

“‘Twere to consider too curiously to
consider so”: a shadowy parallel play in
“Hamlet”

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It is common knowledge that the protagonist of *Hamlet* is Prince Hamlet, the eponymous iconic tragic hero. However, there is a shadowy figure who is to be found at Hamlet’s side throughout the play, a man who sees the ghost and tries to talk to him before Hamlet does, who can also be considered a hero of the play if we look at the plot with a slightly wider-angle lens. And after Hamlet’s death, this man, Horatio, emerges as a person who gives directions to Fortinbras, the new leader, telling him to “give orders that these bodies high on a stage be placed to view”. What if Horatio is the hero of *Hamlet*? What if Horatio’s unique struggle, a very different one from Hamlet’s, is considered to be a parallel plot of the play?

If we track Horatio’s actions, concerns and setbacks, a new perspective of the play emerges, similar to the way that two faces suddenly appear in profile while we are looking at a drawing of a vase in silhouette. In the traditional narrative trajectory of the play, where Hamlet is the protagonist, Horatio is Hamlet’s best friend and gentle confidante. However, in the new narrative arc I propose, where Horatio is the protagonist, Hamlet is more than just a friend. Hamlet becomes a teacher, a powerful guide and mentor, or to use the traditional Japanese expression, Hamlet becomes Horatio’s “sensei”, who initiates Horatio and trains him to fight in a particular mission. Horatio starts as an inexperienced fighter, totally inadequate. But thanks to Hamlet’s assistance, Horatio improves, becomes Hamlet’s col-

laborator in the war, and continues to fight on after the tragic death of his sensei in battle.

This plot of teacher/student fighters (probably based on traditional martial arts) is one common trope in Japanese animé (such as *Naruto*, *Jujutsukaisen* or *Ansatsukyoshitsu*), where a less experienced character is initiated into a group of older and more experienced fighters, and it is seen in such western movies like *Star Wars* too. Eventually, this character has to grapple with the foe on her own. Because the particular fight in *Hamlet* is the epic battle against fossil fuels (still raging now, though already underway in Shakespeare's era), *Hamlet* functions like an ingenious and coded centuries-long interactive animé where Prince Hamlet/Shakespeare subtly initiates Horatio/modern activist into insurgency. Horatio then becomes an avatar for a reader who understands the code, to take over for him in the prophesized battle against fossil fuels and capitalism.

This epic battle is also a cosmic battle since fossil fuels were produced through cosmic forces (sun and earth interaction) as carbon-rich plants (such as *lepidodendron* and *sigillaria*, bizarre huge plants in the primal forests of the Carboniferous period, around 359 million years to 299 million years ago) were subjected to the tremendous pressure and heat of geological forces and became coal. The plants did not decay, due to special conditions in the primal jungles on the earth, and energy accumulating over millions of years resulted in coal. The coal sat untouched for the next hundreds of millions of years it took humans to evolve. Humans evolved 6 million to 2 million years ago, while knowing and using only the yearly seasonal patterns of renewable energy: water, wind, photosynthesis. Coal can be seen, then, as an interloper, an alien cosmic enemy which we have no deep and innate knowledge or understanding of, and therefore, we have no collective ability to deal with it.¹ As a result, our entire biosphere, our oceans, our climate, our atmosphere, is now at risk.

From his vantage point in a London unhealthily polluted by coal smoke in the

early 1600s², Shakespeare could have seen indications that human interactions with fossil fuels were likely to become a major tragedy. London’s long and extensive history with air pollution “has largely escaped the attention of literary critics” (Hiltner, 96) perhaps because critics have been in denial, trying desperately to imagine a comforting and bucolic past that contrasts with the modern world. However, as Sir William Cecil noted in 1596 (the year that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*), “London and all the other towns near the sea.... are mostly driven to burn coal....for most of the woods are consumed” (Hiltner, 98). Ken Hiltner points to the position of early modern Londoners as precursors of what is now everyone leading a modern lifestyle, driven to consume fossil fuels to stay alive while simultaneously understanding that we are wrecking the planet:

Consequently, early modern Londoners, at once knowing the risks involved with sea coal’s use and fearing what life would be like without it (especially during the winter, the flu and pneumonia season) found themselves in much the same position that much of the planet occupies today. In fact, although a preindustrial city, London was likely the first place on the planet to experience on a large scale what is now a global dilemma:

1 An analogous theory: that we evolved in circumstances that have not prepared us to deal with sugar is widely accepted. “The advancement of technology has made it easy for many of us to eat far more sweet foods than our bodies are able to handle. Craving and eating sugar in the amounts and forms that our ancient ancestors encountered is quite healthy. Craving and eating sugar in much larger amounts and in extracted forms is what is unhealthy”. <https://wtamu.edu/~cbaird/sq/2015/08/17/why-do-humans-crave-sugary-foods-shouldnt-evolution-lead-us-to-crave-healthy-foods/>

2 “..as the seventeenth century opened, London had a serious problem with air pollution (resulting from the burning of coal with high sulfur content), which Charles I and others soon realized was not only eating away at the fabric of buildings but also killing animals and fish, causing the local extinction of entire species of plants, and according to some midcentury accounts, second only to the Plague as the leading cause of human deaths in London” Ken Hiltner *What Else is Pastoral?* Ithaca: Cornell U. Press. 2011.

