# *Unfolding* Being and Time through Poetic Beginnings[1]

**Doina CMECIU**
*"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău*

**Abstract:** Eminescu considered that "Shakespeare must not be read, he should be studied" (1870) [Eminescu, 1870], for, in order to comprehend the complexity of his plays' messages, one should perceive 'the trembling of deep feelings within words'. In his lectures on Shakespeare, S.T. Coleridge[2] repeatedly highlighted the playwright's poetic art "of representing, in words, external nature and human thoughts and affections…" and of knowing how to communicate them in "systems of harmony" made of parts that "fit into a whole" ("The Second Lecture", 205-206).
This paper is an attempt at showing the power and function of the poetic word(s) in William Shakespeare's texts, with reference to *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. If, in his sonnets, the three quatrains metaphorically develop the ideatic universe which is conveyed by the words of the couplet, the five acts of his plays are "constructed" – to use Coleridge's words –, in such a way "as to produce" a representation of the Renaissance being's existence starting from a paradigm or a syntagm placed in scene 1, act I, of all his plays. *Hamlet* and Hamlet (both text and protagonist) are created and disclosed through the metamorphosis of the syntagm *unfold yourself* (I, 1, 2) from a denotative linguistic unit into a connotative system.
**Keywords**: *Hamlet/ Hamlet, poetic beginning, semiosis, unfolding (text and being).*

## I. Poetic beginnings in Shakespeare's plays

Although there are hundreds of studies on incipits and endings of novels and poems [Carter, 2003; Raymond, 1978; Smith, 1968; Smith, 2001 etc.], critics have not paid the proper attention to such "points of entrance" [del Lungo, 2003:33] into the dramatic universe of a Shakespearean play.

We consider that Shakespeare's craftsmanship in working with words as representations of man's becoming through time can be best disclosed if 'studying' the key paradigms/ or syntagms in scene 1, act I of his plays as they foreground both the thematic pattern and the (poetic) structure of the discourses of the English Renaissance playwright's texts.

Such words acquire different layers of signification as they gradually take the reader/ spectator from her/ his real world to *another reality*, that of the dramatic text, where they weave up an intricate game of signified through texture (the bundle of devices

[1] This paper is part of a subchapter from my book in progress, entitled *WillΛM. Understanding Shakespeare through Poetic Beginnings*.
[2] All the citations are from Coleridge's "Lectures on Shakespeare", in R.A. Foakes (editor) of *The Collected Works of S. T. Coleridge*, 205–206.

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

exploited by the dramatist to allow the existence and continuity of signifying systems), structure (which provides the connectedness of parts within a coherent whole, be it textual and/ or discursive) and context (which involves the word's *standing for something else* within the hexadic frame that supports the sign's power to establish a net of associative relations). By generating new meanings as a natural consequence of the game of signifiers and signifieds [Cmeciu, 2003:14-69], the key words in scene 1, act I become 'live participants'. Their being invested with new contextual significations (which is the very essence of turning merely "flat" words[3] into signs) allows not only the empowering of the text's messages but also the enhancing of the words' poetic quality[4] when meaning gradually glides from one concrete semantic area to abstract plurisemantic/ contextual domains.

Thus, while studying the process of signification emerging from the signs in scene 1, act I of Shakespeare's plays, "we're no longer beginning but pursuing something that unfolds despite us." [Smith, 2001:ix.]. It is the pursuit of language that any reader/ spectator follows and through such poetic patterns – which turn into a unique design of the playwright's – s/he is lured into perceiving *how things can be done with words*, *how* and *why* they can make somebody act in a certain way, or *where*, *when* and *for whom* the decoding of their message is true, ambiguous or false. In other words, through such beginnings, Shakespeare transgresses the borders of the linguistic units and creates a discursive space where the act of *representing* a Renaissance being's existence is shaped through transferences of meaning at different textual levels. This game of transferences, working at and with all the textual and discursive constituents, reveals the metaphorical dimension of discourse and, implicitly, its capacity of rendering the complexity of a being's inner (less visible) universe.

