

AUTUMN 2006 WINNER

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Instructor's Foreword

As teaching fellows in IHUM, we divulge one cardinal rule to our students early in the Fall quarter: never begin an IHUM essay with those peerless words, “In the history of the world....” Our explanations are many and convoluted: “it is just not possible to compress the history of the world into five pages *and* attend to close reading; the history of the world is still being written and was, in point of fact, only implied in lecture; might not the history of the world be reoriented as the history of the word? Discuss.” While our students marvel at demands which seem the rhetorical equivalent of dancing on the head of a pin, we pride ourselves in having dispensed with the obvious and quickly turn tail, back to the intricacies of the text itself. But, if we are honest with ourselves, it is this very movement between grand ambition and fine detail, between close reading and profound commentary that animates our own pursuit of scholarly significance.

Allysia Finley's remarkable essay, “Hamlet's Place in the Cosmos,” is an exemplary combination of these two impulses, merging the historical and the literary, the bold vision and the intricate detail. She argues that patterns of celestial imagery in Shakespeare's most famous play, including eclipses, lunar cycles, and solar allusions, chart the chaotic effect of the Copernican revolution on the English Renaissance consciousness. Neither reductionist nor heavy-handed, her essay debates Hamlet's exploitation of celestial imagery to assert his primacy in the new heliocentric world order—an order that threatens the political hegemony of his rivals, Claudius and Polonius. Allysia carefully shows that Hamlet is playing with fire: his own appropriations of the language of cosmological revolution are often febrile and unstable, his aspirations to right family wrongs threatened by larger political operatives who have a high stake in the old orders, cosmological and otherwise. Reading Allysia's essay is an exercise in the delight of resonance. She uncannily taps into Shakespeare's larger poetic project which connects the drama of the stage to the drama of his times, an age both removed from and near to our own. In Allysia's brilliant concluding analysis of Hamlet's capitulation to a political universe not yet ready for new truths, she quotes Hamlet's deathbed lines: “Let it be. Horatio—I am dead.” As the lyrics of the Beatles' song revolved in my head, I knew that, although we may no longer question the truth of Copernicus's discoveries, our IHUM courses still allow students to delve into the regenerative wisdom, and whimsy, of great art. Allysia's essay is high testament to the innovative thinking that comes from that endeavor.

Alice Staveley

Hamlet's Place in the Cosmos

Allysia Finley

In his play *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, Shakespeare subtly explores the evolving notions of cosmic order during the sixteenth century. One of the most significant and controversial ideas to arise during that time was Copernicus' heliocentric model. It disputed the ancient Greek astronomer Ptolemy's geocentric model of the earth fixed at the center of the universe with the stars, planets, and moon orbiting in distinct outside spheres. These celestial objects by nature never intersected or traveled outside of their spheres. While most people in Shakespeare's day still agreed with Ptolemy's geocentric model, many scholars considered Copernicus' theory very plausible. Confusion over the cosmic order ensued. In the play, Hamlet represents the new world view that challenges the established social, political, and cosmic hierarchies. By associating Hamlet's mad and menacing behavior with the moon's "lunatic" influence, Polonius and Claudius reveal just how absurd and dangerous they consider these ideas. Hamlet, however, rejects their conceptions of him and the universe. Instead, he compares himself to the steadfast sun fixed at the center of the new, heliocentric system. Although Hamlet maintains that he is the stable sun, Shakespeare's celestial imagery describing Hamlet's erratic behavior suggests otherwise. While some may argue that the play is flawed because of the inconsistent parallels between Hamlet's character and the cosmic order, this inconsistency serves a purpose. By not presenting one clear and definite interpretation of Hamlet, Shakespeare intends that the audience experience for themselves the bewilderment of living in an uncertain cosmos.