How can we live without the fossil fuels that we know are wreaking havoc with the environment (in particular the atmosphere), as well as our very health, when the energy that they supply is paradoxically essential for our life and health? However, as noted above, it does reveal an important representational challenge faced by Renaissance writers: How do we speak about that which we can neither live with nor without? (Hiltner 122)

From the large scale of the early modern human experience with coal (“in the mid-sixteenth century, John Leland noted a dozen large-scale coal mining operations in his tour of England” (Hiltner 99)), Shakespeare also could surmise that the fossil fuel enemy would outlast him by centuries. What to do?— “*How do we speak about that which we can neither live with nor without?*” — Shakespeare’s answer to this representational challenge, as I’ve shown, was to write careful and passionately detailed allegories (his plays and sonnets) of the complex situation with spiritual, religious, scientific, cosmic and social ramifications elaborated (and with the scientific and religious aspects informed by the heretical, fascinating and ingenious writings of Giordano Bruno). *Hamlet* is another sun-coal allegory, also autobiographical, detailing Shakespeare as a secret fighter against coal. But since this fight would last many centuries, Shakespeare knew he would need help in the future. Horatio is the figure in the shadows, the secret co-protagonist whose speech at the end of *Hamlet* confirms that he has absorbed all the lessons encoded in the play preparing him to fight and that he will continue the long battle.

Returning to Japanese animé and manga, it is also interesting that many of these make use of cosmic or otherworldly alien enemies that must be confronted. In *Gin Tama*, for example, Edo-era Japan is invaded by space aliens called Amanto. In *Shingeki no Kyoujin (Attack on Titan)*, the Titans are gigantic humanoids who attack and eat human beings. *Hamlet* is a work of long-running

power and fascination because it secretly voices Shakespeare’s desire that people won’t give up the lopsided battle against the huge cosmic foe, an alien that we puny humans have not evolved to understand and deal with well. Hamlet covertly initiates Horatio into this cosmic fight, and after Hamlet dies, Horatio makes it clear that he will continue the struggle on his own. His directions to Fortinbras and the English ambassador to “give order that these bodies/ High on a stage be placed to the view;/ and let me speak to the yet unknowing world/ How these things came about” (V.ii.) show that he has implicitly acquired the authority to instruct, direct and inform powerful people.

In fact, it is useful to think of the whole play as a trajectory (though disguised) more about Horatio finding his voice and authority than about its more famous and attention-getting eponymous hero getting his revenge. Prince Hamlet sets up *The Mousetrap* to “catch the conscience of the king”, but more subtly, Hamlet’s behavior towards Horatio can be seen as a performance enacted for Horatio’s benefit.

The goal of the play, at the end, at least, where we can expect goals to most logically appear, is to enroll Horatio in action: “Report me and my cause aright” (V.ii.338) and “tell my story” pleads Hamlet, with his dying breath, to Horatio.

Has initiating Horatio into the cause been the plan all along?

Let’s begin at the beginning. Horatio first appears in Act I, scene I, line 14. He actually appears much before Hamlet appears (Hamlet’s first line is Act I, scene ii, line 64). Horatio’s first line is “Friends to this ground” (I.i.14) so the theater audience catches the word “friends” when he speaks for the first time. And that is the impression Shakespeare wants people to have of Horatio: positive, kind, warm, *a friend*.

In this first scene where Horatio appears, Barnardo and Marcellus have seen the ghost and they want Horatio to communicate with it, though he expresses doubt that it exists. The ghost appears shortly thereafter and Marcellus,

Bernardo and Horatio see it, but it soon disappears. Marcellus and Horatio notice that the ghost resembles the old king, now dead, and Horatio connects the appearance of the ghost with the fact that young Fortinbras is fighting to regain the lands the Fortinbras' father lost to the old king Hamlet in battles. It seems like a 'local' sort of political issue and conflict, but after Barnardo agrees with Horatio's assessment ("I think it be no other but e'en so/Well may it sort that this portentous figure/Comes armed through our watch so like the King/That was and is the question of these wars" (I.i.108-111)), Horatio enlarges the whole sphere of the conflict by comparing the national situation in Denmark to Rome and the whole cosmos, the sun, the moon, and the oceans (Neptune's empire) and even the supernatural realm as the dead return life:

Horatio: A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.
 In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
 The graves stood [tenantless] and the sheeted dead
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.
 As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
 Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
 Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
 Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
 And even the like precursor of [fear'd events,
 As harbingers preceding still the fates
 And prologue to the omen coming on,
 Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
 Unto our climatures and countrymen." (I.i.112-120)

So, under the surface, much larger trouble is happening than just a local war.

Worrisome things like “disasters” are occurring, and “doomsday” even seems near. And Horatio seems to have picked up on these as “harbingers” and “omens” occurring in these regions (“climatures”) among his “countrymen”. In the future which *Hamlet* predicts, this era is the time of economic foundering, as oil becomes progressively less and less economic to produce. Horatio has noticed various unusual and bad phenomena and these worry him: “in the gross and scope of mine opinion,/ This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (I.i. 67-8). As fossil fuels would become less economic to use, indeed, the sun economy would stage a slow and ghostly comeback.

More specifically, after that the ghost returns and Horatio pleads with it, “If thou art privy to thy country’s fate/Which happily foreknowing may avoid/ O speak!” (I.ii.133-5); so we see that beyond the local war issue, it seems like the “fate of the country” is involved and that there are many serious “harbingers” or events happening. And Horatio is a “friend”, a good guy. He is worried about the situation he sees.

By attempting to communicate with the ghost, Horatio is trying to protect his country; he feels like he now has a mission to contact the ghost and get some useful information from him. But Horatio cannot help his people in his current condition in this opening scene of the play because he cannot get the ghost to speak. He does not have that power. So he resolves to get Hamlet to meet the ghost so that it can speak to Hamlet: “...and by my advice/Let us impart what we have seen tonight/Unto young Hamlet, for, upon my life/ This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him” (I.i.168-71). It is only by meeting Hamlet and becoming initiated into the fight correctly that Horatio can use what he learns to uncover the necessary secrets, and by Act V, when Hamlet dies, Horatio knows everything and can explain it all: “All this can I truly deliver” (V.ii.385-6). So this play is actually, in a guarded and intentionally unobtrusive way, more fully about Horatio’s mission to help his country than it is about Hamlet’s problems with Claudius. Horatio’s

problems and their resolution fully circumscribe (both starting before and ending after) Hamlet's problems and their resolution.