This is what Shakespeare *negotiates* with words: he gradually molds them into a metaphorical *body* so as to foreground, through such an *embodiment*, a simultaneously kaleidoscopic perspective of a being's experiencing a multitude of states while struggling to exist/ *to be in the world*.

Such poetic beginnings, whose significances are developed by the playwright and should be "pursued" by the reader throughout the five acts of any Shakespearean play, have another important function: that of *tracing* the words' *memory*, their cultural existence, through a subtle intertextuality established within a discursive dialogic space which entangles not only the scenes and acts, the first and the last words of the same play, but they also invite the reader to establish a plurilogue with other cultures, other texts written by Shakespeare or by other poets/ playwrights/ novelists belonging to different ages. Such a plurilogue becomes laden with the attributes of a collective memory which supports the process of turning *ordinariness* (common existence of a common man represented in and through common language) into the *extraordinariness* of Being in the World. In order to achieve such a metamorphosis, Shakespeare paid equal importance to man, his subjective experiencing of time and language as the only powerful means of *representing* the temporality and spatiality/ tempospatiality of being. Hence, the last, but not the least,

[3] For Virginia Woolf, a great admirer of Shakespeare, a discourse acquires poetic quality when words cease "lying flat" on the page of a book and "rise", "box your ears and pelt your eyes", "grow into round transparent globes" able of carrying "an infinity of thoughts and feelings" through a temporal becoming, framed within a process of metaphorization. This is the *lesson* which Shakespeare taught Virginia Woolf and which she exploited into the practice of all her nine novels. See Cmeciu, 1999.

[4] For the words' acquiring poetic quality see Cmeciu, 1999, 131-133.

BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)

function of such beginnings: they create a metaphorical performance, and it is the duty of the readers (whatever age or geographical space they might belong to) to *pursue*[5] the metamorphosis of the horizontality of man, time, language into the verticality of existence subjectively experienced through language. In other words, to discover with each new act of reading (which is a cultural exercise), Shakespeare's skill in making a denotative dimension of the word at the beginning of a play *become something else*, to *know how* to *break the word(s)*, and, through successive discursive associations and transferences of significances, *to know that* a metaphor/ a poetic word may better convey a whole world of fears and hopes, while catching within its transparent fragile *walls* = its *presentness* the *pastness* of memories and the *futureness* of desires.

Through such beginnings and metaphorical becomings, poetic words seem to say, as Prospero does, "set us [me] free".

## II. Why *Hamlet*

Why *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as a case study for this paper?

There are several reasons for such a choice:

- firstly, the play is the longest text written by Shakespeare. It contains 30, 557 words[6] by means of which the playwright "peopled" the *world* of the play with characters that seem *to live* entangled into the trap of words. If *Antony and Cleopatra* is "constructed" on *how much[ness]*, the game of quantity and quality, if in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* history "is cobbled", or if *The Tempest* develops the significations of the noun/verb [*thou*]*art*, and *Macbeth* (the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies) focalizes the meaning of the syntagm "fair is foul, and foul is fair", while making the reader "look into the seeds of time", *Hamlet* develops the significations of "unfold yourself" [I, I, 2] throughout the play. Apparently a mere password, it contains within itself the seeds that may germinate new significations if placed into fertile associative contexts. Thus, the *act of unfolding* invites the reader to a journey from the denotative to the connotative dimensions of language, where successive transferences from textual to discursive levels of communication are but "different manifestations of semiosis" [Riffaterre, 1983:15]. The language's self-reflexivity in *Hamlet* is subtly commented upon by Iris Murdoch's narrator in *The Black Prince* (1973):

