# SENIOR THESIS

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I. Definitions

In this paper, in order to understand the way in which language is used to construct reality, the terms poetry, madness, truth, and reality require clear definitions. When I talk about poetry, I am referring to the act that Maritain defined as “not that particular art which consists in writing verses, but a process both more general and more primary: that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination.”1

Madness in this paper has two separate meanings. Firstly, there is the madness of Hamlet, or his knowing performance of insanity, when he acts and speaks nonsensically in order to appear out of his head. Secondly is madness as it is understood in the creative thought primarily of Maritain, and also Plato, Aristotle, and other aesthetic thinkers. Though each differs on the specifics of madness, the three specifically mentioned agree that it is a state in which an artist experiences inspiration.

Furthermore, truth refers to the sense of resonance a viewer feels when experiencing art done well. This is not “Truth” with a capital T, but rather it once again draws upon Maritain’s understanding of truth as a universal human experience. It is something that strikes one as accurate and fitting. Importantly, it is not purely a logical experience but an emotional one as well.

The term reality does not point to an objective idea, but one in which the subject behaves according to his understanding of his world. This reality, in the context of objectivity, may be accurate or inaccurate, authentic or an illusion. The only qualification is that it is constructed by the subject—particularly through language—and the subject acts on the basis of his belief that his perception is reliable.
II. Introduction

The play *Hamlet* itself is about existence: the existence (or nonexistence) of oneself, the reality (or unreality) of ghostly visions, and ultimately the existence of a world that is not objective in purely scientific terms but rather through emotional knowledge, created by the outlook of one’s own mind shaped by both reason and illusion. The truth to these aspects of existence is not dictated by unarguable tenants, then, but constructed by the language one uses to express the surrounding world, both physical and emotional. Consequently, the world as it is experienced becomes necessitated upon language, and so this verbal expression defines what is real and reasonable, or illusionary and mad.

Language in *Hamlet* emerges threefold in an artistic sense as creator, dramatist, and inspiration. Reality is predicated upon the constructs language establishes. For example, Hamlet’s madness and Polonius’ self-perceived cleverness are both created by knowingly manipulated language. The dramatic and inspirational aspects of language are best exemplified by the Ghost and the Players. As dramatic personae, both require suspension of disbelief and transport the listener to another plane of reality. As the inspirational, their language is used to invoke emotion and even action.

With reality dependent upon language as creator, dramatist, and inspiration, truth thus requires a strong connection with the emotional. The artistic thought of Jacques Maritain provides an intense sense of connection between these aspects. For Maritain, emotion is necessary to experience and comprehend beauty, art and, subsequently, truth. It was both “intellectual” and “non-logical.” Terming it knowledge by connaturality, he stressed that this emotional perception of beauty cannot be deemed subjective, because it “is another kind of emotion—one with knowledge… Such a knowledge transcends mere subjectivity, and draws the
mind toward things known and knowing more.”³ For Hamlet, Polonius, the Ghost, and the Players, all attempt to express this sort of knowledge of truth: Hamlet, in the context of vengeance; Polonius, in his garrulous caveats; the Ghost, in the murder of Claudius; and the Players, in their theatrical display of art. The vehicle for each individual’s experience and communication with their world is language. When Hamlet says that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so,” he just as easily could have said “There is nothing either true or false but speaking makes it so,” because language reconstructs reality in order to bring forth truth.⁴

Yet knowledge through emotion does not satisfy all needs of the characters. It is in their language that knowledge either triumphs or meets tragedy, and in many cases language fails to function in a way that seeks truth most fully. Hamlet’s digression into madness, rather than aiding his quest of vengeance, instead creates a world of disillusion around him that makes fulfillment of his promise a forlorn hope. Polonius’ point is hidden behind wordiness, and he meets his tragic death behind a tapestry, in an equally hidden state. The Ghost’s speechlessness signifies its departure from reality, and its message to Hamlet creates a new, dark world. The Players are the only ones who make it out of the action unscathed, primarily because they are the only ones effectively using language as a conveyer of beauty wherein truth can be discovered. In this paper, the functionality and subsequent result of reconstruction of the world via language will be explored through these four characters, as will the relationship such points have to artistic truth.
III. Language as Creator: Hamlet and Polonius

His world turned upside-down by his father’s untimely death, Hamlet is left to exist in a life he has not known and which casts him sorely out of character. The Ghost asks for vengeance against the murderous hands of Claudius, yet Hamlet falters when attempting to carry out the request “with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love,” as he initially promises. What he does do, and swiftly, however, is create a new world for himself, one in which he can exist as he contemplates his uncle’s foul deed from all angles. His “prophetic soul” can now be indulged, and he does so avidly, revisiting the sins of his uncle and incestuous mother again and again. In doing this, he encases himself in a timeless reality of the moment of murder and betrayal. While his family, friends, and indeed the rest of Denmark continue on, Hamlet remains motionless in grief and contemplation and frozen to take the necessary steps to please the will of the Ghost. He has been transported, for all intents and purposes, to another realm as focused and isolated as the Ghost itself.

This discord between himself and other’s experience of reality is encapsulated in the notion of “seems,” a word that repeatedly finds mention from a variety of the characters. Just as “drama exploit[s] the false presentation of the self,” so Hamlet appears differently than what he truly is. Throughout the final months of his life, Hamlet’s inner turmoil can never fully be expressed in his exterior appearance or in his language. The instances are twofold. Initially, when his mother comments disapprovingly upon his great grieving of his father’s death—“Why seems it so particular with thee?”—Hamlet responds with some contempt about the relationship of appearance versus reality. “I know not ‘seems’,,” he says, adding, “I have that within which passeth show.” The mere appearance of his grief falls short of the emotions he actually experiences, and the reality in which he suffers. Already there is discrepancy between his
appearance and the truth wherein he exists, and this places him on a different plane from the
others around him. This separate state is heightened, secondly, upon his discovery of the Ghost
and his decision to carry out vengeance veiled in madness. Notably, Hamlet’s self-established
discord with reality is now not a result of his unwillingness to express himself emotionally, but
his over-willingness to falsely express himself intentionally. In doing so, he violates the golden
advice Polonius offers to his son, Laertes, but which every character should follow in order to
find truth and peace: “To thine own self be true.”

