What is Hamlet's Book?

by Sky Gilbert

What did Shakespeare read? Well, 'everything'—meaning anything of importance that was available to him at the time, in any language. (Queen Elizabeth herself was able to read 7 languages at the age of 11, and there is no reason to believe that Edward de Vere was not able to do the same.) Shakespeare does, however, mention certain books in his plays: Lyly's *Grammar* and several poems by Ovid. Close examination of William Lyly and Ovid offer the opportunity to identify Shakespeare's place in the contentious philosophical debates of his time. But speculation about a book that is read by Hamlet—but is never named—can also be rewarding.

Some have noticed resonances between Girolamo Cardano's *De consolatione* (*Cardanus Comforte*) and Hamlet and have theorized that this is 'Hamlet's book.' The purpose here is not so much to suggest that there is no relationship between Hamlet and *De consolatione*—there may very well be, as there is no doubt that Shakespeare was familiar with Cardano's work. But previous scholarship (particularly on the part of Hardin Craig linking Hamlet and *De consolatione*) is less than convincing, and in fact Craig misinterprets Cardano's work and his place in philosophical and scientific history. By carefully exploring Hamlet's conversation about the book that he holds in his hand, we can get an idea of what Shakespeare was reading and perhaps thinking when he wrote *Hamlet*. And this exploration will lead us to another writer (Gorgias) who may have been the author of 'Hamlet's book.'

When it comes to classical sources most scholars assume Shakespeare was familiar with the books taught in Elizabethan grammar schools, but Leonard Barkan says:

> Poets such as Horace, Juvenal, and Persius certainly stuck in the dramatist's mind, though they hardly seem to be foundational; the same could be said of the leading prose writers in the curriculum, such as Sallust and Cæsar. Indeed, Shakespeare's relation to the high literary canon in Latin seems so personal, so different from a replication of assigned reading, that we suppose him a dropout somewhere in his early teen years. (4)

This kind of addleheaded surmise comes from trying to reconcile the life of the man from Stratford with Shakespeare's obviously quirky, personal and highly informed literary obsessions. Shakespeare's favorite books were not his favorites because they were taught in Elizabethan grammar schools. Yes—he was undoubtedly familiar with the canon—with Cicero, Virgil and Quintilian as well as historians Plutarch and Livy, and many more. But he loved certain books more than others—why?

Lyly's *Grammar*

It seems a safe bet to include the books actually mentioned, often lovingly, in his plays. Shakespeare makes at least two direct references to the required textbook in Elizabethan grammar schools: William Lyly's *Rudimenta Grammatices*. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* an older person is instructing a younger person (ironically named William) utilizing this book. In *Titus Andronicus* Chiron casually observes "I read it in the grammar long ago" (4.2.23). In *As You Like It*, Touchstone gives a young man (also named 'William') a lecture on love that is also a lesson in rhetoric. These references to this famous grammar textbook of the time—as well as Shakespeare's general self-consciousness about language and word usage in his work—point to the primary focus of all Shakespeare's plays: rhetoric. Rhetoric, along with grammar and dialectics, constituted the main body of the early modern curriculum. And Shakespeare's plays and poems are essentially *about* rhetoric.

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When one says Shakespeare's work is 'about' anything it seems to limit the scope of his work. But it does not, especially when one considers the dominance of rhetoric in early modern pedagogy. Rhetoric was not just 'making speeches,' but included all possibilities for representation—all forms of art, including visual art and music as well as poetry and drama, physical beauty, clothing (including disguise)—really any form of artful deception. Because rhetoric is by nature deceptive, the key rhetorical question that dominates Shakespeare work is 'how do we perceive what is real and/or true?'

This dilemma dominates *The Sonnets*. The narrator inquires over and over about the direct relationship between a young man's physical beauty and his soul. It infects all the love scenes in Shakespeare; where lovers must decide if they have been fooled by the loved one's perfect exterior or have been lured into a trap by a liar. It resonates with Shakespeare's implication, in the final image in *The Winter's Tale* and in so many plays, that art (i.e. deception/rhetoric) may sometimes take the place of reality. And we see this theme echoed in the tragedies, where the heroes are so often, in one way or another, deluded, deceived, or hypnotized by dreams, ghosts, misconceptions, and fantasies.

