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## Burbage's Father's Ghost

James J. Marino  
Cleveland State University, [j.marino@csuohio.edu](mailto:j.marino@csuohio.edu)

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JAMES J. MARINO

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*Burbage's Father's Ghost*

Attempts to read *Hamlet* biographically may be using the wrong person's biography.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have been tempted for more than a century to draw connections between Prince Hamlet's grief for his father and William Shakespeare's private griefs, especially the deaths of his son Hamnet in 1596 and his father John in 1601. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, drawing upon earlier claims by Georg Brandes, makes these biographical events the cornerstone of his reading of *Hamlet*, and thus the foundation for subsequent Freudian criticism.<sup>2</sup> In the twenty-first century it remains routine, as the editors of the *Third Arden Hamlet* attest, to connect John and Hamnet Shakespeare's deaths to the play, no matter how elusive the connection: "It is difficult to dismiss the relevance of these experiences to the writing of *Hamlet*, a play which begins with the death of a father and ends with the death of a son, though it is equally difficult to define the precise nature of that relevance with any confidence."<sup>3</sup> To rephrase this tactful summation less diplomatically: Shakespeareans are confident that the deaths of Shakespeare's son and father have influenced *Hamlet*, but inconvenient facts make it impossible to say quite how. The notion that *Hamlet* reflects Shakespeare's biography is not so much a hypothesis as a conviction, a presumed truth rather than a proved one. That presumption of truth is now firm and widespread, "difficult to dismiss," as the *Arden 3* editors say, because so generally accepted.

1. I would like to thank Brooke Conti, Stephen Orgel, Peter Holland, and Paul Menzer for their generous help and advice during the writing of this essay.

2. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. and ed. James Strachey (New York: 1965), p. 299.

3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. (London: 2006), p. 36.

*“Difficult to Dismiss”*

The case for the relevance of Hamnet Shakespeare’s death is grounded on an appealing coincidence of names. The death of a boy named “Hamnet” must surely, the argument runs, have something to do with the death of a character named “Hamlet.” “In calling his most ambitious tragedy after his own dead son,” one biographer pronounces, “Shakespeare reveals how affected he was by the loss.”<sup>4</sup> But there is no documentary evidence that Shakespeare’s son was ever called “Hamlet,” or the Danish prince “Hamnet.” There is a single slip of the pen in Shakespeare’s will, in which the scribe renders the name of Shakespeare’s Stratford neighbor Hamnet Sadler correctly in one place but writes “Hamlett Sadler” in another.<sup>5</sup> This fortuitous error has proved irresistible to critics, leading to a widespread assertion that there was no difference at all between the names, and that there was therefore “a real-life boy named Hamlet.”<sup>6</sup> Writing on the eve of the twentieth century, Freud proclaims the name Hamnet “identical with ‘Hamlet,’ ” and scholars a century later continue to reaffirm that “the boy’s name was interchangeable with ‘Hamlet,’ ” and that “the names were virtually interchangeable.”<sup>7</sup> The editors of the *Third Arden Hamlet* do not merely argue as others have that Hamnet’s name “could have been pronounced” Hamlet but explicitly fault “nervous” scholars for having “regularly referred to Shakespeare’s son as Hamnet rather than Hamlet.”<sup>8</sup>

There are only two documented instances of the boy’s name, and neither call him “Hamlet.” He is “Hamnet” in Stratford’s parish register, at his birth and his death.<sup>9</sup> Nor does the similarity of names

4. René Weis, *Shakespeare Unbound: Decoding a Hidden Life* (New York: 2007), p. 440.

5. The will is widely reproduced and can be found in E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1930), II, 169–74, and in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: 2008), pp. 3311–14. An electronic image of the will may be viewed at [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item\\_id=21](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=21), courtesy of the National Archives of the United Kingdom.

6. Weis, p. 188.

7. Freud, p. 299; Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford, 1999), p. 90; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: 2004), p. 311.

8. Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (New York: 2005), p. 99; Thompson and Taylor, pp. 36–37. Thompson and Taylor index Shakespeare’s son as “Shakespeare, Hamlet/Hamnet,” and variously name him “Hamnet/Hamlet,” “Hamnet or Hamlet” and simply “Hamlet Shakespeare,” pp. 610, 31, 36–37, 41.

9. Chambers, *Facts and Problems*, II, 3–4.

lead to any causal relationship. Some version of *Hamlet* existed as early as 1589. The hero's name, like the plot, derives from a prior source. The character was not named for the child, nor is the child, born in 1585 and probably christened after Hamnet Sadler, named for the Danish prince.<sup>10</sup> And if William Shakespeare was driven to rewrite the play out of his private grief, that grief never becomes explicit. The play is absolutely unconcerned with paternal loss. *Hamlet* is a play in which no one ever mourns a child. It is consumed with grief for dead fathers, and its characters express nearly every species of familial grief except that for a son or daughter. Fathers are mourned incessantly, a sister mourned hysterically, a lover histrionically, a mother fleetingly, and a brother ambivalently, but even in sorrowful Elsinore no character has the misfortune of outliving a child. Hamlet does not die until he has ceased to be anybody's son.

Even critics who assert a strong connection between Hamnet's death and *Hamlet's* composition are seldom prepared to argue close chronological proximity between those events. And few biographers associate Shakespeare's personal loss with his work in the later 1590s, when he "devoted himself to comedy, to finishing up his history series and turning to Caesar's Rome" and "wrote some of his sunniest comedies."<sup>11</sup> Some argue for an emotional delay. "Nor is it implausible," one writes, "that it took years for the trauma of his son's death fully to erupt in Shakespeare's work."<sup>12</sup> The presumption of biographical influence is so overwhelming that mere lack of implausibility becomes the standard of evidence.