By feigning madness, Hamlet places himself
at discord with the truth of himself. This new reality he creates is flawed from the very
beginning, and it skews his ability to right the murder of his father.

This new state of being, and consequently new order of Hamlet’s world, is established by
how he knowingly acts within it. His embrace of “madness” is an ironic choice, as it seemingly
fulfills the initial fears of Horatio and Marcellus, on guard. Watching Hamlet become entranced
with the Ghost, Horatio fears that some future image it might take

“[M]ight deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness? Think of it.
The very place puts toys of desperation,
Without more motive, into every brain.”

Horatio fears the image as a corrupter of better sense, and later adds that Hamlet “waxes
desperate with imagination” as he chases after it. The vision of the paranormal being has
indeed struck upon Hamlet’s imagination, in that it has jumpstarted Hamlet’s re-imagining of his
world.

Given instruction to avenge his murdered father, Hamlet decides to conduct himself as
one without sense in attempts to go unsuspected. His madness is a willing thing, conjured as a
smoke screen. This conduct also defines his new world, one in which order, sense, proportion,
and truth are consciously skewed. Importantly, Hamlet attempts to invoke madness not simply for an empty, ridiculous end. He seeks to utilize his madness as perception and to reveal the truth. Maritain writes that madness of poetry allows for insight into truth. According to Maritain, both reason and intellect radiate from the soul, and intellect also has the “life of the creativity of spirit.” Poetry’s source, then, lies in “the free life of the intellect which involves a free life of the imagination, at the single root of the soul’s powers, and in the unconscious of the spirit.” Therefore Hamlet’s madness is not one of a disjointed mind. Though it appears fragmented and dislocated, the process of it allows one to see the wholeness, or integrity, of reality. It is the very guise he needs as he searches for the inspiration to do the deed and avenge his father. Hamlet’s language appears as nonsense, but it is through the nonsensical that he builds a foundation to seek truth. It is the “knowledge of the very interiority of things.” Simply common rationality cannot justify this comprehension of truth.

This madness of the artist, of any truth-seeker, had and continues to have its skeptics. In *The Republic*, Plato recommends the censoring of art for fear of its ability to strip man of his senses and rouse his lesser emotions. Yet Plato also believed that art achieved solely through reason lacked the quality of art achieved through madness. This madness he saw as divine knowledge from temperamental muses that came inexplicably and took over the soul without sense. It is a fine line to walk, and more often than not Plato deemed this sort of imagination too dangerous. Similarly, Montaigne wrote in his *Essays*, “I do not find it strange that imagination brings fever and death to those who give it a free hand and encourage it.” Hamlet’s play-acted madness is thus called into question: Does he truly see the Ghost? Is the Ghost perhaps only a projection of his grief? It is not a thought that is too Freudian to be considered a possibility given Shakespeare’s time and commonly circulated sources. King James I, who reigned during
the period of some of the great Shakespearean tragedies, believed that seeing a ghostly specter could be not a devil or other supernatural being, but in fact only a result of a guilty conscience.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, even if Hamlet purposely acted mad, is it possible that he—as Plato and Montaigne both fear for the imaginative spirit—tapped into a state of being that rattled him out of his senses, thus relegating him to true insanity by the end of the play?

Maritain, however, would argue that the nonlogical aspect of imagination is not inherently at odds with the reasonable. Rather, both work through the soul and emanate from the soul together in order to enlighten the artist. The artist knows truth via this connaturality, wherein he is guided to truth and the expression of truth in ways that cannot be perceived or quantified. That does not mean, however, that he does not experience reason or harmony. In fact, madness brings harmony through inspiration that cannot otherwise be achieved as artfully. Hamlet’s madness, in this same fashion, is inspiration needed to seek the truth. Hamlet finds in this an imagination to establish a world that will better heed his quest for truth and vengeance. This is most effectively done through the language he uses, particularly in his conversations with Polonius, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and with his uncle and mother.

Even while feigning madness, Hamlet does not exclusively utter nonsense. His seemingly jumbled speech carries a hidden truth, as a riddles does, if it can simply be decoded. This is most clearly exemplified during his chats with Polonius. While Hamlet is play-acting insanity, his conversations with Polonius become whirling and absurd, clever riddles with layered meaning. As Maynard Mack observes in his review of Hamlet and Hamlet’s world, “Sane or mad, Hamlet’s mind plays restlessly upon his world, turning up one riddle upon another.”\textsuperscript{19} Hamlet’s pointed cleverness, however, is evidence that makes it seem reasonable to argue that no truly mad man could see so clearly and logically to the heart of a matter and into
one’s character, particularly the character of Polonius. Most times, Polonius believes Hamlet is speaking gibberish—which of course he is, on one level—but on another Hamlet is also, simultaneously, playing word games to poke fun at the empty bag of wind that is Polonius, and to comment upon the failings of the world in which they both exist.

A perfect example is directly after Polonius conspires with the King and Queen to use Ophelia to divulge some sort of understanding about what has apparently happened to Hamlet’s good sense. Hamlet enters the room and Polonius goes to him, seeking to engage in conversation but really inquire as to his madness. When Polonius asks Hamlet, “Do you know me, my lord?”—again, a question of appearances—Hamlet answers with a prompt, “Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.” Polonius assumes Hamlet is babbling and so the reference flies right over Polonius’ head, as the old man laments, “He said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone, far gone!” In fact, Hamlet is directly commenting upon who Polonius seems to him. “Fishmonger” is a reference to a man who sacrificed his daughter, an allusion taken from Ovid’s story. In it, a man called Erysichthon sells his daughter. The god Neptune, however, had fallen in love with the daughter, and so to prevent the other man from owning her, Neptune changed her into a fisherman. Further on in the same act, Hamlet compares Polonius to yet another father who sacrificed his daughter, when he exclaims to Polonius, “O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!”