Since *Hamlet* is prophetic, Shakespeare must have had the idea that a Horatio figure or figures would appear in the future as fossil fuels began to be unstable, disliked, harder and harder to produce, and widely acknowledged as deleterious to the environment. This situation parallels the situation Horatio is referring to when he talks about "doomsday", "disasters", "omens". And then Horatio turns to Hamlet for help. And similarly the persons who must play Horatio must turn to Shakespeare (Hamlet) for help. So this play is really like an animé playing out over the centuries. The ingenue must learn a thing or two about how to fight from the master. But Horatio has one important thing going for him from the beginning. We see it right away in this early scene when he says: "But look, the morn in russet mantle clad/Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill" (I.i.166-7). Horatio respects the sun and portrays it like a god. To many people, his language here seems just decorative. But it is naive to think his figure of speech is just ornamental in a play where the sun is so important. Horatio loves the sun as much as Hamlet does. It is common knowledge in animé that the good student fighter has to start with his heart in the right place,

Soon, Horatio sees the ghost again. Horatio had predicted that if he were with Hamlet the ghost would speak, and indeed exactly that happens: this time, the ghost speaks and Horatio, in the presence of Hamlet, hears it.

Hamlet: Upon my sword.

Marcellus: We have sworn, my lord, already.

Hamlet: Indeed, upon my sword, indeed.

Ghost cries under the stage.

Ghost: Swear.

Hamlet: Ha, ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny? Come on, you

hear this fellow in the cellarage, consent to swear.

Horatio: Propose the oath, my lord.

Hamlet: Never to speak of this that you have seen, Swear by my sword.

Ghost: [*Beneath.*] Swear.

Hamlet: *Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground. Come hither, gentlemen. And lay your hands again upon my sword. Swear by my sword

Never to speak of this that you have heard.

Ghost: [*Beneath.*] Swear by his sword.

Hamlet: Well said, old mole, canst work i' th' earth so fast?

A worthy pioneer! Once more remove, good friends.

Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy(I.v.148-167)

This swearing by Hamlet's sword strongly gives the flavor of an initiation ceremony, which Horatio, eager to get started on his shadowy mission to assist his country, is more than ready for: "Propose the oath, my lord". What sort of initiation is this though? Because of the presence of the supernatural as well as the secretive aspects of both the play and Horatio's mission, I will use the *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, which defines "initiation" as: "One of the most ancient of rites, initiation marks the psychological crossing of a threshold into new territories, knowledge and abilities" (Guiley 168). Horatio, initiated, has a new ability he did not have before: he can hear the words of the ghost. Now, by learning as he partners with Hamlet, he is hopeful that he can get the important knowledge that he craves. But, as Hamlet explains, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". That is, Horatio by hearing and heeding the ghost, now crosses into new territory. This

new territory will eventually lead him to become an insurgent fighter flying quietly and almost completely under the radar in a play ostensibly about another character entirely, as he starts a partnership with this character, Hamlet, to reveal the true villain. Finally, alone, he will place all the “bodies” up for viewing, a code for identifying all the mysteries and puzzles, almost detective-like.

Next, let us look at the stated purpose of Horatio’s visit to Elsinore. Shakespeare draws attention to the reason for Horatio’s visit by having Hamlet ask Horatio, *no less than three times*, why he has come to Elsinore. “And what make you from Wittenburg, Horatio” (I.ii.164) Hamlet poses first. Horatio can’t supply an immediate answer since Hamlet has turned his attention to Marcellus and Bernardo. But then, a few lines later, Hamlet inquires again: “But what, in faith, make you from Wittenburg?” (I.ii.169) and this time Horatio responds with a smooth self-deprecating joke: “A truant disposition, good my lord” (I.ii.169) Hamlet, wittily refuting this, then asks for the third time: “I know you are no truant/ But what is your affair in Elsinore? We’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart” (I.ii.173). This word “teach” carries implications that Horatio needs to learn something and will receive an education from Hamlet. In addition, the “drink deep” expression carries a ghostly and imaginary picture of a cup or chalice. A sword and a chalice, symbolizing the male (phallus) and female (womb), are commonly used in initiation rites. The sword image has already been delivered in the scene (“swear by my sword”) setting which can be seen subtly as Horatio’s initiation; now the chalice is added as well.

The third time, Horatio answers simply and truthfully: “My lord, I came to see your father’s funeral” (I.ii.176). Knowing that Hamlet’s father is the old sun economy (killed off by coal, represented by Claudius) in the hidden allegory in this play, we now know whose side Horatio is on. The repetition of Hamlet’s seemingly innocent inquiries underscores that Horatio is on *the same side as Hamlet*, allied with him to the very core of this play.

At a conference in Paris in 2014, sponsored by the Société française Shakespeare, I showed that the hidden allegory in *Hamlet* casts the old king as the sun economy and culture, Claudius as coal and capitalism (usurping the position of the sun), Prince Hamlet as Shakespeare fighting for the Divine Feminine and against fossil fuels and monotheism, Queen Gertrude as a hapless society forced to couple up with fossil fuels, and Ophelia as nature and the Divine Feminine, killed off and sacrificed by a society that can't correctly value nature through its unbalanced and human-centered religious ideas. However, I did not discuss Horatio's role in that paper.

Who is Horatio?