Some critics claim instead that Shakespeare sublimated his paternal grief into filial grief: "something," such arguments go, "must have made the playwright link the loss of his child to the imagined loss of his father."<sup>13</sup> A thematic connection with the death of John Shakespeare seems more legible but runs into the problem that John Shakespeare's death is later than the most widely accepted dates for *Hamlet*. The elder Shakespeare was buried in September, 1601, a mere nine months before the play was entered in the Stationer's Register. There seems little time for Shakespeare to have processed his grief through

10. Hamnet Sadler's wife Judith likely lent her name to Hamnet Shakespeare's twin sister Judith. Honan, p. 90.

11. Honan, p. 236.

12. Greenblatt, *Will*, p. 290.

13. Greenblatt, *Will*, p. 311.

art. Although I have argued elsewhere that *Hamlet* was revised in stages over time,<sup>14</sup> the play had to have been fairly close to its canonical state(s) by late 1601, and the elements which are most clearly “autobiographical,” meaning most concerned with the death of fathers, long preceded John Shakespeare’s demise. *Hamlet* featured a father’s ghost by 1596 at the latest.<sup>15</sup>

Some scholars ignore the difficulty and complexity of the dating questions, blandly asserting that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* after his father’s death or even “composed [it] during the obligatory period of mourning.”<sup>16</sup> Others, acknowledging the chronological difficulties, argue instead that Shakespeare’s grief for John Shakespeare was anticipatory.<sup>17</sup> A critic might concede that John Shakespeare “was almost certainly still alive when the tragedy was written and performed,” but immediately go on to ask, “How did the father’s death become bound up so closely in Shakespeare’s imagination with the son’s?”<sup>18</sup> The question cannot be answered. The search for signs of Shakespeare’s personal bereavement in *Hamlet* is a closed hermeneutic, leading only and always to its own initial principles. These claims are neither false nor true. They are merely expressions of belief.

### III

#### “The Poet’s Own Mind”

The rise of biographical criticism at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led, as James Shapiro has put it, to the emergence of “an autobiographical canon-within-a-canon . . . with half-a-dozen works attracting almost all of the attention.”<sup>19</sup> *Hamlet* has been at the center of the privileged “autobiographical” sub-canon since its formation, and critics have exhibited a deep-seated drive to identify William Shakespeare with its title character.

14. James J. Marino, *Owning William Shakespeare: The King’s Men and Their Intellectual Property* (Philadelphia: 2011), pp. 97–105.

15. Thomas Lodge, *Wits Misery* (1596), sig. H4v. For discussion of dating *Hamlet*, see E. A. J. Honigmann, “The Date of *Hamlet*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956), 24–34, Thompson and Taylor, pp. 43–53, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. (New York, 1982), pp. 1–13, and *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Edwards, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), pp. 1–8.

16. Ackroyd, p. 395. Ackroyd offers no evidence or citation for the period-of-mourning claim.

17. Thompson and Taylor, p. 38; Greenblatt, *Will*, p. 321.

18. Greenblatt, *Will*, p. 311.

19. James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (New York, 2010), p. 57.

While some biographers may associate Hamnet Shakespeare's death with Constance's mourning for her son in *King John* (3.4.23–105) or Northumberland's mourning for his in *Henry IV, Part 2* (1.1.6–160),<sup>20</sup> associations that are chronologically plausible although not assured, critics have been far more interested in major characters and major works. That Shakespeare may not have played leading roles seldom enters these discussions, and actual biographical chronology is less important than the critic's belief that a work is "deeply felt." Since the most personal work is held to be the most moving, the most moving is deemed the most personal; the poet's life is detected where his verse seems best. On this principle, one recent (and otherwise superb) biography of Shakespeare argues that Hamnet's death influences nearly *all* of the major works, on the grounds that the poet's "son's death changed him. He seems never to have recovered from the loss. . . . [H]is grief increased his inwardness while perhaps making him mock any worldly success he might achieve. It is useless to argue that he could not have written his most intellectually assured tragedies had his son *not* died; he was not writing such plays in 1596. But Hamnet's death, this bitter and terrible loss, deepened the artist and thinker: that loss would have helped him to avoid the last, lingering drawbacks of technical facility . . . and gather up his strength for the most emotionally complex and powerful dramas the English stage has known."<sup>21</sup>

Shakespeare here is cast very much in the same terms in which modern criticism casts Hamlet: interior, alienated from material values, and inconsolable. We have no way to know that Shakespeare mocked his "worldly success" in the secret privacy of his heart. (How could we, if such mockery was private and secret?) The inward grief is hypothesized precisely because no outward show of it has survived. Three months after Hamnet's death, William Shakespeare purchased his father a family coat of arms. The next spring, he bought himself the largest house in Stratford. Since these facts do not accord with our long-standing desire to identify the poet with Hamlet, critics hypothesize a secret emotional life.

Margreta de Grazia's *Hamlet without Hamlet* has cogently demonstrated how Romantic criticism created our modern sense of a *Hamlet*

20. Citations for Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, based on the Oxford Edition, 2d ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (New York, 2008). On *King John*: Weis, p. 206.

