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タイトル	Hamlet in Hamlet In the Context of the Soliloquies
作成者（著者）	畠田, 豊文
公開者	東邦大学
発行日	2015.02
ISSN	03877566
掲載情報	東邦大学教養紀要. 46. p.9 18.
資料種別	紀要論文
著者版フラグ	publisher
メタデータのURL	https://mylibrary.toho u.ac.jp/webopac/TD03461992

Hamlet in *Hamlet*

—In the Context of the Soliloquies—

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Despite the nearly 400 years that have passed since it was first staged, *Hamlet* keeps on intriguing and enchanting theatrical and literary audiences. In actual fact, the play has been the most widely produced Shakespearean play. Accordingly, it has been the most extensively critiqued play in the Shakespeare canon. Criticism about the play has been as varied as its production history, and one of the most conventional focal points of criticism has been mainly on the protagonist, Hamlet, or for that matter, his indecisiveness or procrastination. In this paper, we are going to offer a refreshing position on the delivery and behavior of the protagonist in the context of his soliloquies, which have also been a target of criticism for centuries and are believed to have contributed a great deal to the irrefutable standing of the protagonist and hence the play as a whole.

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Until 1642, when the Puritan Commonwealth government closed the theaters at last, *Hamlet* had been fully and greatly appreciated, its popularity being reflected in the fact that even well-known contemporary playwrights such as Robert Green, Thomas Lodge, and Thomas Nashe went so far as to produce the staged version of *Hamlet*. When the theaters came back to life alongside the monarchy in 1660, *Hamlet* was among the first of Shakespeare's plays to be revived. This is just an episode to show the degree to which the play has been extremely successful in its long production history.

It does not necessarily follow that the play has been totally exempt from harsh criticism, however. Critical estimation has been as varied as the play's production history. Samuel Johnson, for example, who was considered the foremost critic of moderate English Neoclassicism in the eighteenth century, instead of commending the play, expressed his bitter opinion about it, saying *Hamlet* is a failure. Especially with respect to the soliloquy in the prayer-scene, he condemns it as "too horrible to be read or to be uttered."¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another important and influential commentator on *Hamlet*, identified Hamlet as a man who was essentially impotent, unable to act on his father's demand for revenge because his great intellectual activity made him adverse to action. Furthermore, "the Romantics, members of a literary and philosophical movement popular in the eighteenth century, embraced the idea of Hamlet as the 'melancholy Dane,' a

term first coined by Johann von Goethe.”² These critics undeniably see the protagonist Hamlet as a character who falls short of the audience’s expectations and therefore does not deserve the position in the play, which leads directly to the negative evaluation of the play as a whole. The fact of the matter is that these portrayals of an introverted and irresolute protagonist were to be fortified by sentimental theatrical interpretations in the next century.

Certainly it is hard to dismiss the notion that the protagonist is introverted, indecisive or lacking in determination. At the same time, however, we wonder if it is truly right and appropriate to simply label him as such when we take a discreet and in-depth view of the protagonist of the play. We would suggest that more careful and thorough observation of utterances or rather soliloquies by him should be made if we are to fully and rightly appreciate the protagonist and the play, which will surely change the approach audiences usually take toward him and the play itself.

The action of *Hamlet* is often reckoned to incorporate all the elements needed for a good tragedy. In many respects, *Hamlet* is also believed to meet the requisite conditions of conventional revenge tragedies, but it surpasses other works in the same category in that it is far more complicated and dexterous. For instance, the protagonist faces agonizing dilemma between the desire for vengeance and the dictates of his conscience. Claudius, his uncle, murders the old King, his father, and the ghost of his murdered father appears and demands revenge for the repellent regicide. To further complicate the action, another important addition was made, which was the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother. Such being the case, the protagonist was to be put in yet another predicament between his abhorrence of his mother and his abiding love for her. In truth, these are also the efforts of François de Belleforest, whose work *Histories Tragiques* Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* rests upon.

Belleforest is believed to have included most of these plot elements in his French prose translation, giving the characters added depth and providing a starting point for the character development that Shakespeare would complete in his play.³ In fact, all these elements recur in some form or other in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. And yet, it is highly probable that these elements alone would not have made such a great difference and contributed enough to the unchallenged appreciation of the Shakespeare’s play. Actually, there is still another innovative addition by the playwright Shakespeare that could be of the utmost importance in appreciating the protagonist and the play as a whole. It is the addition of Hamlet’s internal dialogues, namely soliloquies, together with punning riddles and wordplays. It is purely Shakespeare’s original contrivance, and it is this additional contrivance that has turned out to be the major source of a wide variety of critiques, for better or for worse. What counts, therefore, is that the play was intentionally embroidered with the soliloquies presumably in expectation of some dramatic impact.