Soon afterwards, Hamlet revises his identification of Polonius as a fishmonger, and calls him an “honest” man. Clearly this is not the case, as Hamlet already suspects that Polonius is scheming with his parents against him. But Hamlet is operating within the cushion of apparent madness and so his sarcasm bent on irony goes without notice from Polonius, who is too blinded by assuming based upon mere seems and the apparent lovesickness Hamlet is suffering over
Ophelia. True, Polonius does catch glimpses of Hamlet’s logic in the midst of the young man’s rambling. After hearing him speak convolutedly on one occasion, Polonius says, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.” On one hand this line is designed for laughs, for of course one babbling fool would see sense in another babbling fool. On the other, however, it is an ironic observation from Polonius who understands that Hamlet is operating on some understanding of sanity, and yet Polonius fails to see the true function of Hamlet’s language. Significantly, Hamlet tells the old man, “To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.” They are words spoken by a young man who, by the death of his father and incest of his mother, has been confronted by an entirely new reality. The only way he can cope is to begin reconstructing the pieces, as he does now, with Polonius.

The layout of this new world is information privy only to Hamlet himself, thought, since his madness is a fabrication, a smokescreen, to allow him to function and make sense of his understanding of existence and duty. In a similar reflection, when Polonius inquires as to what Hamlet is reading, Hamlet vaguely replies, “Words, words, words,” which stresses both the essential nature of language as well as the utter fog they can produce. When Hamlet elaborates on the subject of his reading, he wryly explains how the author speaks of old men having “a plentiful lack of wit” to which Hamlet says he agrees. He adds, however, that Polonius himself would be spared this criticism if he “like a crab…could go backward”—meaning, backward in years to Hamlet’s own age. Hamlet acts similarly when he tells Polonius how “that yonder cloud” appears simultaneously like a camel, weasel, and whale. Polonius simply agrees. In an aside, Hamlet is flabbergasted that those like Polonius “fool me to the top of my bent”—meaning, Hamlet must appear as a fool to the very fullness of his ability.
and clouds, Hamlet speaks in jest, yet his actions also allude to the pervasive idea within the play of rearranging reality and becoming what one is not through manipulation of the world.

While Polonius fails to realize Hamlet’s true cognizance through his verbal repertoire, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience Hamlet’s apparent madness in a bitter, more serious way. Brought to Denmark by the King and Queen, hoping they will have a positive effect on Hamlet’s mournful, erratic mood, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deceive Hamlet about this truth of why they have arrived. From their very introduction, then, Hamlet is given reason to distrust them, and so acts accordingly. He does, however, entrust them to know the truth of his insanity, since it serves his purpose of gaining their confidence. “I am but man north-north-west,” he tells them. “When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.” As the footnotes in The Folger Library edition of Hamlet cite, “According to Timothy Bright’s Treatise of Melancholy (1586), the condition of the melancholic’s mood varied with the winds and would be worst when the wind came from the north. Hamlet is saying in veiled terms that his madness is assumed when it suits his purpose.” Hamlet once more manipulates his language to appear mad.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also receive the harsher end of Hamlet’s witty wordplay. Again, he uses a metaphor of wind, when he says to them, “[W]hy do you go about to recover the wind of men, as if you would drive me into a toil?” Hamlet is speaking of a hunting technique, wherein the hunters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) look to get on Hamlet’s windward side so the prey (Hamlet) cannot smell their presence and so is easily led into a trap. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern refute this accusation, Hamlet drops further into apparent nonsense, seemingly without transition. He asks Guildenstern if he would “play upon this pipe?” Again, Guildenstern refuses, claiming he cannot play, and each time Hamlet insists he must, it is simple, how “[i]t is as easy as lying.” When Guildenstern still protests, Hamlet’s
tone changes and he shows that this is not a question of playing a musical instrument, but a question of manipulation and self-governance. He tells Guildenstern,

“Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. ‘Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.”

Hamlet is talking about the ease at which sound can be produced, even artificially. While Guildenstern cannot play, Hamlet can: Hamlet can play his own music, his own self-presentation, because he knows how to manipulate the instrument of language. Others have no sway over his language and his construction of the world. Therefore, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that their scheming against him is all for naught. Hamlet is not a pipe to be played. He is a pipe playing itself. Hamlet’s madness, then, is not extraneous to his good sense but instead an example of Hamlet knowing his own “stops.”

Finally, the various conversations between Hamlet and the King and Queen show him to be predicking his reality upon the language he uses. Again, his words are largely nonsensical, speaking to his uprooted sense of the world since his father’s death and the appearance of the Ghost. Yet they are veiled indictments of his mother as well. Hamlet uses his language to bring destruction to the world of the King, and to refocus the world of the Queen.

Hamlet is greatly distressed that his once fair and faithful mother has turned on her murdered husband and wed his murderer, and so soon after the sudden death. Hamlet regards the marrying of a husband’s brother incest and is repulsed by his mother’s actions. He aims to convince her of seeing her sins and changing her ways—of refocusing her world view—and so
Hamlet resolves to “speak daggers to her.” He is not shaping his world through physical action—as in murder—but through verbal.

His conversation with his mother reveals added depth and confliction to his supposed madness and the reconstruction of his reality. Their heated, emotional talk is overwhelming about identity and presentation. The Queen first asks Hamlet when he enters her closet, “Have you forgot me,” meaning Have you forgotten who I am? His rough language is not befitting of a son to a mother. Hamlet is intent on forcing her to look into a mirror, real or metaphorical, so he can “set you up in a glass / where you can see the inmost part of you.” Her outward presentation of a happily married Queen fails to show her inner sinfulness, which Hamlet is privy to, even overwhelmed by. When Hamlet shows her a picture of both his father and uncle, he calls it “the counterfeit presentment of two brothers.” While surely it is counterfeit insofar as it is merely a replication of the real persons, the very use of the word carries associations, again, of deception. In a turn of events, Hamlet accuses his mother of a failing lack of sense, for only “madness” could choose Claudius after Hamlet’s father. Importantly here, Hamlet’s language succeeds because it speaks truth. It brings forth, as Maritain feels art should, truth that already resides in the soul. So does Gertrude proclaim to Hamlet after he has ranted against her incestuous actions,

“O Hamlet, speak no more!  
Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct."