Like a reader or audience of *Hamlet*, he is alive while Hamlet is dead: “Horatio, I am dead/Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied” (V.ii.338-340). In this way, too, we can see that the arc of the play brings Horatio to a point where he is sent into the battle, and the reader is invited to join in, if she has properly understood the Hermetic code.

That fossil fuels and the western symbolic (religion and philosophy away from nature and without the Divine Feminine) would be only temporary arrangements is the basic message of Giordano Bruno's quite heretical *Lo Spaccio della besta trionfante* (1585), one of the main books used by Shakespeare and referred to extensively, though in a veiled manner, in *Hamlet*. Like *Lo spaccio*, *Hamlet* foretells the future in a specific way. The transitional era during which fossil fuels gradually or even quickly come to an end would arrive one day, not in theory, but for real, and how to enroll helpers in the #resistance if not with an epic work? By the way, Shakespeare specifically wished to only aim against fossil fuels (Claudius) and he has the ghost of the old king caution Hamlet against any type of action such as misanthropy against Gertrude (society): “But howsomever thou pursues this act/ Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught./ Leave her to heaven/And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge/To prick and sting her”

(I.v.84-88).

This transitional era known variously as “peak oil” and “peak coal” and “peak fossil fuels” has almost certainly commenced. Reflecting current deeply ambivalent attitudes towards fossil fuels, Claudius admits his guilt after he refuses to watch the end of *The Mousetrap*. Claudius’ intense sense of wrong doing expresses the deep sense of fear and panic humans feel as we watch the oceans slowly die and the climate warm, unleashing natural disasters and economic crises. Likewise, the fighters against fossil fuels, have also emerged in our era: Extinction Rebellion, Greta Thunberg, and many others.

Thus we can say that when he wrote *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was gaming out the future. He uses his play as a means to show a rough schematic timeline of the future with the antagonists drawn in two basic camps: those who resist fossil fuels and those who wish them to continue as long as possible. Horatio, expressing loyalty to the old king obviously belongs to the fighters against fossil fuels, and is meant to inspire people who grasp what is at stake to join the #resistance.

Horatio’s loyalty is proven at the end of the play when Hamlet’s line addressed to Horatio in Act I “we’ll teach you to drink deep” is poignantly echoed by Horatio, who expresses his desire to follow Hamlet into death by drinking the poison:

Hamlet:.....Horatio, I am dead.
 Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright
 To the unsatisfied.
 Horatio: never believe it;
 I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
 Here’s yet some liquor left. (V.ii. 338-342)

This real cup of liquor (which Hamlet prevents Horatio from drinking) spook-

ily echoes the figurative “drink deep” just enough to make it seem like this drinking image is more than a coincidence. In fact, this drinking image can be seen to be a new rite of initiation: while Hamlet dies Horatio must continue on his own.

In *Hamlet*, Horatio always finds himself at the center of things and is privileged to hear and see lots of secrets. Horatio sees the ghost and even speaks to it. Horatio, along with only Marcellus, is there when Hamlet explains that he will “put an antic disposition on” (II.i.172). Horatio knows the real purpose of *The Mousetrap* because Hamlet divulges this information to him alone: “There is a play to-night before the King/One scene comes near the circumstance/Which I have told thee of my father’s death” (III.ii.75-7). Hamlet also asks Horatio to help him watch Claudius’ reaction to the play: “I prithee, when thou see’st that act afoot/ Even with the very comment of thy soul/ Observe my uncle” (III.ii.78-80) and suggests that Horatio join forces with him to judge Claudius’ behavior: “Give him heedful note/And mine eyes will rivet to his face/And after we will both our judgments join/In censure of his seeming” (III.ii.84-6).

Horatio is thus subtly given a special position as a co-fighter with Hamlet against Claudius. Also, in this scene, right before the play-within-the-play, Hamlet hurriedly explains to Horatio: “They are coming to the play, I must be idle; get you a place” (III.ii.90), so through this as well we can be sure that Hamlet is a sort of spy or agent here in a partnership with Horatio.

The duo are arrayed against the others in the court, who believe that Hamlet’s strange words are a sign of madness. For example, when Hamlet calls Polonius a “fishmonger”, the term seems to make no sense unless the reader remembers that the fish image is used in *Lo spaccio* when a constellation of a fish, a symbol of Christianity, is removed from the sky and devoured during the cosmic reforms undertaken by the Roman gods depicted in this book. From this we can understand that the term “fishmonger” applied to Polonius is Shakespeare’s heretical and covert criticism of Christianity as a religion that peddles spiritual-

ity for profit and for political power. It is only a reader who can make the correct connections who can fathom the subtle references in *Hamlet*. Such readers become, through this virtue, Horatio figures and are in a position to further their advantageous alliance with Hamlet/Shakespeare.

In her book, *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge*, Hilary Gatti similarly points to a “direct collaboration” between Hamlet and Horatio:

During the performance of the play-within-the-play, Horatio becomes something more than the loyal and loved friend, starting *a direct collaboration with Hamlet in the unmasking of the hidden truth*. Horatio appears to Hamlet the ideal figure for this role for characteristics which we continue to appreciate in the historian-narrator: his impartiality, his balanced independence of judgment, his calm rationality. (Gatti, 155) (my emphasis)

Gatti sees Horatio as a historian-narrator; my idea of him as an activist is not so different since the activist who agrees with Shakespeare’s ideas would also need to have some historical and scholarly perspective on the issues. Thus Marcellus says to Horatio, “thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio” (I.i.42) when the ghost appears.