21. Honan, p. 236.

dominated by its title character, and of that character's "modernity," interiority, and psychological depth.<sup>22</sup> As de Grazia makes clear, the invention of psychological criticism reduced the play's other characters to satellites and then eclipsed them. Psychological criticism of *Hamlet* is psychological criticism of Hamlet; one character is credited with a rich interiority, and the rest with little or none. This approach has become so fundamental that after justly complaining that "Goethe . . . made of Hamlet a Werther," referring to Goethe's own *Bildungsroman* alter ego, and "Coleridge . . . made of Hamlet a Coleridge," T. S. Eliot goes on to denounce the play as an "artistic failure" because of its failure to express to Eliot's satisfaction the emotional life of the fictional character, a drama "full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light."<sup>23</sup> Eliot has inherited from the critics whom he denounces the belief in a Hamlet who is both separable from and superior to *Hamlet*, and he measures the play by its relative success in communicating one character's inner experience. Eliot's title, after all, is "Hamlet and *His Problems*." The goal of reading *Hamlet*, for many critics, has become inhabiting Hamlet's point of view.

Since fictional characters lack genuine interior reality, critics have drawn on ideas of Shakespeare's inner experiences to supply Hamlet's lack. Psychological criticism of *Hamlet* virtually demands biographical criticism. Eliot characteristically denounces "the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author" even as he reasserts it in modified form, arguing "that Hamlet's bafflement . . . is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator."<sup>24</sup> Freud, less coyly, assures his readers that "it can of course only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in Hamlet," by which Freud means not the play but the character.<sup>25</sup>

Such readings take the text of *Hamlet* to suggest "the poet's own inward disturbance" and view the play's formal innovation as a corollary of Shakespeare's emotional life: "Something deeper must have been at work in Shakespeare, then, something powerful enough to call forth the unprecedented representation of tormented inwardness."<sup>26</sup> Neither the author's inaccessible mind nor the character's fictional one

22. Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge, Eng., 2007), esp. pp. 7–22.

23. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, 1920), pp. 95–103, p. 95, p. 100.

24. Eliot, p. 101,

25. Freud, p. 299.

26. Greenblatt, *Will*, p. 311.

can be explored directly, but the very impossibility of the project is its chief attraction. Imagining *Hamlet* through its hero's and author's inner lives is a necessary prelude to reading it through the critic's inner life, offered as a proxy for the author's. The desire to speak with the dead<sup>27</sup> yields to the urge to speak for them. This is not an unhappy side effect of psychological criticism, but one of its original goals.

Coleridge does make a Coleridge of Hamlet, and of Shakespeare, just as Eliot objects. But Eliot has made Eliots of Hamlet and of Shakespeare: one overcome by sexual revulsion, the other struggling to create a radically new poetry despite the obstacles presented by older works. Freud collapses Hamlet's mourning for the Ghost with Shakespeare's mourning for John Shakespeare with Freud's mourning for Jakob Freud, whose death prompted Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex. Coleridge, who introduced the word *psychological* to literary studies in order to discuss *Hamlet*, famously pronounced that "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so."<sup>28</sup> Biographical criticism has always been autobiography in disguise.

This seamless identification of the protagonist with the author with the reader enables a hermeneutics of introspection, which offers self-knowledge as the key to all literary ciphers. In order to understand Hamlet, Coleridge insists, "it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds."<sup>29</sup> Here is the dream of literature not as a universal library but as a universal memoir, a shared book in which the reader finds his or her own self. But in the process the historical figure of William Shakespeare drops away, his individual personality and peculiarity evacuated to make room for a "Shakespeare" who embodies a presumed set of profound universal truths. This "Shakespeare" is a figure for some uniform psychological essence imagined to reside within all of us and to be accessible through proper self-contemplation. Any specific truths about the Warwickshire actor, landowner, and poet that are not manifestations of such numinous elemental truth are irrelevant; if "Shakespeare" is universal, we are all "Shakespeare" and William Shakespeare no more so than anyone else.

27. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 1.

28. de Grazia, p. 15; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (New York, 1835) I, 67.

29. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Notes on *Hamlet*," in *Critical Responses to Hamlet: 1600–1900*, ed. David Farley-Hills, (New York, 1995–2004), II, 61.



If *Hamlet* is universal, then we are all Hamlet. *Hamlet* loses its specificity, its resonant strangeness, in order to become a central chapter in the universal memoir.

IV

“*The Late Innovation*”

But for *Hamlet*'s first audiences Hamlet was not a universal but a specific figure, and he was not William Shakespeare. The more obvious person to imagine as Hamlet was Richard Burbage, who played the role and was still remembered as playing “young Hamlett” when he died in 1619.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Burbage had lost his father a few years before the surviving texts of *Hamlet* were created. The actor and theatrical landlord James Burbage was buried on February 2, 1597.<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare may or may not have used Hamlet to speak his own private thoughts, as Freud would have it, but it was Richard Burbage who spoke Hamlet.

John Shakespeare's death was a private matter in a way that James Burbage's could not be. Shakespeare's father died in rural Warwickshire, far from London and quite likely unknown to London's playgoers. (If reading the play through Burbage's biography is a local reading, reading it through Shakespeare's is both local and provincial.) The event would not necessarily have been remarked by anyone except Shakespeare's colleagues and personal friends. James Burbage, on the other hand, had been a public figure for at least a quarter-century before his death, intimately connected to the London stage. His death could not have been kept secret from the whole audience of *Hamlet*. Staging *Hamlet* at the Globe inevitably evoked James Burbage's theatrical career. And however privately or openly Richard Burbage chose to mourn, he inevitably performed in front of spectators who knew of his bereavement.

James Burbage had been a prominent actor himself during the 1570s, a member of Leicester's Men when they were the most highly favored playing company at Court.<sup>32</sup> The surviving company documents typically name James Burbage first in the list of sharers, suggesting that he was one of the company's leaders; the company's 1574 patent was

30. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, (Oxford: 1923), II, 309; Wickham *et al.* pp. 181–83.

31. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II, 306.

32. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 187–88.

issued to “Iacobo Burbage et aliis,” James Burbage and others.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, perhaps, the elder Burbage had built the Theater playhouse in 1576, dying shortly before his lease on the ground where it stood expired. It was at the Theater that the Lord Chamberlain’s Men performed for the first years of the company’s life.

James Burbage was no absentee landlord. His house was near the playhouse, and he seems to have been on the premises for performances. A rich archive of litigation and counter-litigation surrounding the ownership, lease, and profits of the Theater provides several instances of people who wanted to find James Burbage—whether to argue with, plead with, or arrest him—seeking him at the Theater. One witness testifies that some of Burbage’s counter-parties “came at several times to the said Theatre, and namely upon one of the play days, and entreated James Burbage.”<sup>34</sup> “Play days” were evidently when one could be sure of finding him, although he preferred not to be found; the implication is that James Burbage was habitually at his playhouse during performances. There was important business to supervise on performance days, including the collection and division of customers’ money. When there was no play at the Theater, Burbage could apparently be located at other performance venues, including the city inns. In July of 1579, a litigant sent a sergeant to arrest James Burbage “as he came down Gracious Street towards the Cross Keys there to a play.”<sup>35</sup> That Burbage could be intercepted in this manner suggests that his playhouse visit was predictable to a third party with knowledge of his business interests. Perhaps James Burbage was still acting in 1579. Perhaps he made a habit of attending plays by companies he was associated with. But it is clear that people whom James Burbage was trying to avoid could expect to find him at a play.

The Theater was also frequented on performance days by a core audience of regular playgoers. The playhouse audience was never monolithic; as S. P. Cerasano notes, the early playhouses “relied on many different markets” for their audience, drawing upon a mix of visitors and residents, courtiers, tradesmen, and students from the Inns of Court,<sup>36</sup> and the varied groups who composed that audience should

33. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, vol. II, p. 305; Wickham *et al.*, pp. 205–06.

34. Wickham *et al.*, p. 360.

35. Wickham *et al.*, p. 298.

36. S. P. Cerasano, “Theater Entrepreneurs and Economics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford, 2009), pp. 380–95, p. 389.

not be presumed to share the same relationship with the actors or a unified degree of knowledge about them. But the economics of early modern playhouses depended upon returning customers, including customers who came to more than one performance a week.<sup>37</sup> Those spectators would be fairly well informed about the playhouse and its daily workers, especially since many auditors arrived at the playhouse early and spent their time walking, gossiping, and reading inside the playhouse while waiting for the performance to start.<sup>38</sup> Playgoers who visited the Theater several times a year and often spent an hour or so in the building before the play could not all have been unable to identify the Theater's owner or to understand his relationship with the lead player. Nor would they have all forgotten him when the younger Burbage played Hamlet at the Globe.

Courtiers in the audience were also likely to recall James Burbage, at least by reputation, because of his long-standing connections with powerful court figures. He had frequently performed at Court as one of Leicester's Men, and after building the Theater he moved from Leicester's patronage to that of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon. In 1584, ordered by a City official to sign a bond consenting to the demolition of the Theater, Burbage refused on the grounds that he was Lord Hunsdon's man and not to be bound.<sup>39</sup> The Burbage-Carey relationship continued into the next generation of each family. James Burbage's son became the leading player in Lord Chamberlain Carey's playing company, and when Henry Carey died, Richard and his company passed to the patronage of Henry's son George.

James Burbage was known at Court, but also well-known among elite Londoners because of his turbulent business ventures. Nearing the end of the Theater's ground lease and at odds with his landlord over renewal, Burbage purchased a location in the fashionable Blackfriars neighborhood and converted it into an indoor playhouse. But in November 1596, prominent residents of the Blackfriars (including George Carey, Lord Hunsdon) successfully petitioned the Privy Council to forbid Burbage from using his new house for plays.<sup>40</sup> The

37. Cerasano, p. 388.

38. Tiffany Stern, "Watching as Reading: The Audience and Written Text in Shakespeare's Playhouse," in *How to Do Things with Shakespeare: New Approaches, New Essays*, ed. Laurie Maguire (Malden, Mass, 2008), pp. 136-59, p. 138.

39. Wickham *et al.*, pp. 345-46.

40. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II, 508, IV, 319-20; Wickham *et al.*, pp. 507-08.

petition names Burbage specifically; his powerful neighbors knew who had made them angry. James Burbage died a few months after those neighbors blocked the venture in which he had just invested most or all of his capital, leaving Richard's playing company with no playhouse to call home. James's elder son Cuthbert inherited the Theater and its rich history of litigation only seven weeks before its lease expired.<sup>41</sup> Richard Burbage's inheritance from his father was the expensive, unusable Blackfriars playhouse.

The death of Richard Burbage's father was not simply personal, and the blow did not fall on Richard Burbage alone. James Burbage's death epitomized a series of reversals in the playing company's fortunes. The company's troubles had begun with another death; when Henry Carey died in July, 1596, his son George had succeeded to some of his offices but not immediately to the Chamberlainship or the Privy Council. Henry Carey's successor as Chamberlain was William Brooke, Lord Cobham, who was not perhaps as hostile to the players as he has often been imagined but was surely not their advocate.<sup>42</sup> The company had lost the prestige and practical rewards of being a Privy Councilor's servants, to say nothing of their old patron's direct power over the London theater. A contemporary letter from Thomas Nashe to one of George Carey's clients remarks that "the players . . . are piteously persecuted by the Lord Mayor and the aldermen, and however in their old lord's time they thought their state settled, it is now so uncertain they cannot build upon it."<sup>43</sup>

The company's straits should not be exaggerated; they performed at Court six times during the Christmas season when Brooke was Chamberlain, and the rival Admiral's Men are mysteriously absent from that year's court records. But being unable to "build" is the heart of the problem; although Brooke died shortly after James Burbage did, and George Carey was made Lord Chamberlain on April of 1597, the nine months between Henry Carey's death and his son's appointment as Chamberlain deprived the Burbages of court influence just at the

41. The Theater's twenty-one-year ground lease expired on March 25, 1597. See Wickham *et al.*, pp. 367–87.

42. See "William Brooke, Lord Cobham," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., and Paul Whitfield White, "Shakespeare, the Cobhams, and the Dynamics of Theatrical Patronage," in *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R. Westfall (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), pp. 64–89.

43. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, edited by R. B. McKerrow, 5 vols. (New York, 1966), V, 194.

moment they most needed it to move the Blackfriars project forward. James Burbage had spent £600 to buy the property outright while the elder Lord Hunsdon was alive, clearly with his patron's full knowledge.<sup>44</sup> A letter from Henry Carey to the seller a month before the deed was drawn up asks to buy or else rent another part of the old Dominican chapter house for Carey himself, "vnderstanding that yo<sup>w</sup> have allredie parted w<sup>th</sup> part of yo<sup>r</sup> howse to somme that meanes to make a playhouse in yt."<sup>45</sup> Had Henry Carey opposed Burbage's scheme or been disinclined to support it, James Burbage would have had time to back out of the deal. But by the time opposition to the project emerged, Henry Carey was dead; the petition against the playhouse mentions "the Lord Chamberlain and the Lord of Hunsdon" as two distinct individuals. The new Lord Hunsdon himself signed the petition, lacking either the power or the will to protect James Burbage's investment (which by this time included another £400 for renovations). By the time George Carey became Lord Chamberlain, James Burbage had died, the lease on the Theater had expired, and the Lord Chamberlain's Servants had no funds on hand for yet another playhouse.

The players resorted to renting the nearby Curtain, and in December 1598 the Burbage brothers dismantled the Theater (which was allowed under the terms of their father's original lease, but not after the expiration of that lease), so that the timbers could be used to build the Globe. The new building and new ground lease required Cuthbert and Richard Burbage to include several of the company's other leading players as investors, so that the brothers owned only half of the Globe themselves. Even so, the Burbages apparently had to borrow money at interest which Cuthbert later claimed "lay heavy on us many years,"<sup>46</sup> and to make economies in building; the Globe's now-iconic thatched roof visibly confessed its builders' lack of money.

The opening of the Globe suggests a company that had overcome, or was on its way to overcoming, its recent struggles. The young company had remained together despite the loss of its patron, its playhouse, and its chief financial backer. Out of the players' response

44. Burbage purchased the requisite parts of the old Dominican friary from Sir William More on February 4, 1596; the deed is reproduced in Wickham, *et al.*, pp. 504–07.

45. Charles William Wallace, *The Evolution of the English Drama Up To Shakespeare, With a History of the First Blackfriars Theater* (Berlin, 1912), p. 195 n. 7.

46. Wickham *et al.*, p. 497.

to those setbacks emerged the version of the playing company that has become familiar to us, no longer a Burbage family business but a surprisingly durable collective partnership with its world-famous playhouse and playwright. James Burbage's death was a landmark in the company's collective career, the clearest sign that its early days were over. For the players' regular customers, James Burbage's death and muddled legacy were associated with a highly visible series of changes in playing arrangements, as the Chamberlain's Men lost their original London base and changed playhouses twice within two years.

*Hamlet* as we know it is bound up with that migration from one playhouse to another, a play specifically associated with both the Theater and the Globe. One of the earliest references to *Hamlet* locates the play, and Hamlet's father's ghost, at James Burbage's Theater. In *Wit's Misery* (1596) Thomas Lodge jeers at "y<sup>e</sup> ghost which cried so miserally at y<sup>e</sup> Theator like an oister wife, *Hamlet, revenge*."<sup>47</sup> The "Hamlet, revenge!" catchphrase is quoted elsewhere, but no longer appears in the surviving texts of the play. The canonical version dates from after the building of the Globe, as it persistently reminds its audience with topical allusions to the players and their business affairs. *Hamlet* not only emphasizes that its characters are actors, but emphasizes *which* actors they are. Most of all, *Hamlet* wants its readers and viewers to identify Hamlet with Richard Burbage.

By the time *Hamlet* was published, Burbage was even more famous than his father had been in his heyday. He appears in John Davies' *Microcosmos* (which helpfully provides Burbage's initials in its margin), in a jokey anecdote recorded by John Manningham, and as a character in the Cambridge student play *Return to Parnassus, Part Two*.<sup>48</sup> Each of these socially-elite witnesses not only knew who Burbage was, but took for granted that other privileged Englishmen knew as well. Spectators at the Globe were likewise expected to recognize him; he would soon appear as himself, along with some of his colleagues, in the Induction to Marston's *The Malcontent*.<sup>49</sup> In *Hamlet*, as elsewhere, the company playfully acknowledges that the audience knows the actors. Many readers have taken Hamlet and Polonius's in-joke about Polonius acting Julius Caesar and being "killed i' th' Capitol"

47. Lodge, sig. H4v.

48. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, II, 213–14, 212, 201; Wickham *et al.*, p. 173.

49. John Marston, *The Malcontent*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington *et al.* (New York, 2002), pp. 550–613, Ind. 11–84.