However, there is a lapse of understanding during the conversation, coming in two particular points. One, it is unclear whether or not the Queen knows that Claudius murdered her first husband. While Hamlet speaks of “kill[ing] a king” and of Claudius as “blasting
“It is not madness
That I have utt’red. Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will reword; which madness
Would gambol from.”

He is no longer interested in using his rambling nonsense as a guise. Confronted with the need to speak truth—of the identity of the Ghost, of his father’s murder, of his mother’s incestuous second marriage—Hamlet drops the smokescreen and clings to sincerity. His speeches are long and detailed, eloquent and charged. He no longer wastes time with fruitless lines of bitter wit. His focus is not on deception but on the expression of truth. Hamlet’s language ultimately succeeds with Gertrude as she laments to him, “These words like daggers enter in mine ears.” This is the exact phrasing Hamlet used and what he intended to do. His intent and actions, for once, are unified.

Yet Hamlet is not successful at avenging his father. While he does eventually kill Claudius, this deed comes amidst mass tragedy for nearly all around him. This failure, however, is a criticism not of his view of reality, which is always clear—if not enhanced—even though wholesome brother,” it is entirely possible that Gertrude takes these comments to reference a metaphorical killing, as in the defecation of her marriage to her first husband. Here, language falls short. The second lapse of understanding is also one based upon language as the construct of reality, and is the fact that the Queen is unable to see the Ghost, even as Hamlet trembles and cries before it. “Alas, he is mad!” the Queen cries with dismay. She asks why he “bend[s] [his] eye on vacancy, and with the incorporeal air do hold discourse.” Unable to make her see the image that is unarguably clear to him, Hamlet is left once more to defend himself against madness. As his mother regards him with pity and skepticism, Hamlet insists,
disguised in madness. Rather, he fails because of his own inability to become the man he needs to be in this new world of his creation. As Mack so eloquently phrases it,

“Hamlet’s problem, in its crudest form, is simply the problem of the avenger: he must carry out the injunction of the ghost and kill the king. But this problem… is presented in terms of a certain kind of world. The ghost’s injunction to act becomes so inextricably bound up for Hamlet with the character of the world in which the action must be taken—its mysteriousness, its baffling appearances, its deep consciousness of infection, frailty, and loss—that he cannot come to terms with either without coming to terms with both… Hamlet is not the first young man to have felt the heavy and weary weight of all this unintelligible world; and, like the others, he must come to terms with it.”

However, Hamlet fails to come to terms with himself in that new reality he inhabits. To have any success of fulfilling the wills of the Ghost, Hamlet must convert himself from student to avenger; from sportsman to killer; from prince to King. In truth, though, he is not a doer but a thinker. His words create identities he can never measure up to. By placing himself in the role of avenger, he is not true to the person he is, and so struggles to carry out the duty even though the world he creates in his madness sets the stage for him to act.

While Hamlet uses language as a creative force to reconstruct his reality, so does Polonius, but in different ways and with different results. Hamlet muddled his words to appear mad, yet when it suited his purposes his language carried an undercurrent of biting wit. Polonius does not realize how senseless he sounds because he is attempting to appear wise, yet when he does not even realize it his language strikes upon some true caveat of wisdom. Polonius’ language operates based upon the identity he believes he has: sage counselor to the King. He is indeed a counselor, but his speech and garrulous nature make him less good for advice and more good for laughs—and for much longsuffering endurance from the King, Queen, his children Laertes and Ophelia, and Hamlet. Unlike Hamlet, however, whose madness is convincing, Polonius’ guise of intelligence fails to gain him any respect or deference. This speaks not only to
the illusion—and power in that illusion—of words, but also of the transient identities based upon language that the characters make for themselves within the play.

Polonius’s conversations with the King and Queen clearly convey his nature, both perceived and true:

“My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is
Why day is day, night night, and time is time
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.
Your noble son is mad.
Mad I call it; for, to define true madness,
What is’t but to be nothing else but mad?”

In the course of his rambling, Polonius echoes a thought pervasive within the entire play: tension between identification based upon what a thing is, and what a thing appears to be.

Polonius says that the definition of madness is nothing more or less than to be mad. While it sounds self-evident, it is clear that appearances—the seeming within the play—are anything but straight forward. “Mad” is precisely what Hamlet is not, just as he is not an avenger, Polonius is not a wordsmith, the Ghost is of Hamlet’s father may be the spirit of a man or the incarnation of a devil, and the Players are not the characters they portray on stage. Definitions are shaken at their very roots because language fails to encapsulate truly the identity of the thing being described. Thus language becomes not a force to express accurately the world, but to establish new realities within it.

Importantly, Shakespeare writes Polonius’ dialogue in iambic pentameter, a form reserved for heroes, the well-to-do, or those to be taken seriously. The fact that the longwinded Polonius uses the meter stresses the irony of his situation. It shows that Polonius believes
himself to be someone of import, and so his language follows suit. In Polonius’ mind, he is a gentlemen philosopher, bearer of valuable advice and wit. Yet—like Hamlet—his true identity does not fit the world he has verbally constructed for himself.