Addressing the topic of Horatio’s moral and intellectual integrity, Gatti writes that:

Hamlet also heavily underlines the importance of Horatio’s position as an independent observer with respect to the political intrigues of the Court, considering it an essential part of his worth as both friend and collaborator that he has kept himself financially independent of the prevailing power-complex as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, the paid spies, have not: “no revenue/hast but thy good spirits/To feed and clothe thee”. (Gatti, 155)

Activism on behalf of the environment and nature, and against capitalism and fossil fuels, may be a low-paid profession. Meanwhile, historians and scholars may be better paid. So Horatio, with little money, is more likely to allegorize or represent an activist-scholar than he is likely to be purely a historian. In other words, he is on Hamlet’s side.

Lest we incorrectly conclude that Horatio’s low-paid job is unenviable, let us recall the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the paid spies. They meet their deaths after they have been tricked by a piece of devious writing authored by Hamlet. It is, of course, Horatio who hears all the details:

Horatio: So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to ‘it.

Hamlet: Why, man, they did make love to their employment. They are not near my conscience. (V.ii.56-8)

Undoubtedly, Horatio’s fate as an impecunious activist seems far preferable to the fate of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, who were hired by Claudius to report to him on Hamlet’s thoughts and intentions, to find out “the heart of his mystery”.

Next, I’ll address the fascinating and mysterious creature in Bruno’s *Lo Spaccio*, the “Calm Spirit”, whose depiction Gatti sees as deliberately echoed by Shakespeare in his description of Horatio:

Hamlet’s choice of Horatio as a friend, and later as a recorder of his ‘story’, relates in interesting ways to the final section of the *Spaccio* where Bruno deals with the merits of what he calls ‘the Calm Spirit’. Bruno too is developing here the final stages of his process of universal reform or ‘renovatio’ which take place in the third part of the heavens. The precise moment in which Bruno introduces the theme of the Calm Spirit is when Jupiter consults

Neptune as to the correct way of dealing with the constellation known as the Cetus or Maritime Monster. As usual Momus wants to have his say, and butts into the discussion to identify the Maritime Monster as a whale, associating it with the biblical story of Jonah. Jupiter accepts the connection with the Old Testament fable, and accordingly decides to send the whale off to Salonicca, a Greek town famous as a hospitable center for Jews and counting a large Jewish community. The question to be faced then is what kind of virtue to promote to the seat vacated by the Maritime Monster. It is here that Jupiter summons to the skies the virtue which he calls the Calm Spirit. The whale itself, Jupiter claims, may be associated with the idea of rest or calm, for 'when this animal makes its appearance above the high waves of a boiling and tempestuous sea, it announces the arrival of future calm, if not on that same day, at least on an approaching one'. This episode of the reform thus announces the coming of the end of the convulsive working out of the new order. But the virtues of the Calm Spirit are also considered by Bruno as important accompanying factors of the final stages of the reform itself:

It is to be desired — said Jupiter — that this sovereign virtue, called Calmness of Spirit, appear in the heavens, as it is that which balances men against the upheavals of the world, renders them constant against the buffets of fortune, keeps them away from the care of governments, prevents them from pursuing every novelty, makes them of little annoyance to enemies and of little trouble to friends, quite untouched by pride or conceit, unperplexed by the vagaries of chance, not irresolute at the prospect of death.

There are striking similarities between this speech of Jupiter's in praise of the Calm Spirit and Hamlet's praise of Horatio. (Gatti, 156)

Bruno’s description “renders them constant against the buffets of Fortune” does indeed seem to be echoed in Hamlet’s praise of Horatio:

...thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hast ta’en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please(III.ii.65-71) (my emphasis)

The “pipe for Fortune’s finger” image is repeated later in the same scene when Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “play upon this pipe” (III.ii.349) and upbraids them with the criticism, “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...’ Sblood, do you think I am easier to be play’d on than a pipe?” (III.ii.363-370). Horatio, not a pipe for Fortune’s finger, has integrity, though he is poor, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will do whatever they need to do to earn money.

Immediately after this confrontation over the pipe, Polonius enters and tells Hamlet that “the Queen would speak with you” (III.ii.373), and then Hamlet, clearly echoing the theme of the “Maritime Monster” in Spaccio, responds by ***engaging Polonius in a conversation about a whale!***

Hamlet: do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius: By th’mass and ‘tis, like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Me thinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale (III.ii.376-382)

Here, in his clueless attempts to flatter Hamlet by agreeing with him, Polonius shows himself also to be exactly a “pipe for Fortune’s finger”; he has no idea why Hamlet should be talking about these animals and finally settling on a whale, of all creatures. It is only a scholar like Horatio who would understand the important reference to a whale. Act III corresponds to the entrance, in this prophetic play, of this Maritime Monster and the Calm Spirit.

Like the whale in the *Spaccio*, *Hamlet’s* whale floats into the sky, though not as a constellation, as in *Spaccio*, but as a cloud instead, another natural pattern emerging in the firmament. (Shakespeare should be justly admired for his inventive abilities to adapt and translate Bruno’s symbolism, as much as for his moral qualities as a fighter in the #resistance (and Bruno was such a fighter too, of course).)

So what is this Calm Spirit, then, in more modern terminology? It is a huge natural phenomenon that emerges, overarching everything else. It does in fact cause calmness and, as Bruno points out, it puts a limit or a lid on what people can do. Bruno’s whale is a metaphor for western civilization reaching an inflection point where the decline of marginal returns on its investments becomes acute. Mainly the reason for this would be that fossil fuels are increasingly uneconomic to produce. We can also say that perhaps at this point the environment is so degraded and overbuilt that there is little left to take, produce, make or even steal. The “Calm Spirit” indicates the fact that in such a situation, people must necessarily be mostly free of, momentous activity as they are extremely constrained by the limitations of their circumstances. They have, for example, concreted up all

their fields and cannot grow food, and they also lack the wherewithal to remove the concrete. And perhaps they have also filled the oceans with plastic and there are no fish left to catch. Or they have wrecked their atmosphere and can't grow food because of droughts and heatwaves. Thus people are necessarily becalmed.