(3.2.93)—where Shakespeare’s Caesar was killed but the historical Caesar was not—as a wink at Burbage’s recent performances as Brutus. When Hamlet boasts that his acting could “get me a fellowship in a cry of players,” and Horatio responds “Half a share” (3.2.255–56), the joke is that Burbage was no mere half-sharer. The star’s stubborn insistence that he would earn “A whole one, I,” (3.2.257) only furthers the joke.

But *Hamlet*’s most specific reference to Burbage’s affairs comes in the 1623 Folio text, when Rosencrantz describes an “ayrie of Children, little [e]Yases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for it.”<sup>50</sup> Even critics averse to topical readings of *Hamlet* acknowledge this as an explicit reference to the return of boy players to the London playhouses, with the Paul’s Boys returning sometime in 1599 and the Children of the Chapel beginning to play in 1600. But the theatrical in-joke is more specific than that. The Children of the Chapel were performing in the Blackfriars playhouse that James Burbage had built, and Richard Burbage was their landlord. The boys’ company had not met the resistance from powerful Blackfriars neighbors that James Burbage had, and in September of 1600 their manager began leasing the playhouse from Richard Burbage for £40 a year.<sup>51</sup> Every document pertaining to the lease identifies Richard himself as the sole legal owner of the Blackfriars playhouse; the building where he was forbidden to perform was his legacy from his father.

Hamlet responds to Rosencrantz’s news of the “late innovation” with a series of baffled follow-up questions: “What are they Children? Who maintains 'em?” (TLN 1392; 2.2.331) The character’s puzzled curiosity becomes a joke when spoken by the actor who rented the eyases their performance space. Burbage stood on the stage of the Globe pretending never to have heard of his own tenants, and feigning shock that such tenants could exist. Then Burbage, a second-generation London actor who had been raised in his father’s business—someone who had perhaps literally grown up in The Theater—wonders aloud what will happen if the children “should

50. TLN 1385–86; 2.2.326–27. Quotations from the Folio text are cited from *The Norton Facsimile, the First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Charlton Hinman, intro. Peter W. M. Blayney (New York, 1996), using Through-line Numbers (TLN) and the corresponding act, scene, and line numbers from the *Norton Shakespeare*.

51. Wickham *et al.*, pp. 508–09; Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II, 505.

grow themselves to Common players” (TLN 1395; 2.2.333–35) and worries about them “exclaim[ing] against their own Succession.” (TLN 1397–1398; 2.2.336) These jokes only function as jokes, indeed only function organically in the scene at all, if large portions of the crowd know enough about Burbage’s personal business and history to grasp the irony. The fictional illusion of Elsinore is ruptured, emphasizing the difference between the puzzled character and the ironic actor. But even that moment of rupture between actor and character underscores their identity, pointing out the actor behind the mask in order to insist upon the actor’s face as the real one.

*Hamlet*’s insistence that Hamlet is Richard Burbage fits well with Margreta de Grazia’s reading of the play as preoccupied with displaced inheritances and interrupted succession.<sup>52</sup> If Hamlet is a prince deprived of his rightful domain, Burbage is a star deprived of his, literally displaced from his proper legacy. The Folio text draws the parallel explicitly, with Hamlet comparing the vogue for the boy players (rather than the adult “tragedians of the city”) with the vogue for expensive miniatures of his uncle among those who “would make mowes at him while my Father lived” (TLN 1409–1412; 2.2.348). Favoring the boy players over the men is akin to favoring the King over Hamlet. The very fact that Burbage played Hamlet at the Globe underscores the fact that Burbage’s old place, the place built by his father, had been lost and destroyed. Richard Burbage’s failure to inherit successfully, to keep what had been his famous father’s, is the basic condition of his emergence at the Globe.

V

*“The Motive and the Cue for Passion”*

But Richard Burbage’s performance of Hamlet at the Globe was by no means the first. The play had been famous, in one version or another, since at least 1589.<sup>53</sup> Burbage was acting a part that conspicuously recalled his own personal history, but that part had already been made famous by an actor who had not been burdened by any obvious biographical connection to the role. That earlier actor may well have been Richard Burbage himself. If he was, as the standard theatrical

52. de Grazia, pp. 81–128.

53. Nashe, III, 315.



histories presume, the company's leading man from its outset, then he would have played Hamlet on June 9, 1594.<sup>54</sup> And it would surely be strange if he were not playing the lead at his father's Theater. Burbage had perhaps been acting Hamlet's grief while his own father was alive and in the building, but then lost his father in earnest. After 1597, acting Hamlet meant acting a part that many in the audience had already seen played as a thorough fiction but now understood as coincident with the actor's private life. If Richard Burbage himself had given the earlier and more straightforwardly fictive performances, the challenge of revisiting the role was still greater. We cannot establish exactly what changed in the text of *Hamlet* or in the performance of Hamlet between the Theater productions and the productions at the Globe, but there are passages which become richly suggestive when read with the knowledge of Burbage's loss, and ultimately it was the audience's knowledge of Burbage's personal history that created a special theatrical charge in *Hamlet*.

The circumstances under which Burbage performed Hamlet were not universal but individual and idiosyncratic. Playing Hamlet was not about expressing a fundamental common humanity but about coping with the star's own peculiar circumstances. Burbage's position was unique in almost every respect, entirely unprecedented and likely never replicated. No other actor was the son of London's first great playhouse-builder.<sup>55</sup> No other actor had lost a parent who had been such an important figure in London's theater world, because as yet no other actor had had such a parent. No other actor had been driven from a famous London playhouse that his father had built. And few actors, before or since, have had to recreate a famous role that the audience had latterly come to see as pointedly autobiographical.