Prolivity is one of the keywords carrying negative connotations that critics often

employ in the context of the soliloquies. The first thing that strikes us about the play *Hamlet* may well be its size. It has as many as 3,835 lines.⁴ This is no doubt the longest text in the Shakespeare canon, far longer than the average Shakespearean tragedy. The truth is that since it is such a long text that it has been not uncommon to cut the play short. David Young, believing that the play's sheer length must be said to send us some kind of signal, argues as follows:

What is signaled is its wordiness. *Hamlet* is talky. The characters are much given to digressions, and the action to odd arrests and apparent detours. Verbal elaboration is the norm, rather than the exception. [...] the tragic hero, with his soliloquies, is only the most prominent instance of slowing or stopping the action while they discourse, often at length, on matters that interest them, even when these are not matters at hand.⁵

Although it is a truism that *Hamlet* is talky and verbal elaboration is the norm in the play, what deserves attention here is Young's mention of the word "prolixity" and his argument that the protagonist Hamlet is slowing or stopping the action with his soliloquies. His employment of the word prolixity implies that he considers the play could have been constructed with less redundancy or with fewer repetitions in terms of words and action. Besides, he contends that the playwright exploits soliloquies to procrastinate the action. This has been one of the typical and mainstream views critics are likely to take on the production of the protagonist's soliloquies in the context of the action.

However, it comes into question whether the view is valid and appropriate when we have a closer look at each individual soliloquy from the viewpoint that the soliloquies are elements that must have been deliberately incorporated into the action, in hope of not simple delay but some other intended impact. Furthermore, this incorporation is reckoned to have been carried out on the grounds that "Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences liked plenty of action on the stage, but they also responded to stylistically ornate passages and long speeches the way opera-lovers respond to arias."⁶ These observations will no doubt endorse the idea that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would not have been contented with the action making little progress with the use of simply long and ornate soliloquies.

We are now required to examine each one of the soliloquies in *Hamlet*, or rather Hamlet's soliloquies, which is the main target of our investigation, in order to identify the specific and intended impact the soliloquies were meant and designed to have on the overall action of the play. In fact, more than 70 percent of the soliloquies in *Hamlet* are given by the protagonist Hamlet. Maher, who views him as a true soliloquizer, goes as far as to say that the word soliloquy is synonymous with the phrase "To be, or not to be," arguing that his role definition would be incomplete had he been provided with only dialogue.⁷ By the same token, it would not be too much to say here that

soliloquies mean Hamlet's soliloquies.

Hamlet delivers seven of all the soliloquies in the play. They vary in length from twelve (Act3, Scene2) to fifty-nine (Act2, Scene2), covering a great variety of categories, such as exposition, meditation, confession and conviction. In general, there are roughly two ways of delivering soliloquies: an internalized mode of delivery and an externalized mode of performing soliloquies. In an internalized mode of delivery, the actor, instead of interacting with a theater audience, only speaks to himself, while in an externalized mode, he often makes eye contact with some of the audience, interacting with them. The soliloquies of the protagonist Hamlet encompass both these modes.

Hamlet's first soliloquy begins after the court depart, leaving him alone on the stage in Act 1, Scene 2. He abruptly starts to voice his thoughts aloud, wishing he could kill himself. "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God ! God !" (129-32) These first four lines bear eloquent testimony to the depth of grief and indignation he harbors over what happened to both his parents. He goes on, admiring his noble father, the old King, while lamenting over his mother having been a woman of easy virtue, saying, "Frailty, thy name is woman." (146) The prince, Hamlet, just cannot realize what the Queen, his beloved mother, did and thus is frustrated. The condemnation culminates in a direful prediction that the results will be disastrous, which he vows he will never put into words. "It is not, nor it cannot come to good. / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue." (158-59) After all, the protagonist, for the first time, reveals through the soliloquy the fury and shock he feels that mainly stem from his mother's marriage. So his accusation is largely directed toward her. At this point, he does not have the slightest doubt about the way his father died. Hence, he touches on Claudius only a little here.