In more modern ecological terminology, this situation can be called the release or omega phase of the 'adaptive cycle', C.S. Holling's term for the ecological process describing an organism's behavior within its ecological niche. According to Holling, in the adaptive cycle, the front loop "encompasses rapid growth" and "is characterized by the slow accumulation of capital and potential" (Holling and Gunderson 8). As resources are used up, growth slows and stops and then the adaptive cycle enters a new phase: the back loop. "The back loop is characterized by uncertainty, novelty, and experimentation" and it "encompasses release and reorganization" (Holling and Gunderson 8). Release here means release of materials, such as abandoned houses collapsing, so their materials are released back into the environment and are no longer deployed as material in houses.

In the front loop, material conditions of relative abundance give rise to one sort of thinking and believing, one stance toward the world. In the back loop, the new material conditions, which are by definition much more straightened material conditions, produce another way of thinking and strategizing, another attitude toward the world. Holling's characterization of the back loop as one of "uncertainty, novelty, and experimentation" also implies this difference in thinking and strategizing.

Moreover, *Lo spaccio* itself is an allegory of the adaptive cycle: at the start of the book, the aged and dying god Jove represents collapsing western civilization. With the help of Sophia (the Goddess of Wisdom), Momus, (the God of Satire), representing novelty and experimentation, is recalled from exile and together with Jove they reform the heavens (cosmic and religious view of the world) and try to

move beyond collapse. In the process, as Gatti writes, Christianity is provocatively and symbolically removed when Orion is taken down from the skies (Gatti 157). Bruno did not know Helling's scientific terminology, but the whole concept is intuitive. The adaptive cycle implies that humans' deeply held 'truths' or basic understandings of the world are relative to and contingent upon their material circumstances, what Bruno called "vicissitudes". Clearly, the notion that Christianity was just a passing phase in the organization and reorganization of matter on the earth would have been deeply disturbing to the Catholic Church, so it is not a surprise that *Spaccio* was singled out for special mention as a particularly heretical work of Bruno's in the summation of his trial in 1600.

One dialogue a little earlier in this same act and scene illuminates the understated way that Horatio (unlike Polonius) understands Hamlet's esoteric references to *Lo Spaccio*. After watching Claudius' reaction to *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet can be sure of the King's guilt. Buoyed by the success of his strategy, he shares his happiness only with, naturally, Horatio:

Hamlet: *Why let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch while some must sleep:
Thus runs the world away.*

Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers — if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me — with two Provincial roses on my raz'd shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?

Horatio: Half a share

Hamlet: A whole one I!
*For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself; and now reigns here*

A very very—pajock.

Horatio: You might have rhymed.

Hamlet: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghosts's word for a thousand pound.

Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well, my lord.

Hamlet: Upon the talk of poisoning?

Horatio: I did very well note him.

(III.ii.271-290)

These obscure allusions do not befuddle or mystify Horatio. He is implicitly capable of understanding every abstruse thing Hamlet is referring to in his mirthful songs, and offers back teasing ripostes like “Half a share” or “you might have rhymed”. But let's talk about Hamlet's mirthful songs themselves. The lyrics of these songs, importantly, can be obviously applied to the situation of Claudius: the “strucken deer” in the first song parallels Claudius, who fled after he was stricken by the truth of the play, while in the second mirthful song the theme of a “realm dismantled” approaches the situation in Elsinore, where King Claudius is a corrupt criminal (“now reigns here a very very pajock” —peacocks were considered vicious birds in Elizabethan times).

But there is a further layer of meaning in these song lyrics, and their vague applicability to Claudius and the situation at Elsinore is a sign pointing to this next much more obscure and hidden layer: the “strucken deer” is also a secret reference to Bruno, who famously used the myth of Diana and Actaeon (who becomes a stag and is devoured by his dogs) in *Gli Heroici Furori*. In the second song, “Jove” is a reference to the central character, also named Jove, in *Lo spaccio*. And the reform of the heavens which he undertakes can be said to be a “realm dismantled” since constellations in the skies are removed and replaced in Bruno's allegorical work.

To go further in depth into this crucial little dialogue, Horatio is not puzzled by professional or insider's jargon such as Hamlet's phrase "get me a fellowship in a cry of players"; he can respond smoothly with, "half a share". We haven't realized until now that Horatio and Hamlet are both professionals who are deeply connected as co-workers in activities which are geared toward performance and playing a role (players) while hiding reality. We've seen, of course, that Hamlet was into plays and knew the players. But we did not know until now that Horatio was also quite familiar with that line of work. As a team, Hamlet hides the secrets and Horatio exposes them (as Gatti says, "Horatio becomes something more than the loyal and loved friend, starting a direct collaboration in the unmasking of the hidden truth"), but Horatio has to do this together with Hamlet, who voices the secrets that need to be exposed. This is how they operate, as a team. So it is only Horatio, a scholar in sync with Hamlet, who can unmask the secrets buried in the song lyrics and elsewhere in *Hamlet*.

This process of interpreting sketchy phrases is actually alluded to directly in one of the few scenes with (tellingly) Horatio but without Hamlet. In Act IV, scene v, Ophelia's madness in speech is described by a minor character named "Gentleman":

Gentleman: She speaks much of her father; says she hears
 There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart;
 Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
 That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
 Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
 Which as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought,

Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

Horatio: ’Twere good she were spoken with; for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds. (IV.v.3-15)

As you can see, this is an extremely dry and witty sort of message of heartfelt encouragement and confirmation to any reader who may imagine herself interpreting *Hamlet* along the lines that I propose, precisely because it is Horatio himself (to whom Hamlet addresses so many of his cryptic utterances) who speaks this ironic warning. The play itself uses exactly such “winks and nods” to transmit Bruno’s heretical ideas or “dangerous conjectures”.