Ovid's Oeuvre

Besides the grammarian William Lyly, Shakespeare directly references another author: Ovid. Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* reads from *Metamorphoses*. Young Lucius identifies the book when he says "Grandsire, 'tis Ovid's Metamorphoses; My mother gave it me" (4.1.43–44). Not coincidentally Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was translated by Edward de Vere's uncle and Latin tutor, Arthur Golding. Shakespeare draws his subject matter from Ovid in *Titus Andronicus, Midsummer Night's Dream, Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. Lucentio and Bianca translate a passage from Ovid's *Heroides* in *Taming of the Shrew*: "*Hic ibat*, as I told you before, *Simois*, I am Lucentio, *hic est*, son unto Vincentio of Pisa, *Sigeia tellus*, disguised thus to get your love …" (3.3. 31–33). Holofernes also refers to Ovid in *Loves Labours Lost*: "For the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, caret, Ovidius Naso was the man" (4.2.147–148). Jonathan Bate in his *Shakespeare and Ovid* lists many other instances when Shakespeare subtly (or not so subtly) references Ovid, even if he does not mention him by name.

What about Ovid so deeply attracted Shakespeare? Cora Fox quotes Georgia Brown, who says Ovidianism "freed literature from the necessity to be didactic" (18). Ovid's work struck early modern England readers as being shockingly sexual, moreso because it lacks a clear moral imperative. Jonathan Bate says that Ben Jonson (in his play *Poetaster)* calls Ovid's work:

> distinctly problematic, for there is little learning in him 'concerning either virtues manners or policy.' His *Amores* contain nothing 'but

> incitation to lechery' and times spent reading him would be better employed on such authors that do minister both eloquence, and civil policy, and exhortation to virtue. (169)

Did Ovid's rejection of didacticism attract Shakespeare? Ovid's work was not without ideas, but, like Shakespeare, he utilized them in a manner that makes it difficult to deduce his intentions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare used ideas to enhance his poetic effects rather than to proselytize. Delacey suggests Ovid uses ideas as poetic devices, and he "conceived of philosophy not as a perennial search for truth, but rather as a collection of doctrines which could be effectively used on appropriate occasions in literary work" (160).

Shakespeare's Affinity for Paradox

The fact that we don't often clearly understand the 'message' of a Shakespeare play is actually the key to understanding Shakespeare's work. Though certain Shakespearean passages may seem to endorse a specific philosophical idea, one is liable to find another idea in Shakespeare's work that contradicts the first one. This paradoxical aspect of Shakespeare's writing offers a fundamental clue to his philosophical inclinations.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* tells us "the Pyrrhonian skeptic has the skill of finding for every argument an equal and opposing argument, a skill whose employment will bring about suspension of judgment on any issue which is considered by the skeptic, and ultimately, tranquility" (Introduction). Shakespeare does exactly this. If Shakespeare was indeed a skeptic, he would have believed that it was important for us to ponder opposing ideas, not to find a solution but to rest tranquilly in the zone of contradiction.

Pyrrho was all the rage in Early Modern English graduate schools. Though Shakespeare doesn't mention skepticism by name, he was undoubtedly aware of him. Ben Jonson knew of the Pyrrhonian skepticism brought to England, via the Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Bronson Feldman mentions that Thomas Nashe directly refers to Sextus Empiricus: "our opinion (as Sextus Empiricus affirmeth) gives the name of good or ill to everything" (139). And Feldman also reminds us that this idea sounds remarkably like Hamlet's assertion "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2. 268–270).

So, by examining books actually mentioned by Shakespeare—Lyly's *Grammar* and Ovid's poetry, for instance—we can get an inkling of what was on Shakespeare's mind. It follows that speculating about the title of a book that Hamlet carries is rewarding, as it requires that we articulate not only what was on Hamlet's mind when he speaks of that book in Shakespeare's play, but what was on Shakespeare's mind when he wrote *Hamlet*.

Cardanus Comforte

In an essay entitled "Hamlet's Book" (1934) Hardin Craig suggests Hamlet is reading *Cardanus Comforte,* an English translation of Cardano's *De consolatione.* Cardin is not the only one to suggest this; the correlation between the two had been noted previously by Francis Douce (1839) and Joseph Hunter (1845). The idea is attractive to Oxfordians, as the young Edward de Vere wrote an introduction to Thomas Bedingfield's translation at age 23 which Bedingfield dedicated to de Vere. There is much evidence in *Hamlet*—and elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays—that Shakespeare was familiar with Cardano. But *De consolatione* is less relevant to *Hamlet* than Craig asserts, because Craig misinterprets Cardano's work.