Hamlet has a chance to talk with the ghost in Act 1, Scene 5. This is the very scene where he learns the real cause of his father's death. His father was poisoned by Claudius. The ghost's long and uninterrupted narrative betrays not just the extent of Claudius's wickedness and deceptiveness, but the degree of his father's mortification. The ghost vehemently and acutely wishes him to take action to pay off a grudge against Claudius. With the coming of the dawn, the ghost departs, leaving behind the words "remember me." After this, Hamlet, in his second soliloquy, exposes his irresistible sentiments as follows:

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O all you host of heaven ! O earth ! what else ?
 And shall I couple hell ? O, fie ! Hold, hold, my heart,
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
 But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee ?
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee ?
 Yea, from the table of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven !
 O most pernicious woman !
 O villain, villain, smiling damned villain !
 My tables. Meet it is I set it down
 That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain--
 At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark. [*Writes.*]
 So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word.
 It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'
 I have sworn't. (1. 5. 92-112)

As we can see, this soliloquy is replete with rage, agitation and resolve, which discloses that the protagonist has renewed his fury and disdain against Claudius, who has deceived him in an insidious manner, slaying his father vilely. Therefore, even though he refers to his mother as "pernicious woman," his replenished anger is primarily aimed at "smiling damned villain," namely Claudius. In this condensed soliloquy, Hamlet firmly pledges that he will never fail to take action, expressing his decisive resolution, while he does not yet refer to any words such as revenge or vengeance at this point in time.

In the third, long and well-known soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet pours out his feelings about himself not having been able to make a definite move despite the fact that there are sufficient motives, lowering himself in comparison with the great actor, 1st play, and actually delivering, "Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have? He would drown the stage with tears, / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, / [...] / Yet I," (555-61) He accuses himself of being a coward, rascal and villain, saying, "A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / [...] / A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain," (562-67) He continuously discharges all manner of abuses at himself, blaming himself for losing his original resolve and being indecisive. The self-accusation observed here also indicates that he has been afflicted by profound reproach and remorse for his failure to act on what he promised his father. But then the condemnation is directed toward Claudius and at its crescendo, the protagonist finally utters the word "vengeance," which we have never heard before. Furthermore he hits upon an idea of having the play performed before Claudius. These are evident signs

that he is changing or at least he is trying to move things forward.

In the last phase of this soliloquy, it becomes apparent that he has good reason for his delay and hesitation. Hamlet is well aware that he must make Claudius feel guilty, which is a tough business to do. Furthermore, he is not yet feeling sure of himself that the ghost is his father. He discloses his uncertainty, saying, "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil, and the devil hath power / To assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds / More relative than this." (594-600) Thus we are now convinced that the lack of surer grounds has prevented him from moving forward and the inability or failure to act on what he promised is not unjustified.

The fourth and best-known soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 1 appears similar to the previous one in the sense that in both soliloquies we witness the introspective protagonist. Close observation, however, tells us they are comparable but very different. Though in the third soliloquy, as we have seen above, the tone of words coming out of his mouth is more vehement and violent, which is plainly manifested in the varied style or uncontrolled choice of words in at least the first half of the soliloquy. In fact, the playwright capitalizes on the contrastive gap in action between the actor 1st play and Hamlet so as to highlight the indecisiveness of the latter. In the fourth soliloquy, however, as the renowned and philosophical opening remarks "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (56) reveal, the overall tone of words expressed here is calm and well-controlled, or more meditative than angry, more composed than passionate.

In addition, unlike the case in the third soliloquy, we see no self-accusation here, that is, the protagonist does not blame himself at all at least in words. Instead, from the beginning to almost the end of the soliloquy, he dispassionately and analytically soliloquizes a series of reasons for the inability to take a decisive action in realizing his death wish. He wonders if life is worth living at all in a world fraught with agony and despondency. The following are some crucial parts in them. "Must give us pause—" (68) "But that the dread of something after death," (78) "puzzles the will," (80) "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," (83) "With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action." (87-88) What interests us in his argument here is that he does not refer to any specific person or situation. Instead, he discloses his general ideas about fears one might harbor in taking one bold stride forward to enter eternity. Therefore it can be said that we witness Hamlet rationally and logically cite some latent mental hindrances as a justification for his failure to make a definite move, but at the same time contemplating suicide here makes us feel it is abrupt and sudden.