Unlike Hamlet, though, others see through his guise. The Queen interrupts his dialogue to suggest he gets to the point: “More matter, with less art.” Whereas Hamlet uses language to develop a smokescreen of madness, which preoccupies his friends and family while he plots revenge, Polonius’ garrulous speech is far less functional. Instead of being regarded highly as a sage advisor, Polonius is, for the vast majority of the time, comic relief. He speaks ironically to the point when he insists to the King and Queen, “I swear I use no art at all.” Polonius falls short of art because there rarely is anything below the surface of what he says. His words are fillers, meant to sound clever. Indeed the listeners are led around in circles when he speaks, but not because of the complexity of what he says but because of the sheer rambling, nonsensical nature of it.

However, Polonius does bestow wisdom—accidentally, almost shockingly—amid all his other claptrap. In giving advice to his son, Laertes, who is preparing to go abroad to Paris, Polonius dwells upon mundane and contradictory advice: how friendly one should be, how reserved; what clothes should be worn; money concerns, and others. Then, from seemingly out of nowhere, Polonius concludes by advising,

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”
Lionel Trilling, in his article, “Sincerity: Its Origin and Rise,” concedes that this out-of-character quality statement from the dull Polonius may initially be perceived to be about self-preservation. “But,” Trilling writes,

“the sentence will not submit to this reading. Our impulse to make its sense consistent with our general view of Polonius is defeated by the way the lines sound, by their lucid moral lyricism. This persuades us that Polonius has had a moment of self-transcendence, of grace and truth. He has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained.”

Yet what an ironic epiphany for Polonius to have, and what an ironic epiphany to be featured in a play obsessed with the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Mack writes, “Shakespeare’s favorite terms in *Hamlet* are words of ordinary usage that pose the question of appearances in a fundamental form.” Key among these words is *seems*. Polonius’ advice to Laertes—indeed, advice applicable for everyone character in the play—stresses that man must be true to himself; therefore, he must appear as he truly is. But if this were true, Hamlet would not be speaking gibberish and Polonius would not be mumbling nonsense. Both deny the truth of what they are in their very language. As a result, their language fails to function in the reality they have established for themselves. Hamlet cannot avenge his murdered father because he does not fit the part, just as Polonius does not fit the part of wise sage. With sincerity lost, Polonius’ emphasis on being true to every man—especially oneself—is simply not possible. The inspiring words Polonius seeks to impart to others, then, falls empty. Maritain considers this failure of poetic creation a result of excessive self-awareness of the creator. If the art—the wisdom Polonius tries to bestow—is not the focus in and of itself, Maritain believes that “[i]t becomes a curse when it shifts from the line of poetry, and of the creative Self in the fire of spiritual communication, to the line of man’s material individuality, and of the self-centered ego, busy with self-interest and power.”

Because Polonius speaks not for the sake of truth but for the
sake of appearing wise, the truth is sacrificed. By not being true to himself, he is not true to his art, his wisdom. Both his identity, his place in the world, and what he perceives as wisdom cannot flourish and lead to discovery of deeper truth.

Continuing from this foundation of illusion, it is fitting, then, that Polonius meets his death in the most mistaken of ways. He previously conspired with the Queen of his intention to spy on Hamlet and gather information regarding his madness. When Hamlet enters his mother’s closet to confront her about his sinful marriage to Claudius, Polonius is there, too, hidden behind an arras, or tapestry. When Gertrude fears Hamlet might be intending to murder her, her cries for help are echoed by Polonius’ foolish shouts, and Hamlet—assuming he is the King—impulsively spears through the arras and kills him. Just as in life, there is a strong dichotomy between who Polonius was and who he was presented as being. When alive, he is a simple, foolish man who presents himself as a wise sage with caveats and wit. In death, Polonius is murdered not for who he is, but who he is mistaken to be.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Shakespeare chose that Polonius should be hiding behind—an arras. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an arras is more specifically defined as “a tapestry of Flemish origins.” It is common for tapestries to have ornate designs. It seems fitting that Polonius, a man who projected an ornate front, would be stabbed while hiding behind fabric of such a similar nature. The overly detailed nature of the tapestry, like Polonius’ ornate language, in the end hid something simple behind it. Ultimately Polonius’ inability to be true to himself leads him to tragedy.
IV. Language as Dramatist and Inspiration: the Ghost and the Players

While Hamlet and Polonius reconstruct their world via language in a physically and emotionally insincere sense, both the Ghost and Players present a different perspective regarding artistic transcendence towards truth. Both require their respective audiences to engage in a unique suspension of disbelief. Both also, to certain extent, raise the question of sincerity and truth. There is an element of doubt in their transcendence for truth. Language once more is necessary for the reconstruction of reality, and—in certain cases—even the absence of language aids in this cause.

Shakespeare presents the Ghost as a vehicle for vengeance. Through it, Hamlet is informed that he should feel more than just grief for his father’s death: he should now be incensed by the murder his uncle committed and spurred on to action. The Ghost, however, presents two clear problems in regards to madness, inspiration, and artistic search for truth. In the first case, the Ghost appears several times in the play, but importantly its ability to be seen fluctuates. On the occasions, there is also the fluctuation of silence and speech. In the second case, the very question of identity comes into debate and doubt. It is never clearly established whether or not the Ghost is a force of good or evil, and therefore whether or not it can lead to truth or even bring about the necessary inspiration to achieve transcendence is questionable.

In the Ghost’s appearances to the watch, importantly the specter utters no words at all. As Horatio tells Hamlet, though the watch tried to speak to the Ghost during its third nightly appearance,

“…answer made it none. Yet once methought
It lifted up it head and did address
Itself to motion, like as it would speak;
But even then the morning cock crew loud,
And at the sound it shrunk in haste away
And vanished from our sight."

Language is the very ability to express oneself verbally. The Ghost is occupying a realm wherein it is trapped, both physically and verbally. While it is forced to dwell, as it later says to Hamlet, in a “prison house” of which any description “would harrow up they soul, freeze they young blood,” it is also, in ways, tongue-tied by the very nature of its state in an unearthly realm.\(^{58}\) It is confined away from communication—communication with the body, yes, but also with the world itself. Its inability to speak and even its shrinking away from earthly sound reinforces this idea. Lack of language places the Ghost in a realm that is foreign to the realm of the living, and one that is also unable to be shaped by the Ghost itself, whose free will is apparently nonexistent. This absence of free will is a deathly detriment to any sense of language being capable as art. For art can come only from the free will and the natural intuition of the soul. The Ghost, if it has indeed lost any governance of the soul, cannot hope to use language as a function of truth-seeking.