When Craig says that "in the original form of the play, or tradition, Hamlet was thought of as having a book in his hand when he spoke the soliloquy" (17), he is referring to the First Quarto, considered by most scholars to
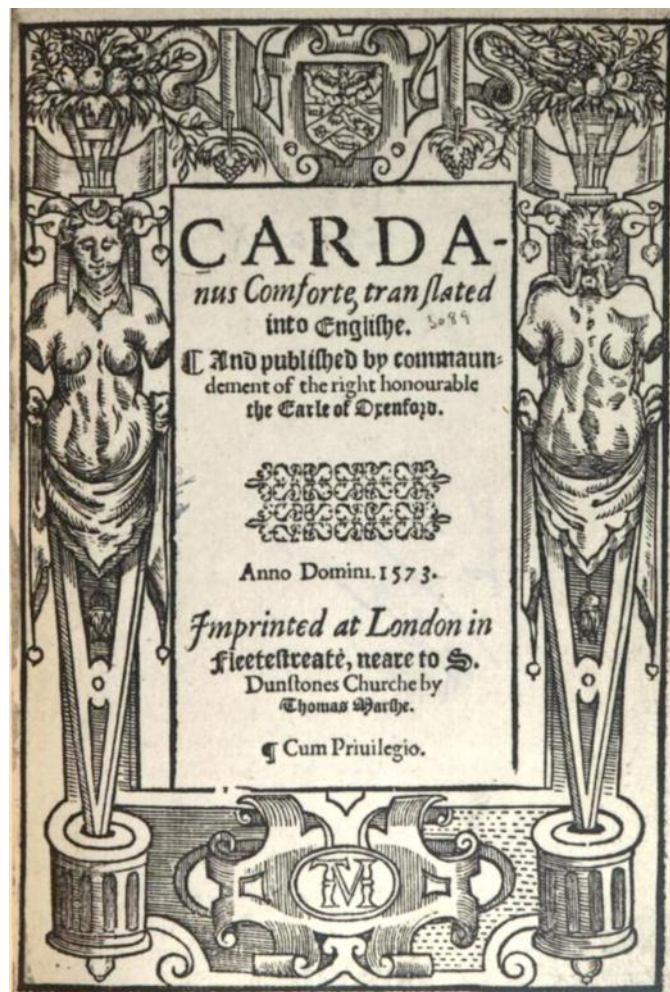
be a 'bad quarto.' This quarto is only about half the length of the Second Quarto and the First Folio and contains stage directions that seem derived from an actor's memory. For instance, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears in the queen's bedroom wearing a nightgown, and 'Ofelia' appears playing a lute. More notably Hamlet jumps into Ophelia's grave to battle Laertes. The Arden *Hamlet* calls this stage direction unlikely because it would make Hamlet's line after the sword fight: "I prithee take—thy fingers from my throat" (5.1. 249)—seem "forced and cold under the circumstances" (429 fn).

In this unreliable quarto the scenes are ordered in what seems to us to be an odd way. Hamlet's "to be or not to be" immediately follows the king's observation in Scene 7 that he is carrying a book, whereas in the Second Quarto and the First Folio it appears in a later act. The nunnery scene between Hamlet and 'Ofelia' follows directly after "to be or not to be." Then Hamlet meets Corambis/Polonius, who mentions Hamlet's book. (Since Claudius had mentioned this book for the first time three scenes earlier, Hamlet has been carrying it around for four scenes!) Unfortunately, Craig uses this odd ordering of the scenes in the unreliable First Quarto as the basis for establishing *Hamlet*'s relationship to *De consolatione*. He insists on examining Cardano's work in the context of "to be or not to be," not in the context of the scene with Polonius—in which Hamlet actually discusses the book he is reading.

But even if we accept Craig's methodology, some of his arguments are questionable. Craig points to several ideas that can be found in both 'to be or not to be' and Cardano. Craig notes "Shakespeare's lines reflect Cardan's characteristic interest in dreams" (22). But many other writers and philosophers in the early modern period were also interested in dreams, including Thomas Nashe (whose work was undoubtedly familiar to Shakespeare)—who wrote an entire book about dreams called *Terrors of the Night*. Craig also notes that both Cardano and Hamlet compare death to sleep. But Shakespeare and Cardano are not the only Elizabethan writers to do so. Take for example, the lyric "Come, heavy sleep, the image of true death" a line attributed to composer John Dowland. Finally, Craig says: "the point is that Cardan, in common with Hamlet, is convinced of the reality of the ills of life" (29). But what writer worth his or her salt doesn't think that the world is a difficult place?

To his credit Craig acknowledges that Cardano had access to a wealth of classical sources, including among others, Erasmus, Seneca, Epictetus, Plutarch, Cicero and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and that it is difficult to tell whether Shakespeare read Cardano, or Cardano's sources. Thus, Craig wisely narrows his argument somewhat: "If we could find both in Hamlet and Cardan allocations of ideas peculiar to them we might arrive at some certainty that the two works are related" (19).