Just as Claudius and Polonius are suspicious of Hamlet's character, they appear apprehensive about the subversive, new ideas; their repeated references to Hamlet as the moon reflect their fear that the new order will destabilize the old order. By associating Hamlet, a representation of the new order, with the moon of the old order, they suggest that amalgamating the two incompatible orders necessarily results in disorder, or "lunacy." Already in the opening act of the play, Polonius affirms that Hamlet is a menace who cannot be trusted. Polonius warns Ophelia that "for nature, crescent, does not grow alone/ in thews and bulk, but as this temple waxes/ the inward service of the mind and soul/ grows wide withal" (I.iii.14–17). On a literal level, Polonius explains that when the moon's crescent waxes, its volume also grows. Similarly, he suggests that as Hamlet's power increases so does his egoism, or his "inward service of the mind." Another implication of this allusion is that just as the moon's shape constantly changes, so does Hamlet's disposition. Even though the lunar cycle is predictable, the old order considered it arbitrary because they did not understand its cause. Likewise, Polonius considers Hamlet's behavior illogical and therefore dangerous because he cannot discern his motives. Polonius clearly does not understand what triggers Hamlet to, metaphorically, wax or wane. Apprehensive of Hamlet's unpredictable character, Polonius advises Ophelia to protect her chastity because "the chariest maid is prodigal enough/ if she unmask her beauty to the moon" (I.iii.40–41). Polonius suggests that scrupulous women debase themselves when they succumb to the charms of the "moon." By explicitly referring to Hamlet as the moon, Polonius

makes clear what was merely implicit in the aforementioned allusion: Hamlet's alluring character threatens the integrity of the old order. Hamlet represents the novel ideas that appeal to the new generation of thinkers and that challenge the conservative order. By preserving his daughter's chastity, Polonius seeks to preserve his conservative ideas in the new age. An ulterior motivation for his separation of Hamlet and Ophelia is to maintain familial and hierarchical order. As Polonius later tells Claudius, Hamlet is "out of [her] star. This must not be" (II.ii.150–151). Referring to the geocentric model, Polonius suggests that just as the moon and stars revolve in separate celestial spheres, Hamlet and Ophelia occupy different positions in the social hierarchy. Although Polonius uses the word "star" instead of sphere, he believes that Hamlet and Ophelia revolve in different social circles. According to Polonius' conception of cosmic and hierarchical order, their union "must not be." Though Polonius strives to preserve this established order, Hamlet's romance with Ophelia undermines his efforts. Ironically, in the end, Polonius' attempts to preserve order merely create disorder and tragedy as Ophelia goes insane. This irony causes the audience to contemplate whether men should try to preserve an order that is incompatible with the changing universe.

Similarly, by associating Hamlet's madness with the moon, Claudius and Polonius suggest that any attempt to reconcile the new and old orders is not only dangerous but also irrational. When Claudius asks Polonius what troubles Hamlet, Polonius claims that Ophelia is "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (II.ii.2). Implicitly invoking medieval folklore that links the moon to madness, Polonius affirms that Hamlet's "lunacy" is the result of Ophelia's denied affections. By referring first to the geocentric model and now to medieval folklore, Polonius demonstrates his attachment to the narrow-minded ideas of the dark ages. He later pays for his narrow-mindedness with his own death when he insistently tries to prove that Ophelia causes Hamlet's madness. Polonius hides behind the arras in Gertrude's bedchamber, confident that Hamlet will confess his despair over Ophelia. His shriek of surprise when realizing his mistakenness precipitates his murder. Polonius' death suggests that misguided dogmatism leads to catastrophe when people awake from their delusions unprepared to face a startling reality. As with Polonius' endeavors, Claudius' attempts to maintain a fixed order fail. When he asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to discover why "[Hamlet] puts on this confusion/ Grating so harshly all his days of quiet/ With turbulent and dangerous lunacy" (III.i. 1–4), Claudius seeks a rationale for Hamlet's irrational behavior. Like Polonius, he appears disturbed by Hamlet's "lunacy" because it contradicts Hamlet's normally "quiet" character. Regardless of whether Claudius believes Hamlet feigns madness, he clearly considers Hamlet's lunacy a threat that must be subverted. Like many religious and state figures at the time, the King fears that a disruption of order, whether it be social or cosmic, will undermine his position and power. These recurring allusions to Hamlet as the mad and menacing moon reflect a latent fear that the new order will disrupt the stability of the old order.