Therefore it becomes necessary to explore the connection the Ghost has to the earthly realm and whether or not its appearance is legitimate, or which appearances lack legitimacy. In the beginning, the night watch sees it on three separate nights. The watch calls Hamlet, and every individual in the gathered group sees it again. Later, however, Hamlet sees the Ghost in the presence of his mother, yet Gertrude sees no specter in the room with them. Certainly to be seen the Ghost does not need Hamlet in order to appear, as it appeared before the watch alone. As mentioned previously, it was though acceptable that seeing apparitions could be a result of a guilty or overworked conscience, which certainly Hamlet—still yet to avenge his father—carries with him. Yet despite Hamlet’s earlier explored outward expression of mental instability, he time and time again proves cognizant of his motives and indeed the motives of people around
him. It seems, then, that perhaps it is Gertrude who suffers an inability to see truth, which would seem plausible, given her lack of character judgment shown when she marries Claudius.

The question becomes, then, what does it take to see the Ghost, and what does that have to do with the quest for truth as the artist, the reconstructor of worlds, sees it? When Gertrude sees nothing even as Hamlet quavers in front of the Ghost, the Ghost tells him,

“But look, amazement on thy mother sits. 
O, step between her and her fighting soul! 
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.”

Two aspects here are most essential. Firstly, the Ghost speaks of a “fighting soul.” It is as if she is not aligned with her body, that her physical senses and her spiritual intuition are at odds. Her eyes lack the ability to see what her soul would tell her is true: her newest husband is a usurper, a murderer; she cannot sense the Ghost who appears before them to speak truth. Secondly, “conceit” here is meant to mean “imagination.” Tension resides here again between the physical and the spiritual. Maritain believed that “poetic intuition, which in itself is an intellect flash, is born in the unconscious of the spirit.” Her soul too cluttered with illusions, Gertrude is unable to experience this flash that allows her to access the truth of the soul, the truth that Hamlet has, the same truth that would allow her to see the Ghost. As Mack writes,

“… [I]t is hard to say what may be signified by her inability to see the ghost… In one sense at least, the ghost is the supreme reality, representative of the hidden ultimate power… witnessing from beyond the grave against his hollow world.”

Yet Hamlet, the one capable of seeing through to this reality, the Queen thinks is mad. Her inability to take that leap of faith, to engage in a suspension of disbelief, renders her soul incapable of transcending to the higher reality, beyond the earthly realm, that the Ghost inhabits.
Next, it becomes essential to examine the message of the Ghost when it engages with Hamlet, for Hamlet is the only one the Ghost appears to and speak to. Tied into this is the notion of the Ghost’s dramatic and inspirational nature, as the Ghost is both a vehicle for action—“a vehicle of realities”\textsuperscript{63}—and for emotional reactions to truth. Within these conversations, however, it is also necessary to explore the doubt inherent as to the identification of the specter itself. Hamlet is well aware from the beginning, too, that this unworldly presence in the image of his father may not be what it appears to be. Again, it is a question of seems when Hamlet calls forth to it,

\begin{quote}
“Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,  
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape…”\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

As he mentioned earlier to the watch, furthermore, he would only speak to the specter “if it assume[s] my noble father’s person.”\textsuperscript{65} There is much emphasis Hamlet is basing upon the image, upon the seeming, without any further proof of identity. Indeed, when the Ghost appears in the image of the dead King, Hamlet settles for a definition based upon image alone, saying,

\begin{quote}
“I’ll call thee Hamlet,  
King, father, royal Dane.”\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

In truth, any demon looking to deceive would certainly choose an appearance trustworthy to those the demon wants to harm. When it speaks, furthermore, it speaks only to what Hamlet wants to hear: that his anger towards the King and Queen is justified, that a great wrong has been done to his father, that the Queen is whoring herself. The Ghost confirms Hamlet’s
trepidations and justifies the vengeance suit ing it. It also casts Hamlet’s world in a shade of grief and darkness, since Hamlet reacts to this news of injustice by reshaping his world accordingly.

Ironically enough, however, the entrapped Ghost’s words entrap his son, since Hamlet struggles to function as an avenger. The truth of the Ghost is not freeing. Just as the Ghost is confined to punishment, forced to wander the night and suffer damnation at all other times, Hamlet too is confined to a task he cannot adequately fulfill, wandering in mock insanity and suffering death in the end. Indeed, in retrospect the Ghost becomes a harbinger of doom. This is particularly true when, after Hamlet swears to fulfill the duty of vengeance, the Ghost says,

“I find thee apt;
“And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this.”

Hamlet clearly does not move with haste and focus. Instead, he—like the Ghost—becomes encapsulated in time, obsessed with the murder, and driving others towards disillusion and death.

Finally, the Ghost brings up the question of truth; specifically, the truth of words. Given the violent emotional reaction of Claudius and his subsequent prayer for forgiveness, the Ghost is not lying about the murder. Hamlet’s father was indeed poisoned by Claudius. Therefore, the Ghost’s words regarding this treacherous tale are evocative, invoking truth in both Hamlet and the King. Furthermore, the Ghost and his words exceed the superficial, as good art in the definition of Maritain does. The Ghost is not merely a spirit appearing to frighten with empty words, but one appearing to seek avenging with a true tale of fratricide. As Hamlet says of the Ghost,

“His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable.”
In this case, “capable” does not mean *able to do the deed of vengeance*, but capable, meaning *susceptible to emotional appeal*;\(^{69}\) to Hamlet, the Ghost is one that strikes at the soul, at the emotions, and brings the truth of identity and reality forth. It seems, then, that Hamlet’s tragedy was perhaps not dictated by the Ghost, but brought about by Hamlet’s own inability to act upon the truth that his soul recognized. Good art, after all, does not always redeem the viewer. The viewer must choose to act in response to the truth that is revealed. For instance, Laertes provides an excellent foil to Hamlet in this capacity. When his father was unjustly murdered, Laertes gathered himself to what was true, just, and necessary. He promptly swore to avenge Polonius’ death and did not hesitate when the opportunity to fence—and murder—Hamlet arose. As Maritain writes, truth is “conformity with Being (Being grasped through emotion).”\(^{70}\) Hamlet never achieves this conformity. Thus Hamlet’s incapability does not render the Ghost as lacking in his sense of artistic truth. Rather, it can be argued that the Ghost simply did not have an audience that was jointly able to receive the truth and act accordingly.