What Richard Burbage thought or felt about his circumstances is lost to us, no more recoverable than the thoughts or feelings of William Shakespeare. To search our own feelings as a guide is misleading, because we cannot know how a specific individual responded to his family losses, and misguided, because to ascribe our own responses to that individual is to deny his individuality. To presume that Richard Burbage felt what "anyone" would feel under the circumstances inscribes "anyone's" feelings over the actual emotions,

54. *Henslowe's Diary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. R. A. Foakes (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 21–22.

55. James Burbage was not the first to build a playhouse in London, but was the first builder to exert a major influence on the overall shape of playing in London.

however surprising or banal, that the man himself experienced. But Burbage's griefs for his father were not private. His loss was public knowledge, a publicly understood fact that colored the public's understanding of his performances; that knowledge circulated as what Stephen Greenblatt calls "social energy."<sup>56</sup> What that public presumed or expected Burbage to feel is far easier to reconstruct than the interior experience of being Burbage. Common sentiments tell us nothing about how one person mourned, but a great deal about group expectations. We should not make projections or presumptions about Burbage's feelings, but we should remember that the crowd would almost inevitably project and presume. A playhouse audience coming to see *Hamlet* in the knowledge that "Hamlet's" real father had died would contain large numbers of people who expected that Hamlet's performance would now be somehow different: more authentic, more emotional, or more persuasive, but surely not the same. And the audience had to be faced very literally, because the early modern playhouse afforded "no dimming of the lights, . . . no sense of the disappearance of the crowd."<sup>57</sup> To serve up those spectators the reliable old performance that had been given at the Theater, to show that James Burbage's death made no difference in acting Hamlet, would threaten to expose both past and current performances as artifice. A performance of *Hamlet* needed to acknowledge, however implicitly, what the audience knew (or believed it knew) about the lead player, and several passages in the surviving texts become peculiarly resonant when approached from this perspective.

Having persuaded the First Player to describe the death of Hecuba, Hamlet professes horror at the actor's ability to feign grief "but in a fiction, in a dream of passion," as Burbage (or any predecessor) had himself done as Hamlet before 1597, and to "force his soul to his own conceit" in order to mimic the outer physical expressions of grief (2.2.529–30). Then Burbage's Hamlet wonders what the First Player would do "Had he the motive and [cue] for passion / That I have?" (2.2.538–39). Hamlet's question implies a division between the First Player's histrionic talents and Hamlet's emotional experience; but part of the audience knew, or thought that it knew, that Burbage united both. For the star to yearn aloud for a supporting actor's gifts is a sly

56. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 6.

57. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 5.

joke; presumably Burbage had all of his colleague's theatrical power and more. But Burbage was also presumed to have a genuine experience of filial grief, exactly "the motive and the cue for passion" of which his character complains. The reality of Burbage's emotional experience is unrecoverable and irrelevant; what matters is not what Burbage genuinely felt, but what the audience credited him with feeling. And Hamlet condemns as "monstrous" the First Player's ability to simulate grief through technical facility, to play his part as Hamlet's had originally been played (2.2.528).

Burbage's Hamlet then fantasizes about what a performance of Hamlet by someone like Richard Burbage—someone with both the First Player's histrionic techniques and Burbage's experience of personal loss—would be like. That fantasy begins by imagining a performance exactly like the First Player's but on a grander scale, different not in kind but in intensity: "He would drown the stage with tears / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, / Make mad the guilty and appal the free" (2.2.539–41). Here Hamlet imagines a performance that would externalize all of the performer's emotions, leaving nothing unexpressed and translating the actor's inner life seamlessly into the terms of traditional dramaturgy. Deeper feelings mean louder acting. The more authentic the emotion, the more histrionic its expression. But even in Hamlet's apparently naive fantasy about how acting works, the theatricality required to communicate his "real" feelings becomes grossly excessive: not merely grandiose but inhuman, impossible for auditors to bear. Such declamatory authenticity would make theater impossible.

But Burbage's Hamlet has no serious intention of out-Heroding the First Player. However Hamlet's part changed after James Burbage's death, the part as it exists is too complicated and too nuanced to represent an amplified or exaggerated version of a role from the 1580s. Simply playing the part bigger would not do. After berating himself for under-acting compared to the First Player, Hamlet berates himself for over-acting as well:

this is most brave  
That I, the son of a dear father murdered  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my thoughts with words  
And fall a-cursing like a very drab (2.2.560–64)

Hamlet calls himself “a rogue and peasant slave” for expressing himself too little and “an ass” for expressing himself too much (2.2.527, 560). Conventional histrionics are inadequate to represent his inner life, but even these inadequate histrionics are far too much.

For Burbage at the Globe this soliloquy is a moment of sly *recusatio*, a rejection of old-fashioned, artificial acting that nonetheless establishes Burbage’s mastery of the approach he’s renouncing.<sup>58</sup> Between Hamlet’s complaints about the First Player’s theatrics and his own, he gives a perfect demonstration of the old conventional full-throated passion:

But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should ‘a’ fatted all the region kites  
With this slave’s offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
O, vengeance! (2.2.554–59)

But while the soliloquy displays Burbage’s old-school acting credentials, it also strips that school of credibility. Instead, Hamlet’s alleged *inability* to perform, the problem that he “can say nothing” becomes the sign of genuine feeling, the guarantor of theatrical truth. An actor, a ham actor, might offer more of the same old theatrical gestures, the soliloquy says, but this, the refusal to emote, is what real emotion looks like. Burbage had a unique authority to define theatrical realism because his spectators ascribed him emotional authenticity, because he could claim that the actions he played were not pretense.