Though Polonius and Claudius refer to Hamlet as the erratic moon, Hamlet conceives of himself as the steady sun at the center of a rapidly revolving system. In the opening act of the play, Hamlet draws the central focus onto himself when he appears before Claudius. Wallowing in his own affliction, he expresses annoyance at Gertrude and Claudius' feigned grief and hurried marriage. When Claudius asks why the clouds still hang on him, Hamlet retorts, "Not so my lord; I am too much in the sun" (I.ii.69). Hamlet's sullen clothes, caustic remarks to Gertrude, and subsequent suicidal monologue suggest that his tone is darkly ironic. Hamlet plays on the word "sun," suggesting that as the son he still

grieves for King Hamlet even while others seem to have forgotten his death. However, Hamlet's mourning suggests clearly that he is not "in the sun." Deeply affected by his father's death, Hamlet feels out of character. Nevertheless, he assumes central significance in the scene. Hamlet's ironic comment that he is "too much in the sun" suggests that he feels the court focuses too much on him and not enough on his father's death. This verbal irony mirrors the contradiction Hamlet sees between Gertrude's ostensible grief for King Hamlet's death and her real joy in her marriage to Claudius. Hamlet also challenges the motive behind Gertrude's unnatural marriage to Claudius. One reason Gertrude marries Claudius is to maintain order and prevent chaos after King Hamlet's death. However, Hamlet rejects the idea that an unnatural order like the geocentric model is preferable to the confusion and discomfort that may result from the introduction of a new order. To Hamlet, the old order is just as horrific as the disorder that it seeks to subvert.

The pointed irony behind Hamlet's allusions to himself as the sun reflects his self-assuredness and distrust toward this old order. For example, when Polonius pries Hamlet for the cause of his confliction, Hamlet tells Polonius to "Let [your daughter] not walk i' th' sun/ Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive friend, look to 't" (II.ii.201–203). This connection between Ophelia and the "sun" appears arbitrary until the next few lines when Hamlet seems to confirm Polonius' fear that Ophelia will compromise her chastity. In this context, Hamlet refers to himself as the sun and, according to the pun, as the King's son with whom Ophelia has conceived. Regardless of whether Hamlet and Ophelia actually consummated their relationship, Hamlet refers to himself as the central sun rather than the peripheral moon to emphasize his significance in the new world order. Hamlet also conceives himself as a source of illumination. This illumination blinds and disorients Polonius who cannot discern the irony and nuances of his speech. However, as the play progresses Hamlet himself becomes disorientated by others' constantly revolving positions. He finds himself challenging his friends' and Ophelia's devotion and questioning his own existential significance in a world where all men become worms' meat. According to Hamlet, everything in the "distracted globe" (I.v.104) is uncertain and brief "as woman's love" (III.ii.175). In a poem to Ophelia, he writes, "Doubt that the sun doth move/ Doubt truth to be a liar/ But never doubt I love you" (II.ii.124–127). Hamlet doubts the established truths of the world, but nevertheless claims that his love for Ophelia is sincere and steadfast. His doubt of the sun's motion reflects his skepticism of the conventional ideas of cosmic order. By challenging the geocentric model, he questions others' conception of him as volatile. Rather, he insists that he is as steady as the sun of the new heliocentric model.