Though Hamlet, Polonius, and the Ghost exist in a reconstructed world via language, they all fall short of the self-realization for which they search. Hamlet cannot muster up the drive needed to carry out his vengeance until tragedy has settled upon him and his family; Polonius, despite small caveats of wisdom, is never received as a well-respected sage; and the Ghost’s identity is never quite established as being Hamlet’s father or a devil taking his shape, bent on driving Hamlet to a tragic end.

The only ones who successfully use language to create a new reality are the Players. To understand why this is the case, the thoughts of Jacques Maritain are essential. Specifically, one must examine art and creative intuition in the context of the artist, as well as the idea that truth is
identifiable in the essence of a proper artistic creation. These thoughts are brought into fuller understanding with the additional ideas of Plato, Plotinus, Aristotle, and Aquinas who—while disagreeing on particulars—share very compatible ideas of madness, transcendence, and inspiration that exist within the very core of creativity and art.

The Players succeed where everyone else fails. Their constructed world resonates for all the right reasons because their art is true. When they perform, the truth is self-evident. Hamlet seeks them to catch the conscience of the King because The Mousetrap is better than merely accusing the King to his face. Accusing merely would be speaking the truth; the play is showing the truth. The Players take seeming and make it more than an illusion or a subjective experience. In art done well, the essence is drawn forth and a thing no longer seems but expresses in fullness a universal truth about reality. Maritain echoes the thoughts of St. Thomas when he writes that art “carries within itself infinitely more than itself.” Specifically, he continues, “in poetic knowledge emotion carries the reality which the soul suffers—a world in a grain of sand—into the depth of subjectivity.” Therefore although the players enact a moment specific to those characters they portray, the essence of what they are showing is what the soul has subjectively and yet universally experienced: truth of the human experience. Of course, in the case of the King, the play is not only going to resonate as a murder of a man, but rather remind him of the murder of a certain man, the King and his brother. Because of this, the audience experiences not only the truth of human betrayal and mortality, but the King is additionally affected in a very personal way. As Hamlet reflects,

“…I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions…”
By “cunning,” Hamlet means skill, and in this way his thoughts align with Maritain’s. Hamlet appreciates the power of art when he decides “The Mousetrap” will be the mode by which he ensnares the guilty conscience of his uncle. Hamlet wants more than a superficial accusation; he wants reality, in the form of art, to strike his uncle’s soul.

This is especially successful because the Players are good Players; that is, they are artists performing their art at the highest level. In this capacity, they are, in fact, a notable foil to Hamlet’s own act of madness. Hamlet’s performance is superficial in quality, put on for an ego-driven purpose. He needs not affect the soul of those around him, but only make them think that he is not in good sense. His portrayal directs his audience to a guise. The Players, on the other hand, when acting, transform themselves entirely. They are not becoming what they are not for the sake of themselves, but for the sake of the play. They are first receivers of human condition through attentiveness, or, as Maritain puts it, “alert receptivity.” Through their suffering of worldly experience are they able to create art which transcends the physical and enters into the realm of human emotion, where truth is recognized. All of this depends on the artist removing himself and deferring to the art itself. As Maritain writes, poetic activity “engages the human self in its deepest recesses, but in no way for the sake of the ego.” Rather, poetic activity is “for the sake of the work. The creative Self is both revealing itself and sacrificing itself, because it is given; it is drawn out of itself in that sort of ecstasy which is creation, it dies to itself in order to live in the work (how humbly and defensively). This essential disinterestedness of the poetic act means that egoism is the natural enemy of poetic activity.” As a result, when the Players perform the audience does not see them but sees their art. The audience also experiences the fruit of their art, which manifests as truth that the viewer recognizes instantaneously. Polonius
experiences this when watching the Players perform, when he interrupts an especially emotional performance with a cry, “Look, whe’r he has not turned his color, and has tears in’s eye. Prithee no more!”

But the Players cannot simply present truth as truth in their performance. Maritain considers this forcing an idea and corrupting art. Indeed, it would no longer be art, but rather propaganda, if the artist consciously pushed forth his ideas in his work. “[R]eason alone is not enough for the artist to form and conceive this work,” he writes, emphasizing that “[t]o product in beauty the artist must be in love with beauty.” Yet there are certain qualities art has that make it good or beautiful, although—as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Maritain feel—these are not cookie-cutter standards that require art to fulfill them in exactly the same ways. While Aristotle believed, for instance, that “chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness,” he also acknowledged that “Beauty varies with the time of life.” This makes art analogous, Aristotle believed, although it also has certain standards.

In the same vein, St. Thomas Aquinas asks the question, “Why are we pleased” when we see good art, and comes to the conclusion that it involves three major points. The first criterion is proportion, or consonance, harmony, symmetry, order. It requires that, in the art, the “parts fit” and there is a sense of purpose and balance. The second criterion is integrity, or unity, perfection, fullness of being. The art should feel complete or finished. Aquinas here is not making moral judgments, however. He concedes that there is diverse beauty, but that wholeness is possible in the many forms it takes. Finally, the third criterion is clarity, or a provocative insight into reality. Maritain especially takes to this point, writing that in art “light…emanating from things, causes intelligence to see.” Essences and forms are often hidden from ordinary view. It is the reason why a typical person may walk past an apple orchard without noticing, a
farmer might appreciate the harvesting potential, but an artist would stop and catch his breath, overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the trees. The artist can see what to others is hidden. Art in this way is “supra-intelligible,” but the artist himself is able to bring the reality of beauty and truth out in order for others to experience it. This is primarily accomplished through the notion of clarity. In this aspect, clarity gives a vision of a poetic truth.