But the fact that Craig is set on proving that Cardano and Shakespeare were both stoics, renders his argument less convincing. When contemplating suicide in "to be or not to be" Hamlet says, "thus conscience does make cowards (of us all)" (3.1.91). What he clearly means is 'thought' makes us cowardly. We know this because soon afterward Hamlet says: "the native hue of resolution / Is (sicklied) o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.93–4). Here Shakespeare employs the rhetorical technique called abundance, i.e. Hamlet says the same thing in two different ways. Craig, however, misinterprets this line. According to Craig "thus conscience does make cowards of us all" means "we do not commit suicide because we are cowards, and our consciences makes us feel guilty for this flaw." Hamlet's notion becomes not an astute observation but a moral lesson. According to Craig, both Cardano and Shakespeare "assert that this fear of death is part of man's cowardice, for which his conscience reproves him, and both insist that lack of virtue is the reason calamity continues to assail him" (24).

Attempting to attribute noble Christian ideals to Shakespeare's heroes is an appealing miscalculation, as what is troubling about these complex, sometimes inexplicable men is suddenly reassuring. Hamlet is no longer a flawed, neurotic, inscrutable man, but a good Christian one, with a few stoic virtues thrown in. Craig maintains that Hamlet and Cardano both believe "man must meet his trials with valiancy and fortitude" (29). Craig challenges critics who accentuate Hamlet's "unheroical acknowledgements of cowardice" (31). According to Craig, when Hamlet praises Horatio, he "meant, not to confess his own weakness when he so delineated Horatio, but to express the ideal of his own character" (31). But the play offers no evidence for this. In addition, Craig concludes that both Shakespeare and Cardano were "steeped in the philosophy of the stoics and both drew from the same fund of classical literature" (36). Thus "Hamlet merges with the calm-minded heroes of antiquity" (31). But not only is Hamlet clearly not in any way 'calm-minded' but neither Cardano nor Shakespeare were stoics. On the contrary, a pointed aversion to stoicism is something they have in common.

Guido Giglioni (in "Autobiography and Self-Mastery") states "Cardano openly distanced himself from the stoic examples" (344). He goes on: "Although the ability to transform suffering into a gift and to make one's destiny one's own choice may be said to be characteristic of both the Stoics and Cardano's approach, concreteness is what distinguishes Cardano's methodical use of prudence from the mere endurance of adversity "(348). The basic difference between Cardano and a typical stoic is that "the technique of drawing advantage from the misfortunes of life shows its difference form the Stoic consolatory method " (350). In other words, Cardano, in *De consolatione*—using his own life as an example—believes the secret of dealing with pain is not 'endurance' but instead, trying to, quite pragmatically, gain profit from it.

Cardano endured much personal strife which he discusses openly in his work. For example, he was abused by his father. One of his sons was beheaded for poisoning his wife, and Cardano disinherited the other for stealing his money. Cardano suffered from severe attacks of gout late in life, and, according to Giglioni, confessed—"I used to end that suffering of the body that tormented me every day by scratching my flesh raw with the nail of my thumb, and there I could perceive pleasure" (350). This distinctly *un*Christian method of drawing pleasure from pain (the bizarre passage above shocked readers at the time)—and his frank confessions about it—resonate with Shakespeare's generally amoral sensibility; Shakespeare presents even his 'heroes' unabashedly, warts and all.

Seneca and More...

It's true that Shakespeare's plays are often associated with Seneca, the Roman 'closet dramatist' whose work epitomized stoicism. It is also true that not only do Shakespeare's heroes suffer greatly, but also that Shakespeare's plays provide ample evidence that he had read Seneca. However, Patrick Gray suggests: "Seneca's tragedies are designed to illustrate the disastrous effects of unchecked emotion" (218), whereas in Shakespeare's plays: "the height of human dignity, as Shakespeare sees it, is…to give up the Senecan dream of self-mastery" (215). Shakespeare's characters do not deal with their anguish in a 'stoic' way: on the contrary, they wallow in pain. Hamlet is flagrantly consumed by melancholy, Richard II considers digging a grave with his own tears, and Titus goes on and on about the burdensome dampness of sorrow: "In summer's drought I'll drop upon thee still; / In winter with warm tears I'll melt the snow" (3.1.19–20).

So, Craig mistakenly proposes that both Cardano and Shakespeare were stoics, but does this mean the two authors don't share a similar sensibility? Giglioni summarizes Cardano's work: "It is not incorrect to say of Cardano's oeuvre that it represents a fractured stream of consciousness, made up vacillations and discontinuities, a written record that reflects Cardano's attempts to cope with constant self-doubt" (334). This self-doubt reminds us of Hamlet, and of the narrator of *The Sonnets*. In addition, both Cardano and Shakespeare were addicted to paradox; Giglioni says Cardano was constantly "taking all the risk of exposing himself to the powers of contradiction" (362).