However, Shakespeare's celestial imagery contrasts Hamlet's conception of himself as the stable sun with his haphazard behavior. Notably, the play opens with Horatio invoking the cosmic omens that appear before Julius Caesar's death to foreshadow Hamlet's fall into disarray: "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 doomsdale eclipse" (I.i.129–133). The "disasters in the sun" preface Hamlet's references to himself as the sun and portend his unstable behavior. By qualifying stars with fire and blood, Horatio foreshadows the death and destruction that come to fruition as a result of the disaster and "sickness" in Hamlet's character. While this cosmic imagery may refer to the play *Julius Caesar* rather than to *Hamlet*, it nevertheless foreshadows Hamlet's confused behavior that becomes more evident as the play progresses. Polonius in fact later bridges the connection between the two plays when he claims to have played Julius Caesar

and been killed by Brutus. Notably, Hamlet kills Polonius two scenes later, ultimately actualizing the death that the cosmic imagery in the first scene foreshadows. Hamlet's rash murder of Polonius and nonchalant reaction likewise suggest his sick and unsettling behavior. His scathing remarks to Gertrude in her bedroom recall this idea of sickness: "Heaven's face does glow/O'er this solidity and compound mass/ with heated visage, as against the doom/ is thought-sick at the act" (III.iv.58–60). Hamlet's words "heated" and "thought-sick" aptly describe his state of mind. In a sense, heaven's face mirrors his own: both are "thought-sick" at the earth. He reflects this disillusionment toward the world when he calls the earth a "sterile promontory." But despite the disillusionment he expresses to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he later revels in the players' presence. While in one moment Hamlet is sullen, in the next he becomes jovial. Because his emotions and behavior constantly waver depending on the circumstances, Hamlet is clearly not as stable as the celestial imagery that he appropriates would suggest.

Only at the end of the play does Hamlet realize the sense of stability to which he aspires. Hamlet's anger and disillusionment transform into gravity when he stares down at Ophelia's grave to ask, "What is he whose grief/ Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow/ Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand/ [...] This is I" (V.i.267–270). Hamlet suggests that his grief is so powerful that it makes the stars stand still like in the heliocentric model. While it is unclear whether the entire cosmos also transforms from the geocentric to heliocentric model, it is clear that Ophelia's tragic death has produced a new, more stable order. The image of the stars coming to a rest mirrors Hamlet's change to a more restful state of mind. After Ophelia's funeral, Hamlet no longer acts mad. Rather, he finds peace of mind. He amenably submits to Claudius' request to duel and even apologizes to Laertes for his mad behavior. As he tells Horatio prior to his duel, he will "let be" (V.ii.238). Consequently, Hamlet's death at the end of the play seems less tragic because he calmly accepts his fate, uttering, "Let it be. Horatio—I am dead" (V.ii.370). Hamlet uses his last modicum of energy to surrender his legacy and power to Horatio and Fortibras rather than to try to prolong his life. Perhaps what makes the play so tragic is that Hamlet ironically comes to peace with himself only to face death shortly thereafter. However, because Hamlet's state of peace is short-lived, the audience cannot be certain whether it is real or merely another transformation of the "sun."

Throughout the play, celestial allusions juxtapose the ideas of the old order with those of the new order. Hamlet comes to represent the new, enlightened age while Polonius and Claudius reflect the conservative world views. The tension between these characters mirrors the conflict between the old and new orders. While Hamlet views himself as the illuminating, stable sun of the new heliocentric system, Polonius and Claudius compare him with the erratic moon of medieval folklore. However, as Hamlet's mood constantly changes, so does the celestial imagery that Shakespeare uses to describe him. The inconsistency in the play's cosmic allusions parallels the incongruity between the court's conception of Hamlet, Hamlet's conception of himself, and Hamlet's own behavior. Because of these inconsistencies, the audience and readers are left uncertain of the natural cosmic order and, likewise, of Hamlet's genuine character. Just as men could debate theories of an indefinite and infinite cosmos but never arrive at definite conclusions, so too can the audience ponder the mystery of Hamlet's character but never find a clear resolution.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1992.