends the soliloquy, resolving that “The play’s the thing, / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.606).

The famous “to be or not to be” sequence of act three, scene one is Hamlet’s fourth instance of engaging in soliloquy for the sake of hearing himself speak. Hamlet begins with not one question, “to be or not to be,” but a series of questions, as if his queries will offset his solitude. But Hamlet is not alone. Ophelia has been prompted to approach Hamlet just a few lines before by Polonius and Claudius. In fact, it is they who have set this scene. There is no question that the two are spying on the prince; the question is whether or not Hamlet knows of their presence. If he realizes Claudius and Polonius are lurking within earshot, then the sincerity of Hamlet’s speech is doubtful. There is, to be sure, some element of authenticity in the soliloquy, but there is a level of performance in Hamlet’s words as well.

The first line is often thought to imply Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide, but it is more than that. A mere six monosyllabic words make manifest Hamlet’s genuine identity crisis as well as serve as a performance, with Polonius and Claudius in mind. Hamlet is aware of his audience but maintains his sincerity to some degree. He desires to interpret the meaning of his existence—his purpose—but his progressive failure to discover such meaning produces thoughts of suicide. The prince is trying to discover what it means “to be,” and in the process wonders whether he should “be” sincere, or seem to be—in this case perform—for Claudius and Polonius. Perhaps this is what he means when he begins the soliloquy with “to be or not to be.” Is he to continue with his sincerity, or embrace his talent for deception? But there’s a problem: Hamlet has spent so much time seeming to be something that he is not, that he can no longer distinguish what his “being” signifies. Is it noble, he wonders, “in the mind to suffer,”
perhaps stoically, despite the fury of fortune’s “slings and arrows?” (3.1.58-9). Or should Hamlet, recalling the contempt he has for his inaction in the preceding soliloquy, finally “take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them?” (3.1.60-1). The first five lines of this soliloquy demonstrate Hamlet’s inviolated intellect better than any other instance in the play, and it is not until his resolution at the conclusion of his self-reflection that we discover Hamlet’s decision.

But first, Hamlet has to continue to obsessively ruminate over the question of “being.” He reveals to his audience that suicide is a “consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d” (3.1.64-5). He expresses his desire to take his own life, but simultaneously demonstrates his nobility of character by explicating his respect for the endurance of old age. The sense of respect is intense, and the beauty of Hamlet’s words paradoxically describes his pessimism and the horror, awfulness, and utter despondency of life as he perceives it. What, he wonders, makes humankind “bear those ills we have” rather than risk the great unknown of eternity?

So far in the course of the third act’s first soliloquy, Hamlet makes generalizations concerning humanity. But if this soliloquy is to remain self-reflective and sincere, we have to assume that he is also specifically depicting himself. The soliloquy turns from Hamlet’s suicidal musings to focusing on his over-active conscience, and the prince hints at resolution. “Conscience,” he elucidates, “does make cowards of us all.” His principles prevent him from taking his own life (3.1.84). Hamlet describes himself and his own near-constant contemplation—his conscious conscience—when he finally initiates his “native hue of resolution” and ultimately resolves not to act against his own life and identity. “In the name of action,” the act of catching the conscience of the king, Hamlet ends his famous soliloquy with a resolution – to act, to seem, and to be (3.1.89). Recalling Hamlet’s two spies lurking in the shadows, the soliloquy also concludes with a warning in a kind of anticipatory, proleptic prayer request to Ophelia. Additionally, it indicates Hamlet’s awareness of his final demise as well as the final demise of Claudius at the end of the play: “Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins
remember’d” (3.1.90-1). Hamlet’s identity and capacity for self-reflection have increased so much that he can almost anticipate his own fate in consequence of his decision to act.

Hamlet’s final soliloquy of act four, prompted by Prince Fortinbras’ pending arrival, portrays the ultimate struggle between his consciousness and his conscience. He feels the delayed murder needs to occur quickly, since the rest of the tragedy’s characters are questioning the validity of his antic disposition, and Claudius is plotting against him. Hamlet recognizes his capacity for “god-like reason,” as part of his identity, but he is also aware of how he thinks “too precisely” on the myriad of problems associated with his father’s ghost (4.4.39, 42). His thoughts, he says, are “one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward,” and Hamlet continues the rest of the soliloquy agonizing over the reasons for his delay (4.4.43-4). He claims he is a coward whose aptitude for thought hinders him from acting, but he is drawing nearer to his final, murderous resolution. He measures his hesitancy against Fortinbras, whom he seems to admire for his “army of such mass and charge” (4.4.48). The noble aspects of Hamlet’s identity burst forth as he reflects on the nature of his delay. How dare he hesitate while Norway’s twenty thousand soldiers are willingly sacrificing their lives for their country’s gain? What about Denmark’s honor in the hands of Hamlet, her prince? “Honor’s at the stake,” he says, and the double meaning in the phrase suggests his deathly foresight as well as the urgency of the situation (4.4.57). Hamlet, in four acts, has discovered the identity and legitimacy of the ghost, the identity of his uncle as a regicidal murderer, and, at last, his own identity and duty to his father and to Denmark. He is anxious to finally revenge his father’s death. Hamlet’s conclusive resolution, free of scruples, is the pivotal moment in the soliloquy, and it compels the entire fifth act and tragic end of the drama.

The resolutions at the conclusion of Hamlet’s soliloquies advance his identity and prepare us for the final act in which he rapidly executes his revenge on Claudius without hesitation, without contemplation, and without another introspective soliloquy. Hamlet, after the conclusion of the fourth act, no longer has any need to soliloquize. At this point in the drama four characters are already dead, either directly or indirectly murdered by Hamlet. He
stabs Polonius impulsively when he realizes he is being spied upon in his mother’s chamber and leads Ophelia to suicide through seemingly inane acts of cruelty and brutality. Hamlet also forges the letter that sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in order to save his own life so that he can return to Denmark and enact his father’s revenge. These deaths become signs that Hamlet is slowly accepting his identity as a murderer. The absence of soliloquies—or of any speech at all—that signal any regret of his murders is striking. There are no soliloquies in act five, as well as no indication that Hamlet regrets or laments the eight deaths, including his own, which he has ultimately caused. The prince of Denmark has thus transferred the sincerity of his soliloquies to his actions in the remainder of the tragedy. His moral scruples have vanished, quandaries of thought over action no longer arise, his conscience is altogether ignored, and Hamlet has embraced his identity as a murderer.

After watching his mother die and realizing that he too will perish in moments, Hamlet performs the murder he has been contemplating throughout nearly four thousand lines. His final words, “the rest is silence,” apply to both the remainder of the play and the fate of Hamlet’s soul. Hamlet is equivocating, even on the verge of death. The prince speaks no more, and his eternal “rest,” though unknown and unspoken, is free of the dogged thoughts of murder and revenge (5.2.360).

Shakespeare, by distinguishing between the way Hamlet seems and truly is, as well as through the utilization of soliloquies and resolutions, leads his audiences to the tragic conclusion of the play. From the beginning of the first act and its opening question of identity, “Who’s there,” Hamlet’s character has progressed from a prince with a multitude of courtly roles to a murderer, sincere in his desire for revenge. More than the deaths of eight individuals and the transference of Denmark into the hands of Norway, the ultimate demise of the prince, who sincerely embraced the identity of a regicidal, patricidal assassin is what truly makes Hamlet a tragedy.