These standards of Aquinas conclude that art and beauty is not solely in the eye of the beholder. There seems to be some overriding sense of truth and true experience that makes a viewer react positively when the art is good and react negatively or not at all when the art fails to feel true. Yet there is some room for subjectivity. It is not about The Truth, but rather it speaks an analogous understanding of what is true for this particular art. One cannot presuppose exact standards and designs that will fit all art uniformly. As Aristotle believed, what happens in a play should be good for the play itself. It is not meant to be a factual portrayal of real events, Aristotle argues. A play should instead be realistic to the play, and truth will resonate in that. Hamlet’s actions correspond with this philosophy. He does not ask the Players to perform a true-to-life reenactment of his father’s murder. He does not request that they cram in a role for “Claudius” and dub it “The Murder of the King of Denmark.” Instead, Hamlet asks if they know the play “The Murder of Gonzaga,” and requests that they memorize additional dialogue that Hamlet himself will insert. Obviously “The Murder of Gonzaga” is not exactly a true reenactment of the King’s murder, yet it is a tale of betrayal and death that will have the same effect.

Through the denial of the self and focus of the play, the Players are able to transform art into something more than what is there in a physical sense. They transcend to another plane of reality and truth becomes expressive in them. As Plato observed of madness in Phaedrus,
“[W]hen [one] sees the beauty of earth, [one] is transported with the recollection of the true beauty.” Plato had in mind the idea of the World of Forms, and while the thought changes in Maritain there is still a central, connective notion of remembering, recollecting, or anamnesis that is essential to the artist, art, and viewer. Hamlet observes this tri-fold effect in a Player after he performs a monologue from a Greek play. Hamlet is overwhelmed, almost baffled, that this Player

“But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That, from her working, all his visage waned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect,
A broken voice, and while whole function suit
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her?”

However, it is not just “a fiction,” as Hamlet says, that captures the emotion of the Player. It is the reality of human experience, and the Player taps into that. He is transformed physically and emotionally by the swell of that truth. He is the perfect alignment of the seeming and the true identity of what a thing is; therefore, his art resonates. Comparatively, Hamlet’s madness was only a guise that led viewers to deception. Polonius’ wit was artificial and fell empty on longsuffering listeners’ ears. The Ghost was an image of potential but never revealed itself to be good or evil, and so his truth was always in doubt.

But the artist—the Player—does not deceive, even while pretending to be someone else. His truth is a universal human truth of experience and existence. The Player brings reality out, brings forth truth, and thus makes it accessible to the audience. It again is the notion of clarity
which struck Maritain so soundly. Plato recognized the transformation that occurred when one experiences art. As Plato wrote in *Ion*, in the persona of Socrates,

> “When you produce the greatest effect upon the audience in the recitation of some striking passage, such as the apparition of Odysseus leaping forth on the floor, recognized by the suitors and casting his arrows at his feet, or the description of Achilles rushing at Hector, or the sorrows of Andromache, Hecuba, or Priam,—are you in your right mind? Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking, whether they are in Ithaca or in Troy or whatever may be the scene…?”

Plato viewed his out-of-body experience, this transcendence, as a risk to good sense and self-control, primarily because Plato saw creative imagination as extraneous to the body and soul. He believed it was a divine power from the Muses that could be used either for good or evil, and therefore was not trustworthy and required careful censure. Maritain rejects the notion that there is anything “beyond” about imagination. He believed that “imagination proceeds or flows from the essence of the soul through the intellect,” and furthermore that there exists “no Muse outside the soul; there is poetic experience and poetic intuition *within the soul*, coming to the poet *from above conceptual reason.*” In this understanding, there is no dualist struggle between the physical aspects of this world and the spiritual aspects beyond. Therefore the artist, when he performs his art, does not put forth anything that is extraneous to or contradictory of whom he himself is. The fact that the Player can cry for Hecuba or startle the King’s guilty conscience signifies that creative intuition is not a singular act, solely unique to the individual. Instead, it is a unifying act, one which affects the quality of the art and the emotions of the viewer. This occurs because art speaks to a universal truth that is experienced by all human beings. It rings true. It stirs empathy. Therefore, the Players transcend and bring forth truth in a way that no other character accomplishes in the play.
V. Conclusion

Ultimately, the power of language in *Hamlet* is the power of reconstruction and of truth-seeking. Language functions as art in that it can reflect reality, distort reality, and even—when truly achieved in its highest form—can bring forth the true essence of reality. As creator, language seeks primarily the reforming of the world view of one’s reality. *Hamlet* does so, but unsuccessfully as his goal of vengeance ends in tragedy. Polonius winds up no better, in death as misperceived as in life. As dramatist and inspiration, language makes it possible to transcend.

As dramatist and inspiration, the Ghost assumes a doubtful identity and forwards the action of the play. The Players, on stage, do much of the same in their roles and suggestion. Those who fail to achieve artistic transcendence through language do so because their language does not adequately represent fitting meaning. Thus truth is never brought to light. Only the Players succeed. Their language transcends and enlightens, and through knowledge of connaturality they grasp and convey the highest artistic understanding of truth. The artistic thought of Maritain and fellow aesthetic thinkers provides a direction to explore the reconstruction and truth-seeking that language ultimately serves in *Hamlet*. Yet so few grasp the greatest function that language could serve. It is as if *Hamlet* himself knows of language’s failure to deliver, for as he dies he murmurs lastly, “The rest is silence.”86
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