To return to the little post-play dialogue, Horatio is called “O Damon dear” by Hamlet. Who is Damon, by the way? He is famous in an ancient Greek story of two close and loving friends, Damon and Pythias. The implication is that Hamlet is Pythias to Horatio’s Damon:

As told by Aristoxenus, and after him Cicero (*De Offic.* 3.45), Diodorus Siculus (10.4), and others, Pythias and his friend Damon, both followers of the philosopher Pythagoras, traveled to Syracuse during the reign of the tyrannical Dionysius I (r. 405-367 BC). Pythias was accused of plotting against the tyrant and was sentenced to death.

Accepting his sentence, Pythias asked to be allowed to return home one last time, to settle his affairs and bid his family farewell. Not wanting to be taken for a fool, the king refused, believing that once released, Pythias would flee and never return.

Damon offered to take his spot while he was gone. The king agreed, on the condition that, should Pythias not return when promised, Damon would be put to death in his place. Damon agreed, and Pythias was released.

Dionysius was convinced that Pythias would never return, and as the day Pythias promised to return came and went, Dionysius prepared to execute Damon. But just as the executioner was about to kill Damon, Pythias returned.

Apologizing to his friend for his delay, Pythias told of how pirates had captured his ship on the passage back to Syracuse and thrown him overboard. Dionysius listened to Pythias as he described how he swam to shore and made his way back to Syracuse as quickly as possible, arriving just in time to save his friend.

Dionysius was so pleased and astonished with their friendship that he pardoned them both.³

Like Hamlet, Pythias is captured by pirates. Pythias is then thrown overboard and swims ashore, then makes his way back to Damon. Hamlet is, however, freed by the pirates who had captured him and then he makes his way back to Horatio.

The question arises: Does Hamlet in any sense of the word, “free” or “rescue” Horatio, thereby forming a parallel situation with the Greek pair? In fact, there is a charged hint that Horatio must also fear for his life. This occurs in Act IV, scene vi after Hamlet returns from sea (after he has been rescued by the pirates), and in his letter to Horatio about what happened at sea there is the dramatic and startling exhortation: “Let the King have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with *as much speed as thou wouldst fly death*” (22-24) (my emphasis). The King has tried to have Hamlet killed; now this urgent message from Hamlet to Horatio suggests that Horatio is also not safe. In fact, Horatio spends the rest of the play by Hamlet’s side, so, though totally without fanfare, Horatio does appear after this to perhaps have fled the court. Perhaps the secrets he knows

³ http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/damon_and_pythias

and has uncovered have made him somewhat of an outsider? In any case, he seems to have become an insurgent. This sort of thing—an ordinary citizen suddenly finding herself becoming an anti-government rebel—is pretty common in Japanese animé as well.

Since we are now tracking Horatio and his implicitly insurgent and subversive activities, you will notice next that Horatio does in fact (through a safe middleman arrangement) deliver the letters from Hamlet to Claudius. One letter is openly threatening and confirms the idea that Hamlet is an insurgent *par excellence* now: “High and mighty, You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom” It is likely that had Horatio delivered that message in person, he may have risked being caught and imprisoned. (The king asks the Messenger, “Who brought them? (IV.vii.38).)

Now both outsiders and exiles (or even spies), Horatio and Hamlet are next spotted in the graveyard, where Horatio is present for the “alas poor Yorick” scene. Yorick, whom Hamlet notes was the king’s jester, represents Bruno, who was dead when *Hamlet* was written. It is Bruno’s works who have supported Shakespeare, so the line “he hath bore me on his back a thousand times” (V.i.186) is a warm tribute to the man who proposes in *Lo Spaccio* that only jesters, such as the God of Satire, Momus, could tell the kings necessary but painful truths. Horatio is addressed directly in this scene: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of most infinite jest of most excellent fancy” (V.i.184-5). Horatio is meant to learn a solemn and unforgettable lesson here about the deep and spiritual reverence which Shakespeare had for Giordano Bruno and his ideas about the Divine Feminine and the sacredness of the material world and nature.

Next, Horatio and Hamlet watch the funeral procession of Ophelia and, as I’ve noted in another paper, the whole point of the scene is to embrace pantheism and nature worship and to refute Christianity (the Doctor of Divinity is made fun of (“churlish priest”) and a Christian burial for Ophelia, who symbolizes the Divine

Feminine, is rejected in favor of simple flowers being strewn on her casket). Horatio says nothing during this whole scene; he must simply be present to absorb its lessons.

Next, in Act V, scene ii, Hamlet explains to Horatio the whole story about how he has fatally tricked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with his writing of the letter to the king. As I've noted earlier, this is an allegorical admission by Shakespeare that he was fine with hiding subversive and heretical messages within his writings as well. Horatio is quite interested in the whole story and openly agrees that Claudius, by ordering Hamlet's death, is in the wrong: "Why, what a king is this!" (62). Horatio is clearly and openly an enemy of the king by this point. In other words, he has definitely become an insurgent.