The protagonist Hamlet, left alone once more after the talk with Polonius, slips into his own world, the fifth soliloquy, briefest but vigorous speech starting at the end of Act 3, Scene 2. Late at night, he sounds full of vigor, unlike the Hamlet during the daytime. He now feels confident that he can do any cruelty. It is apparent that he has changed or at least he is changing. However, recalling his father's words, Hamlet judges that

the brunt of his attack should not be directed against his mother.

In Act 3, Scene 3, Claudius, unable to bear the continued existence of Hamlet, decides that he must die. He promptly goes ahead with a plot of his another murder. Almost at the same time, however, Claudius reveals that he is overwhelmed by a sense of sin, admitting his guilt. He falls to his knees and goes in prayer. It is in the course of the prayer that the protagonist begins to be engaged in his sixth soliloquy. It appears not impossible for Hamlet to put the long-awaited business into action. In fact, it is a moment of sweet revenge. Nevertheless he does not dare to do so, which ends up solidifying his negative image that he cannot really get anything done. But again, this is not a right and proper interpretation of the scene. Here Hamlet is actually questioning whether it will be a real revenge, saying, "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying. / And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven; / And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd: / A villain kills my father, and for that / I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven. / Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge." (73-79) Thus we see that Hamlet is not simply delaying what he is supposed to do. If Hamlet kills Claudius while he is praying, his soul will end up going to heaven, which means claiming his life in this situation will not be the revenge Hamlet has sought. The idea here derives from an old Catholic tradition. According to Lamb, the tradition tells you that a person who dies without confessing his or her sins to a priest and receiving penance and absolution does not go to heaven.⁸ After all, the protagonist intensely wishes to fulfill his commitment properly and so prefers awaiting his chance for a real vengeance. This is evidently shown in the last line of the soliloquy. "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days." (96)

The protagonist's seventh and final soliloquy gets under way just after his exchange with Captain telling him about the Norwegian prince, Fortinbras, and his army marching through Denmark on the way to Poland. When Hamlet talks with Captain, we feel as if we were watching a king dealing with the messenger. Or we may say we are subconsciously examining Hamlet's qualification as a king. Listening to Captain telling him Fortinbras's army is to invade Poland for "a little patch of ground," Hamlet is moved and admires Fortinbras, which in turn results in complaints about his weak-mindedness. However, unlike the Hamlet we have seen in the early soliloquies, Hamlet here sounds calm and mature. Even in his opening words, "How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge. What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?" (32-35), the tone and form display his composure. Referring to the sixth and seventh soliloquies in comparison with the earlier ones, Clemen goes as follows: "it has been pointed out that the Hamlet of the late soliloquies (3. 3. 73, 4. 4. 32) is no longer the same as the earlier ones. The wild despair which led to a dislocation of syntax in the first three soliloquies has given way to a calmer and more controlled mode of speech and thought."⁹ Since he now has certainty about the ghost and his remarks, and also about Claudius's duplicity and

perfidy, he is far more confident and self-assured of his commission, which is reflected in these restrained and well-controlled lines. There is no doubt a marked change or growth perceived in Hamlet's mind-set and attitude about what is expected of him. Admiring the noble aspiration of the young prince of Norway, the prince of Denmark finally voices his determination to carry out the pledge he made to his father, saying, "To hide the slain? O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth." (65-66) Although Hamlet's renewed passion has been fueled by the conduct of the young Norwegian prince, he has eventually reached the point where the action of the play is to be moved forward with absolute certainty.