In addition to all this, Shakespeare and Cardano share a similar attitude to mysticism, one that is not typically Elizabethan, as both seem relatively relaxed and pragmatic when dealing with angels and demons. Barbara Mowat reminds us that in Elizabethan England, "accepting the doubts about the existence of demons was to invite the accusation of atheism" (19). But as there were two kinds of spirits—angels associated with Christian

and Jewish traditions (i.e. Neo-platonism and the Kabbala)—and evil demons associated with pagans, actual communication with spirits from the dead was fraught with danger. The dead were imagined as wishing to communicate with the living, but to complicate matters, when doing so they often appeared in disguise.

It is in the matter of demons that the confusion about Cardano begins; and this confusion is related to our misconceptions about early modern science. Many of the Renaissance men who made revolutionary scientific discoveries, discoveries that are still relevant today, were also steeped in mysticism, and were accused of being witches. Bruce Sterling quotes Hugh Trevor-Roper as saying, "Agrippa and Cardano were both frequently attacked as being themselves witches" (68, n). This is partially because both men challenged the mania for searching out and punishing innocent women, but it is also because they were sorcerers.

On the one hand, Cardano's reputation as a mathematician is recognized by modern experts as one of the most influential of the Renaissance since he was one of the key figures in the foundation of probability, and first introduced binomial coefficients and the binomial theorem in the West. When it comes to philosophy, however, historians offer a different judgment. Trevor-Roper classifies Cardano not so much as a 'philosopher' as a magician: "The platonism of More and Erasmus gave way to the Hermetic, Kabbalistic, magical platonism of Reuchlin and Agrippa, Cardano, Dee and Bruno, the conjuring with demons and spirits, planets and stars. The magical platonism was not a new development…it had been forwarded by Ficino and Pico de Mirandola" (31). Often, his discoveries were linked with God's plan and had a mystical component. He was, as Giglioni says (in "Faxion and His Demons") "a sort of late medieval ghost hunter, who apparently spent a large part of his life investigating the life and mores of demons and other aerial creatures using all the scientific means at his disposal (optics, astrology, medicine)" (471). This means that Cardano—like Dee, Bruno and Agrippa—made use of 'experiments' not only to summon demons but in order to discover which were good and which were evil.

We see this kind of dilemma in Hamlet, who struggles over whether or not to trust his father's ghost. But to be clear: none of Shakespeare's 'spirits' are unequivocally good or evil; his attitude to them is ambiguous This greatly contrasts with the attitudes of other dramatists and philosophers in the early modern period, who routinely separate good Christian spirits from bad pagan ones. For instance, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not purely angelic, and neither is Puck. The witches in *Macbeth* are not purely evil—if only because they speak significant truths to Macbeth that he is ill-equipped to understand. And Shakespeare's ambivalence about Prospero in *The Tempest,* a character who was probably an amalgam of Dee, Cardano, Bruno a*nd*

Agrippa, stands in direct opposition to Christopher Marlowe's representation of another similar magician, who is clearly bound for hell: Doctor Faustus.

Shakespeare's reluctance to clearly separate good spirits from bad ones finds its apotheosis in *The Tempest*. Critics have classified Prospero as a 'good witch' because he never kills anyone with his spells, and he ultimately forgives his enemies. In contrast, Caliban is classified as a 'bad witch' because Prospero accuses him of rape and thievery (among other things), and characterizes his mother as an evil, pagan sorceress. But the moral distinctions between Caliban and Prospero are cloudy. Prospero tortures his victims quite gleefully, and Caliban is comic, often sympathetic—and endowed with eloquence. More importantly, at the end of *The Tempest,* Prospero claims Caliban as his spiritual brother, saying " 'This Thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" (5.1275–6).

Hamlet's book may or may not be Cardano's *De consolatione,* but it is quite likely that Prospero's book was Cardano's *De subtilitate* (*The Subtlety of Things*). In his introduction to the English translation of *De subtilitate*, J. M. Forrester says "The bulk of the work can be seen as a miscellany of phenomena which Cardano sees as exposing the inability of Aristotles' neat system to account for all things" (xiv). Forrester quotes Cardano's definition of subtilitatas: "the feature ('ratio quaedam') by which things that can be sensed are grasped with difficulty by the senses, and things that can be understood are grasped with difficulty by the intellect" (xv). In this book Cardano is "offering to make previously esoteric knowledge available to all" (xv). The magicians who wrote the early modern textbooks of magic ('grimoires') lacked Prospero's mastery—they were not always able to control the spirits they conjured. Cardano's *De subtilitate* offered early modern readers the possibility that they, like Prospero, might deal once and for all with things not dreamt of in Aristotle's philosophy.
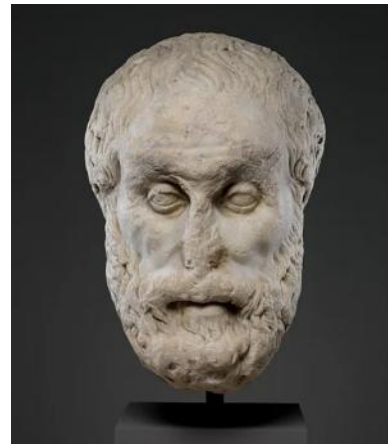
Gorgias' *On Nature, or the Non-existent*