> …He [Shakespeare] has performed a supreme creative feat, a work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very substance, a Chinese box of words as high as the tower of Babel, a meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of those without identity, that is human beings. *Hamlet* is words, and so is Hamlet. He is as witty as Jesus Christ, but whereas Christ speaks Hamlet is speech. He is the tormented empty sinful consciousness of man seared by the bright light of art, the god's flayed victim dancing the dance of creation. …Shakespeare is passionately exposing himself to the ground and author of his being. He is speaking as few artists can speak, in the first person and yet at the pinnacle of artifice. How veiled that deity, how dangerous to approach, how almost impossible with impunity

[5] It is worth mentioning that, following Shakespeare as a model, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is built on the significations of a single paradigm – *to pursue/pursuit* – and on this paradigm's *journey* from an iconic signifier into a metaphoric process of signifieds.

[6] Open Source Shakespeare, available at www.opensourceshakespeare.org/.../plays/plays_numwords..., on 31 August 2016.

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

to address, Shakespeare knew better than any man. *Hamlet* is a wild act of audacity… [Murdoch, 1973:164]

- secondly, the play was probably written in 1600/1601[7] (*Troilus and Cressida* and *Twelfth Night; or What You Will,* are considered to have been written in the same period), at the crossroads of centuries, that is of a tense dramatic historical period, dominated by passionate debates on the concepts of man, time and language. The first encompasses the status of the human being during the Renaissance. The idea that man is both angel and devil, both animalness and godlikeness at the same time sustains the dramatic universe of the play. Hamlet himself refers to man's complex nature[8]:

> What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so. [II.2.303-310],

or

> …What is a man
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. [IV.4. 33-35].

Shakespeare showed a major concern with time: time, metaphorically suggested (in his sonnets) as a tyrant, or devourer of physical beauty, generally represented by fleeting moments, and associated with the transitoriness of life, with the briefness of "hours and weeks" (calling to mind the Greek concept of Chronos) is opposed to Eternity, which perpetuates beauty through the art of exploiting words in context. Thus, according to the Elizabethans, man is given eternal life through procreative love and through the power of words that glorify a being's feelings in "eternal lines". In *Hamlet*, time is "out of joint", and prince Hamlet's duty is "to set [the dismembered body] right" [I, v, 195-196]. The metaphor of *time as (diseased) body* and its *restoring* into its *natural* frame [act I, scene V] is the clue to the deep patterning of significations in/of the play.

> …Let's go in together.
> And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right.
> Nay, come, let's go together. [I, V, 194-198]

The decoding of this metaphor needs not only the metaphorical mapping of time (subjective experiencing of time, the time of belonging, the display of cultural time) in the

[7] For date of composition, sources, influences, use of texts, editing problems, medieval and Renaissance motifs etc. see Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ed. by Streinu, 1965; Spenser 1980; Jenkins, 1982; Cmeciu, 1999 /2000.

[8] All the quotations, line numbering and textual references to the play are from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, the Arden edition.

BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)

play but also the understanding of semantic transferences only within a metaphorical context, which allows significations to branch off into the whole text. Thus, "let's go together" at the end of act I invites towards a different semiotic attitude after reading the last scene of act V, with Horatio, Laertes, Hamlet and Fortinbras *being together*.