Hamlet’s next interaction with the players after the “rogue and peasant slave” speech is to instruct them in the new approach to theatrical “realism” that his soliloquy has implied, cautioning them not to “tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings” (3.2.8–10) as in his earlier fantasy of “cleav[ing] the general ear.” That which is “overdone,” Burbage’s Hamlet declares, “is from the purpose of playing” (3.2.18–19), and the authority to decide playing’s purpose and prescribe its means comes not from Hamlet but from Burbage. His Hamlet can dispense advice because he is at once palpably an actor and presumably “real,” perceived as a

58. Peter Holland, “Hamlet and the Art of Acting,” in *Drama and the Actor*, Themes in Drama 6, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 39–61, p. 55.

singularly authentic figure among a cast of performers but also as that cast's most notably gifted performer. In retrospect, Hamlet's advice seems self-evidently sensible; of course the effort to out-Herod the Herods with increasing extravagance leads to diminishing returns, while the contrast of carefully deployed restraint becomes devastatingly effective. But the original force of that prescription comes less from its inherent logic than from Burbage's peculiar authority in that role and at that moment in his career. Hamlet's advice is a solution to the acting problem Burbage faced by playing Hamlet after leaving the Theater, the problem of how to meet higher expectations for future performances without verging into excess. And Hamlet's advice is most importantly a prescription to Burbage's audience, dictating an aesthetic standard that favored Burbage as an actor. Those who expected Burbage's grief to make his Hamlet louder or more frantic, to overdo what had already likely been well done, were told that such an expectation was uncouth. Burbage's Hamlet dictates the theatrical taste by which Burbage and Hamlet are to be judged.

To be sure, the shift to restraint and nuance was relative and strategically deployed: another effect among many. *Hamlet*, and Hamlet, are often far from what later centuries would consider theatrical minimalism or restraint, and indeed early performances seem to have been far more frenetic and physically active than twenty-first-century readings of the play would lead us to expect.<sup>59</sup> Hamlet is not completely inarticulate. But the play repeatedly proposes that the character is *incompletely articulate*, that his emotional experience can never be fully translated into the previously established terms of theatrical representation. The hallmark of truth, *Hamlet* and its leading man suggest, is "that within which passes show," the emotional residue that cannot be reduced to "actions that a man might play" (1.2.84–85). Hamlet asks us to believe that a successful performance always leaves something unspoken, that "the rest is silence" (5.2.300). The actor playing Hamlet needed his spectators to believe that. If successful acting demands perfectly transparent expression of emotion into theatrics, then the loss of Burbage's real-life father should have been straightforwardly manifest in his performance, so that every spectator could measure Burbage's grief and his skill. If the connection between life and art was imagined as direct, Burbage stood to be

59. de Grazia, pp. 8–9.

judged as an actor and as a son. But if genuine feeling is always partly expressed and partly held back, if some of what is real is always left uncommunicated, then the Globe's spectators could not fault Burbage for failing to express some prescribed measure of his private griefs. *Hamlet* proposes a murkier relationship between the inward and outward man, and condemns the expectation of full emotional revelation as Philistine. That Burbage left some private emotion in reserve was to be expected and was a laudable sign of his artistry.

But if Hamlet's command that actors hold a mirror up to nature is enabled by Richard Burbage's unavoidably public mourning for his father, *Hamlet* thereby repudiates the theatrical norms of James Burbage's generation. *Hamlet*, which cannot avoid metatheatricity with Richard Burbage playing its lead, consistently defines itself through contrast with the outmoded dramaturgy of earlier generations and with the outmoded dramaturgy of contemporaries. The First Player's heavy-handed Marlovian speech, the antiquated play within a play, and Hamlet's advice to the players all strive to distinguish *Hamlet* from less up-to-date entertainments and to stigmatize its dramatic rivals as unsophisticated. The stigma inevitably included the theater of James Burbage himself, who had enjoyed his acting heyday a quarter-century earlier. Richard Burbage, the actor's son, stood in the new playhouse built from the timbers of his father's Theater, pledging his loyalty to a dead father "while memory holds a seat / In this distracted Globe" (1.5.96-97), and burying his father's acting style in its grave.

*Hamlet*'s formal daring, its emphasis on the lead character's interior life and on a restrained and comparatively "realistic" approach to theatrical representation, is ultimately derived from exteriority and publicity. Hamlet's interiority does not come from within. It comes from the public's insistent, expectant gaze upon an actor whose personal life had become public knowledge: "th'observed of all observers" (3.1.153) who was in the strange situation of continuing to feign emotional experiences which spectators now believed him to be drawing upon in earnest. Hamlet's brooding introspection is not William Shakespeare's inner life emerging irrepressibly on the stage of the Globe playhouse. Instead, it is an artfully strategic device to obscure the relationship between Richard Burbage's life and his art, to deflect or refract the crowd's gaze so that he could perform. The play proposes its hero's interiority as a defense against its star's celebrity.

The play uses the trope of Hamlet's irretrievable inner life to make it impossible to trace a direct relationship between Burbage's inner life and art, even when the crowd was most tempted to do so. The play does not and dares not deny that the actor brings something of his own life to his art, but it denies that what the actor brings can ever be perfectly legible. This tactful assertion of ambiguity and obscurity freed Richard Burbage's Hamlet from the expectation of unmediated autobiography, freeing him to be received again as his character rather than as his famous self. Preventing a strictly biographical reading of Hamlet was a necessary precondition for *Hamlet* to function as a work of dramatic art, to remain a play even as it strategically concedes a partial identity between Burbage and Hamlet. For at least two hundred years, readers have used Hamlet's artful simulation of introspection to impose the very biographical readings that those introspective passages were designed to resist. That they are using the wrong man's story is only half the problem; the play denies, in plain words, that the tale we hope to hear can ever honestly be told.

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