Another candidate can easily compete with *De consolatione* for the honor of being Hamlet's book: Gorgias' *On Nature, or the Non-existent.* Gorgias (483–375 B.C) was the first Sophist. He is infamous due to Plato's misrepresentation of him in *The Dialogues* as an empty persuader, a manipulative wordsmith, a master of form with a dangerous lack of concern for content. Shakespeare was undoubtedly familiar with Gorgias' work. This is evident not only because of the content of the plays but through historical links between Gorgias and Shakespeare.

The poetry and prose of John Lyly, Edward de Vere's secretary, has long been linked to Gorgias. C. S. Lewis said of Lyly: "So far as the elements are concerned, we are indeed embarrassed with too many ancestors rather than too

few: those who inquire most learnedly find themselves driven back and back till they reach Gorgias" (312–13). Furthermore Feuillerat, in his book on Lyly, speaks of the early modern influence of Gorgias on many Renaissance writers:

> Among the writers I have mentioned there is one who from the first, in England, enjoyed an unusual vogue: Isocrates. The works of the Athenian rhetorician were imposed by royal decree as subjects of study in the Universities…. One could then with sufficient accuracy assign Isocrates the honor of having taught the usage of the so-called figures of Gorgias. (462–63)

Only four extant manuscripts of Gorgias' work exist. *On Being or the Non-existent* is the most inscrutable and controversial. It takes the form of a philosophical essay on ontology, i.e., on 'being.' Like all 'Gorgias' manuscripts, this work must be read in the context of performance—as Gorgias was not only a poet but an actor— and master improviser, concerned with the art of persuasion. In each of the four extant examples of his poetry, Gorgias performs a monologue in a different rhetorical style. In his *Encomium of Helen* for instance, he portrays a lawyer defending the famous beauty Helen of Troy. In *Epitaphio*s, he wears the mask of a eulogist at a funeral. And in *On Being or the Non-existent* he disguises himself as a philosopher.

Few contemporary images of Gorgias are known with certainty to have survived. This is a 1st-century CE Roman copy of a Greek statue of the 3rd century BCE. The identity of this man remains unknown.

In *On Being or the Non-existent* Gorgias satirizes the ontological theories of the eleatic philosophers Parmenides and Melissus, who laid the foundation for Aristotle and Plato. They believed, as Schiappa says, that reality was "ungenerated and unperishing, unchanging, stable, and forever" (25). *On Being or the Non-existent* makes a persuasive argument in opposition—attacking the notion of a stable, eternal reality—in quite perfect rational detail. Kerferd summarizes Gorgias' ontology: "Nothing is. If it is, it is unknowable. If it is, and is knowable, it cannot be communicated to others," because "neither being nor not being exist" (5–6). Gorgias' philosophical satire presents us with an extremely reasonable treatise. In other words, he employs the syllogisms used by his fellow eleatic philosophers to come to an impossible conclusion—one the eleatics would have hated, because, paradoxically, he utilizes logic to craft an unassailable critique of reason.

Probably the most remarkable aspect of Gorgias' poem is that for hundreds of years it has been analyzed and often detested but no one has been able to

figure out whether he meant us to take it seriously. His claim that 'nothing exists' appears on the surface to be ridiculous. But the phrase must be read in the context of Gorgias' work as poetry—that is, his persistent, scintillating and somewhat frustrating wordplay. Thus, his final conclusion *could* possibly have two meanings: 'NOTHING exists,' meaning: 'the world is nothing,' or 'Nothing EXISTS,' meaning: a thing called 'nothing' exists.

The witty, satirical tone of the scene in which Hamlet and Polonius discuss Hamlet's book is remarkably similar to the tone of Gorgias' essay. Hamlet's funny, seemingly silly jibes contain a sharp satirical point, as Polonius remarks "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (2.2.223–4). As in *On Being and the Non-existent,* Hamlet is hiding behind the mask of a philosopher in order to espouse nonsense, but not only does the mood of the scene between Polonius and Hamlet very much resemble Gorgias' poem; *Hamlet* and *On Being and the Non-existent* are very much alike both in implied content and intended meanings.