Our examination of each individual soliloquy by Hamlet was triggered off by the necessity to scrutinize the validity or appropriateness of observations on the use of his soliloquies. What we see in the first soliloquy is the effusion of a series of mainly sad and disappointed feelings pouring out his heart over the marriage between Claudius and his mother. It is such a shocking event to him that he has a death wish, and his accusation is mostly directed toward his mother, who has betrayed his father all too soon. However, after the talk with the ghost, the target of his fury shifts from his mother to Claudius, who has turned out to be the one that deceived him and killed his father. Thus the second soliloquy is overflowing with words of rage, excitement, and resolution, with the disordered syntax representing his unrestrained sentiments. Nonetheless, we are to eavesdrop on him lamenting over his indecisiveness in the third soliloquy, which is due in large part to his uncertainty associated with the ghost being his father. We are naturally convinced here that he has every reason for not being able to take a bold step further. Presumably not having been able to get hold of any sure things, the protagonist, in the fourth soliloquy, contemplates committing suicide to get away from anguish and plight in this world, which he finds virtually unachievable. Put another way, his thought of whether to live or to die keeps doubling back on itself and gets nowhere. But he delivers his soliloquy in a profoundly calm and meditative fashion, making us feel as if he were a sage. However, now that Claudius's murder of his father by poisoning has come to light, the protagonist shows up in the fifth soliloquy scene full of vigor and confidence needed for any cruelty. Although, in the next soliloquy scene, Hamlet witnesses Claudius praying, he ends up postponing taking a decisive action of murdering him at this moment, not because he is coward, but because he has realized, after deliberating over what a true vengeance is all about, it is not going to be what he has sought. By the time he delivers his final soliloquy, Hamlet is no longer what he used to be. He now sounds more calm and mature, showing a marked difference in the attitude he takes toward his destiny.

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Looking back upon our examination above, we have learned that obviously it is an

overstatement to call the work *Hamlet* a failure in the context of its soliloquies, while it is certain that the incorporation of soliloquies into the structure of the play has been looked upon as a great factor that can determine the success or failure of the play. In the course of our examination, we have been made aware of two things. One of them is that certainly Hamlet sometimes shows us his inclination toward indecisiveness or procrastination, but as it turns out whenever he does so, he is trapped in indecision, having no other choice but to do so and at the same time having every reason to do so in almost every case, as in the third soliloquy scene where he just cannot move forward decisively due to some uncertainties, or as in the sixth soliloquy scene where the protagonist is hindered from slaying Claudius, because he is at prayer then, for example. Therefore, it is not for nothing that the protagonist has not been able to take one bold step further with ease. This endorses the idea that the protagonist's indecisiveness or procrastination has been under the control of the playwright. In fact, this is the very design and dexterity of the playwright to be perceived if we are to fully appreciate the soliloquies and the play. Furthermore, every time the protagonist finds his way from one soliloquy to another, we encounter a different Hamlet, that is, we do not see the same Hamlet again in different soliloquies, suggesting that he is going through a gradual change or a latent transformation is taking place within him by way of the soliloquies, the consideration of which rejects the simple labelling of him as indecisive or irresolute. All this is totally alien to Young's observation that the protagonist is slowing and stopping the action with his soliloquies and that the playwright exploits soliloquies to procrastinate the action.

The other is that while the individual soliloquies appear independent of one another, there is a definite train of thought and behavior to be perceived among all the seven soliloquies by the protagonist. That is to say, there is an undeniable flow of action discerned in the context of the soliloquies, signifying that we can observe another action unfolding from one soliloquy to another. While the action at issue is in fact naturally subsumed within the overall and primary action of the play, it can be looked upon as being independent, serving as a complementary role of exposing the protagonist's inner self. In other words, we may say there are two actions in the play: external and internal, which can be referred to as "dual action." In all probability, it is the dual action of the play that the playwright Shakespeare intended to embed in the introduction of the soliloquies. Admittedly unless we are attentive enough, the intended design of the dual action may not be recognized, which is highly likely to give rise to a common misinterpretation of what is expected of the protagonist's soliloquies. In truth, the internal action enables us to realize not just what is going on inside him at a particular moment, but also the change or growth he undergoes and the direction he opts for on a specific occasion, which we would find hard to recognize through the external action alone. Understandably, there is an indissoluble correlation between the external and internal actions in the sense that they complement each other to the core.

As it turns out, it is this internal action in the context of the soliloquies, alongside the external action of the play, that is so designed and contrived as to bring forth a dramatic impact, as well as to contribute a great deal to the indisputable appreciation and standing of the protagonist Hamlet and hence the play as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Laurie Lanzen Harris ed. *Shakespeare Criticism* vol.1, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984, 83.
- 2 Sidney Lamb ed. *Shakespeare's Hamlet*, Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, 2000, 26.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 4 *Hamlet* of The Arden Shakespeare. The above textual citations are all from this.
- 5 David Young, *The Action to the Word*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, 9.
- 6 *Loc. cit.*
- 7 Mary Z. Maher, *Modern Hamlets & Their Soliloquies*, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992, xv.
- 8 Sidney Lamb, *op. cit.* 129.
- 9 W. Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, London: Methuen, 1987, 125-6.