As for the third debate, it can be encompassed in the question "what does language do?". Is language used as an ornament, as decorum for thoughts and emotions, or can it *represent something to somebody else*? The Elizabethan theatre was a specific cultural mode of encoding the complexity of the Renaissance being's existence, with all its tensions, individual and national crises of identity and of authority, with the relativity of perception. Having broken the medieval fetters of hierarchy and order, where everything/everybody is assigned a symbolic value through a correspondence with a superior entity, the Renaissance man finds himself in search of answers regarding the relations he can establish with nature, with the others, even with himself. The world is no longer built on opposite pairs: up – down, body – mind, matter – spirit, to be – to seem, black – white etc. It turns into a battlefield where man – experiencing both the grandeur of lofty ideals and the weaknesses of his poor mortal frame ("which so poor a man as Hamlet" – [I, V, 192] – where the paradigm "poor" contains a half-mocking perception of himself) – learns how to exist in glory and how to defy being a "quintessence of dust" through an array of emotions and experiences. Such a lesson displays a gamut of conflicting feelings, structured on the dynamic interrelationship between a being's mind – heart – will. The *world* becomes the *stage*, where myriads of emotions can be "shown" and given life in and through artful tales. In such circumstances, language ceases being an ornament, it becomes the linguistic representation of thought – emotion – determination/ energy and purpose of action (with Shakespeare, *will* is the very act of naming). Hence, the playwright's painful concern and "wrestling" with words in each of his written texts. The Elizabethan stage is a bare place, and yet, it is through the use of language, through the game of signifieds, that Shakespeare turns it into a lively space for the medley world of his age to inhabit. Shakespeare's turning "the sound into sense [on stage]" – as Coleridge asserted in his *Second Lecture* - problematizes several aspects of representation: language as a self-generator of significations, the way signs work from the surface level of establishing relationships to the deeper, hidden level of relatedness (a level meant to disclose different states of being connected), the human being as agent of representation (as mortal body and soul, as union or gap between signified and signifier), or the very act of representing perceived by the speaking agent or by an observing eye. Under such circumstances, could a reader say who, or which the main protagonist of a play is?

- thirdly, in order to understand the sense-making power of the words in *Hamlet*, it is necessary to outline the age's political views on the role of the state, of the monarch, of a legitimate ascension to the throne, according to which there should be made the difference between *revenge/ avenge* – an act characteristic of the medieval mentality – and *a judicial act of restoring the natural order of things*, by means of which both being and political authority may regain their "healthy" robustness and energy. Through such an act, the effect caused by "political and physical sins" inflicted on Denmark may be abated and removed when the telling of the true tale reestablishes the truth of history.
- fourthly, Shakespeare is considered to have 'poured new wine into old bottles', that is, to have instilled the Renaissance spirit unto medieval patterns. It is within

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

such a creative stance that the medieval cultural paradigms of order, hierarchy, obedience, or loyalty are "garbed" in metaphorical and/or ironic garments which make the reader wonder whether Hamlet is a tragic hero indeed.

## III. The act of *unfolding*
### III.1.Who *unfolds himself* - what *is unfolded*

> Who's there?
> Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
> Long live the King! [I, I, 1-3]

From the very first exchange of words between Barnardo and Francisco, both members of the king's guard, the reader feels that the natural flow of conversation is *usurped* and the gap allows irony to creep in. *Unnaturalness* opens the dramatic space and, as a consequence, the reader is warned to scrutinize the scene, both physically and mentally, and to make full use of his/ her cultural knowledge. Thus, s/he discovers that, instead of a name, which is the *natural* answer to the common question *who's there*, Barnardo identifies himself as a dutiful servant when uttering the password. The next dialogue between Horatio, Marcellus and the former two sentinels somehow deepens the dramatic irony of the beginning, on the one hand; on the other hand, it makes the reader observe *what* is *unfolded*: their social status and their states of mind.

Bearing in mind *what* follows to be *unfolded*, the reader should exploit his/her ability to see through a pitch-dark night and listen to the (disembodied) voices coming from "the platform of the battlemented castle" [I, I].