What happens in this scene is precisely what Gorgias says happens when we try to describe reality. Hamlet misunderstands various things that Polonius says, and ends up speaking 'truths' that are evidently falsehoods—like the idea that the sun can make a woman pregnant, or that old men don't have grey beards. This seems to echo Gorgias' line: "If it [reality] is, and is knowable, it cannot be communicated to others." Hamlet has no luck at all explaining *his* version of reality to Polonius.

The similarities between Gorgias *On Being and the Non-existent* and *Hamlet* continue. Polonius asks Hamlet what he is reading, and Hamlet answers "Words, words, words" (2.2.210). Here Hamlet devalues language, implying that the meaning of the words is not important. This is a Gorgian notion. Gorgias wished us to understand that all language is poetry; that since the poet is not the only one to manipulate us with language and that philosophers are poets too. Gorgias believes there is no difference between fact and fiction; he wants us to remember that language is merely words, i.e., words are used by philosophers and orators to mislead and confuse, hypnotize and manipulate. Nietzsche (quoted here by Consigny) said—for sophists "tropes or figures of speech are not 'occasionally added to words but constitute their most proper nature'…What is usually called language is actually all figuration" (77).

What version of reality does Hamlet propose in this scene? First, he challenges conventional notions about how babies are made:

> **Ham**. For if the Sun breed Magots in a dead dogge, being a good
>   kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

> **Pol**. I haue my Lord.

> **Ham**. Let her not walk I' th' sun: Conception is a blessing, but not as
>   your daughter may conceive, friend look too't. (2.2.196–205)

Hamlet then proceeds to utter a series of 'true' statements that are patently false:

> **Pol**. What is the matter, my Lord?
>
> **Ham**. Between who?
>
> **Pol**. I mean the matter you mean, my Lord.
>
> **Ham**. Slanders sir: for the satirical rogue says here, that old men have
>   gray beards; that their faces are wrinkled; their eyes purging thick
>   amber, or plum-tree gum: and that they have a plentiful lack
>   of wit…yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for
>   yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab you could go
>   backward. (2.2. 211–222)

Why would Hamlet want to confuse an old man by framing falsehoods as true? Well, the skeptic Sextus is quoted by Schiappa as saying Gorgias "wants to 'abolish the criterion' of truth" (15). The implications of this notion are huge. Johnstone says of Gorgias*:* "To hold that nothing exists is to hold that nothing exists outside the sphere of human consciousness, and that all realities are the products of perception and thought" (272). In other words, "Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so." Hamlet tries to convince Polonius of an alternative, topsy-turvy reality, one that is contrary to the facts as we know them—and he tries to create these 'alternative facts' through language.

But are Hamlet's lies completely untrue? For when he suggests that Ophelia might become impregnated by the sun, he is challenging her chastity—precisely what he does in the 'nunnery' scene. In other words, Hamlet's 'madness' (again, as Polonius observes) draws forth a grain of truth, at least about his own feelings. Similarly, after saying that old men do *not* have gray beards, Hamlet argues with himself, stating that Polonius would look very much like Hamlet if only we could go backward in time. Of course, we know that this is not possible. But Hamlet's notion of time travel contains all the yearning that we have about aging, offering the fantasy that we might grow younger, rather than older. In other words, when we are old, we are not merely decrepit, we carry regrets, and the wishes and dreams of youth.

Here, Hamlet is pointing to a deeper reality through paradox. Paradox is important to both Gorgias and Shakespeare because it represents reality more accurately than facts ever do. If we simply talk about the facts of aging—without Hamlet's fanciful paradox about moving back in time—then we don't include all of our feelings about aging, and we are not telling the whole truth about it. Similarly, if Hamlet speaks of 'pregnancy' without

mentioning Ophelia's (possibly imagined) infidelities, then he doesn't get to express his very deep and angry suspicions about her. Consigny, quoting Untersteiner, says Gorgias use of paradox "creates a simulacrum of the antithesis inherent in the nature of things thereby conveying through poetry what cannot be portrayed logically…[he is] circumventing the impossibility of rational communication of the tragic nature of things by using an antithetical style" (155).

We can also apply Craig's methodology to analyze "to be or not to be" in terms of Gorgias, for Hamlet's scene with Polonius is not the only one that echoes *On Nature or the Non-existent*. Though Hamlet's famous monologue is rightly interpreted as a man musing on the possibility of suicide, the opening question vibrates with ontological implications, and echoes Gorgias. Kerferd gives us this translation of a passage from *On Nature or the Non-existent:* "It is not possible to be or not to be. For he says, if Not-To-Be is Not-To-Be, then Not-Being would be no less than Being. For Not-Being is Not-Being and Being is Being, so things are no more are than not" (15). Here Gorgias argues that *neither* being or 'not-being' exist and as such equates them in the sense of being equally possible—or impossible—ideas. But the idea of 'not being' would be summarily dismissed by the eleatics, and such a notion would not be tolerated in Aristotelian philosophy; one needs Gorgias in order to speak of it.