After the sword fight, as Hamlet is dying, he begs Horatio to "tell my story" (V.ii.348) and "report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied" (V.ii.339-40). We know that Horatio has become a sworn enemy of the King, and though the symbolic King is dead, Horatio has been initiated into the real fight and implicitly understands who the real King is (fossil fuels and the patriarchy which denies the Divine Feminine). Horatio accepts his commission and ceases talk of suicide. He will have to carry on the mission alone. When Hamlet dies, Horatio is capable of mustering up eloquent words and performs with confidence: "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (V.ii.358-60)

Finally, Horatio's last long speech implies that he will reveal all he has discovered. In fact, he knows what the hidden situation surrounding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is and he explains it right away:

Not from his mouth,
Had it th'ability of life to thank you.
He never gave commandment for their death.

But since so jump upon this bloody question,
You from the Polack wars, and you from England,
Are here arrived, give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view,
And let me speak to [th`] yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and [forc`d] cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall`n on th`inventors heads: all this can I
Truly deliver. (V.ii.372-386)

Horatio seems almost like a detective in a whodunit who will reveal the identity of the criminal. He intends to be active, to take charge, to make use of his knowledge and his authority to help. And he intends to act and speak as Hamlet would have intended him to do: “Of that I shall have also cause to speak/And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more” (V.ii.391-2).

Rubin vase-effect and “witchcraft”

In thinking about the question: is *Hamlet* about Prince Hamlet or is it about Horatio, the reader must conclude that there are two possible plays: one is the traditional one where Hamlet is the protagonist seeking revenge; the other hidden one is about Horatio’s attempts to get useful information from the ghost and follow where this path leads. The “protagonist” and “the main plot” are different in each case, and become analogous, respectively, to the concept of “figure” and “ground” in perceptual psychology. Since “figure/ground perception can be expanded from visual perception to include non-visual concepts such as melody/harmony, subject/background and positive/negative space”⁴, the choice of

two equally possible *Hamlet* plots can be analogous to a “Rubin’s vase/face”, an ambiguous or bi-stable set of reversing two-dimensional forms developed by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin (see figure 1)⁵:



figure 1

Do we perceive the face as the ‘figure’ and the vase as the ‘ground’? Or do we perceive the vase as the ‘figure’ and the face as the ‘ground’? The human brain “shapes” information when it is ambiguous like this. We are more likely, at least at first, to see the vase: “Rubin noted a ‘fundamental principle’, an enclosed area, which is smaller than an enclosing area, is more likely than the surrounding area to be perceived as figure.”⁶

Horatio’s entrance onto the stage and his encounter with the ghost precede Hamlet’s entrance onto the stage. Furthermore, Horatio’s command to Fortinbras to “let me speak to the yet unknowing world how these things came

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure%E2%80%93ground_\(perception\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure%E2%80%93ground_(perception))

5 John smithson 2007 at English Wikipedia, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubin2.jpg> (accessed 10/18/2020)

6 <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-25/edition-1/looking-back-figure-and-ground-100>

about” comes after Hamlet’s death. So the “enclosed area” is the plot we have all studied in school, where Hamlet is the protagonist and the revenge plot is the main story. The “enclosing area” is the plot where Horatio is the protagonist and his struggle is to gain information and understanding. We are more likely to see the “enclosed area”, the traditional plot, and in fact we have done that. We are less likely to perceive the hidden plot that I have identified.

This implies that Shakespeare had some intuitive knowledge about the way our brains experience, interpret and ‘shape’ phenomena. As he was in the business, as a playwright, of delivering various phenomena onto a stage where it could be seen and heard in a certain way as he intended and wished, it can be considered that he had quite a stock of professional knowledge and experience about how the processes of human perception and interpretation functioned. Yet the terms and underlying concepts were still centuries away from being identified and defined; the whole field of psychology was still nascent. Indeed, 300 years later, in 1915, when the vase/face stimulus idea was developed by Rubin and presented as Rubin’s doctoral thesis it “broke new ground” in the field of psychology, and observers commented on its “mysticism”:

The opponents at Rubin’s defence, Hoffding and Lehmann, were impressed with the thesis, though Lehmann was also puzzled by what he termed its ‘mysticism’. ‘The boat of my soul staggers,’ Lehmann added, quoting Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (as reported in the Danish newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, evening edition, 8 July 1915). Rubin’s thesis indeed broke new ground compared with Lehmann’s own solidly psychophysical approach to psychology, and it was perhaps little wonder that Rubin’s methodology — the detailed phenomenological description of visual experience — had mystified Lehmann. It did not, however, mystify a group of Rubin’s contemporaries, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt

Koffka, pioneers of the Gestalt movement.⁷

The feeling of “mysticism” that surrounds the play as it strives to present yet conceal the whole other plot of Horatio and his quest, is one underlying reason that *Hamlet* has references to “witchcraft” (actually four in total) sprinkled liberally in it, though there are no actual witches in it at all:

1. “No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm” (I.i.144)
2. “With witchcraft of his wit” (I.v.43)
3. “’Tis now the very witching time of night” (III.ii.376)
4. “but this gallant had witchcraft in it” (IV.7.71)

The witch was Shakespeare himself. It wasn’t that Shakespeare considered his secret techniques to actually be witchcraft, but they were so effective and so devious, though out in the open, that they were essentially language-as-witchcraft. The techniques relied on science that was centuries away from being discovered and understood by professional clinicians, but it does seem that Shakespeare’s plays can be said in a way to “charm” the human brain and lead us to see only what he wished to obviously show. Unless we have a motivation (such as environmental concern, which Shakespeare must have predicted would develop with time as the damage from fossil fuels progressed) to investigate beyond this wall (where the hidden plays become fairly obvious), we will stay within the bounds delimited by this devious magician of language. This was how Shakespeare confronted the “representational challenge” faced by him and other Renaissance writers who wondered how to speak about that which we can neither live with nor without.

⁷ [https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-25/edition-1/looking-back-figure-and-ground-](https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-25/edition-1/looking-back-figure-and-ground-100)

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