What makes Gorgias' *On Nature or the Non-existent* such a striking candidate for Hamlet's book is that Gorgias' notion of reality is markedly similar to Hamlet's—and his ideas about the relationship between language and reality are singularly odd and somewhat perverse, and equally uncanny correspondences are difficult to find. On the other hand, the links between *De consolatione* and Hamlet are echoed in many early modern works. Cardano and Shakespeare share the same sensibility, both are deeply attracted to doubt and to non-Aristotelian explanations for the mysteries of life. What links Shakespeare with Cardano and Gorgias is not 'stoicism,' but a passionate attraction to notions of reality that are mysterious, befuddling and somewhat impossible.

Appendix

On Nature or the Non-existent

In the following fragment, Gorgias makes his case for non-existence and the impossibility of both comprehension and communication about anything whatsoever. The text is taken from *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Professors* edited by R.G. Bury, cross-referenced with *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* by Kathleen Freeman and *Philosophic Classics: Ancient Philosophy* by Forrest E. Baird:

I. Nothing exists.

   a. Not-Being does not exist.

   b. Being does not exist.
      i.   As everlasting.
      ii. As created.
      iii. As both.
      iv. As one.
      v.   As many.

   c. A mixture of Being and Non-Being does not exist.

II. If anything exists, it is incomprehensible.

III. If it is comprehensible, it is incommunicable.

I. Nothing exists. If anything exists, it must be either Being or Non-Being, or both Being and Not-Being.

   a. It cannot be Not-Being, for Not-Being does not exist; if it did, it would be at the same time Being and Not-Being, which is impossible.

   b. It cannot be Being, for Being does not exist. If Being exists, it must be either everlasting, or created, or both.

      i. It cannot be everlasting; if it were, it would have no beginning, and therefore would be boundless; if it is boundless, then it has no position, for if it had position it would be contained in something, and so it would no longer be boundless, for that which contains is greater than that which is contained, and nothing is greater than the boundless. It cannot be contained by itself, for then the thing containing and the thing contained would be the same, and Being would become two things—both position and body—which is absurd. Hence, if Being is everlasting, it is boundless; if boundless, it has no position ("is nowhere"); if without position, it does not exist.

ii. Similarly, Being cannot be created; if it were, it must come from something, either Being or Not-Being, both of which are impossible.

iii. Similarly, Being cannot be both everlasting and created, since they are opposite. Therefore, Being does not exist.

iv. Being cannot be one, because if it exists it has size, and is therefore infinitely divisible; at least it is threefold, having length, breadth, and depth.

v. It cannot be many, because the many is made up of additional ones, so that since the one does not exist, the many do not exist either.

c. A mixture of Being and Not-Being is impossible. Therefore, since Being does not exist, nothing exists.

II. If anything exists, it is incomprehensible. If the concepts of the mind are not realities, reality cannot be thought; if the thing thought is white, then white is thought about; if the thing thought is non-existent, then non-existence is thought about; this is equivalent to saying that "existence, reality, is not thought about, cannot be thought." Many things thought about are not realities: we can conceive of a chariot running on the sea, or a winged man. Also, since things seen are the objects of sight, and things heard are the objects of hearing, and we accept as real things seen without their being heard, and vice versa; so we would have to accept things thought without their being seen or heard; but this would mean believing in things like the chariot racing on the sea. Therefore, reality is not the object of thought, and cannot be comprehended by it. Pure mind, as opposed to sense-perception, or even as an equally valid criterion, is a myth.

III. If anything is comprehensible, it is incommunicable. The things which exist are perceptibles: the objects of sight are apprehended by sight, the objects of hearing by hearing, and there is no interchange; so that these sense-perceptions cannot communicate with one another. Further, that with which we communicate is speech, and speech is not the same thing as the things that exist, the perceptibles; so that we communicate not the things which exist, but only speech; just as that which is seen cannot become that which is heard, so our speech cannot be equated with that which exists, since it is outside us. Further, speech is composed from the percepts which we receive from without, that is, from perceptibles; so that it is not speech which communicates perceptibles, but perceptibles which create speech. Further, speech can never exactly represent perceptibles, since it is different from them, and perceptibles are apprehended each by the one kind of organ, speech by another. Hence, since the objects of sight cannot be presented to any other organ but sight, and the different sense-organs cannot give their information to one another, similarly speech cannot give any information about perceptibles. Therefore, if anything exists and is comprehended, it is incommunicable. (*Sextus Empiricus* 1.3/Freeman, 128–129, fragment 3/Baird, 45–46).

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