Within this game of *who – what* is *unfolded*, Shakespeare builds up a complex discourse of identity, whose fabric is woven with the *wefts* and *warps* of *words*, while its design is organized on the *meanings* of the verb "to be". The relationships established by the words in the first two acts are meant to make them *unfold* their denotative layers, and thus, get rid of their "fleshy" texture. These acts of folding and unfolding words develop the process of investing them with meaning. The words' becoming into signs discloses one characteristic of Shakespearean semiosis: the state of relatedness between signifieds. Their being connected into a "harmonious whole", made visible in Hamlet's soliloquy from act III, scene 1 [56-89], is supported by the display of the significances of the verb "to be", a display which foregrounds being-language-time as the main protagonist of discourse. It is also in act III that Ophelia keeps asking about the meanings of Hamlet's words, acts, gestures. If in his soliloqui [III, I, 56-89], Hamlet has, for the first time, taken off his ironical garb, his conversation with Ophelia [III, I, 95-110] turns him into a derisive interlocutor. Ophelia's insistence on what Hamlet's questions really mean sends the reader to the *whatness* of the first act of *unfolding*.

> Ham. Ha, Ha! Are you honest?
> Oph. My lord?
> Ham. Are you fair?
> Oph. What means your lordship?
> Ham. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty. [III, 1, 103-109],

and

BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)

Oph. What means this, my lord?
Ham. Marry, this is miching malicho. It means mischief. [III, II, 134-135][9].

If act I, scene I warns the reader that 'words are not *what* they are', act III is the pivot on which the whole game of semiosis stands: *unfolding* needs *folding*, and here is the paradox of such a semiotic act in *Hamlet*; the more being-time-language seems to *unfold* significances, the deeper the pursuit of *folding* is. It is in the four scenes of act III that 'inquisitive ears and eyes' may find out what the game of signifier and signifieds really means and how it works: from Hamlet's answer "Words, words, words." [II, 2, 193] to Polonius's question " – What do you read, my lord?" [II, 2, 192] to the significations of the infinitives in Hamlet's soliloquy and the different responses to what is seen of *The Mousetrap*, there is the *mischievous* metamorphosis of the denotative (a mere signifier signifying nothing if lying flat somewhere between ears that cannot catch it, 'a frail, frivolous item', hence its being repeated) into signifieds. All the characters in Shakespeare's play come 'to see and feel' the power of words when they are laden with meaning. Claudius himself, the usurping king, understands that words signify nothing if they cannot represent a being's thoughts: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below/ Words without thoughts never to heaven go." [III, 3, 97-98]

Shakespeare makes Ophelia perform her greatest part in this act (otherwise, a dull puppet), for she unveils the gap between layers of signification; secondly, she foregrounds *what* and *who* Hamlet is; thirdly, she asks for an act of *restoring* [III, I, 143] the *unnatural* state of being into a *natural order*; fourthly, her attitude and way of being and perceiving the things around herself make Hamlet show off his ironic side; fifthly, she indirectly invites the reader/ spectator to develop a semiotic attitude towards 'what is done' on stage. S/he is, thus, asked to look carefully between the *folds* of the words, to *reconsider*, *to read* (= *observe* and *remember* and *reinterpret*) "the peopled" world on stage from different perspectives in order to apprehend both its depths and heights simultaneously. It is the "madness" of language that puzzles the reader from now on, the understanding that transferences of signification have created a whole process of metaphor-ization meant to *unfold* a tale of existence, of being in the wor(l)d.

**III.2.** *Who* is *unfolded*? – This is the question. Let us begin with act III, the very middle of the play, where the answer to this famous question is given by and "constructed" on the verb "to be", whose *unfolding itself* begins and ends with a "supreme creative feat" performed by Shakespeare:

To be, or not to be, that is the question[10]:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die – to sleep
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

[9] This dialogue is fully commented upon in Hawkes, 1992, 1-10.
[10] There are thousands of critical commentaries on this soliloquy [Jenkins, 1982:484-493], which makes it impossible for us to come with arguments for and against one opinion or another. Our intention is to *unfold* another dimension of both character and tale as an example of what Iris Murdoch considers to be the playwright's "creative feat".

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream… [III, 1, 56-65; the soliloquy continues for another twenty five lines]

The question is why *this* verb? *Why* its infinitival form in the middle of a play where orders are, nevertheless, plentiful? *How* can it sustain the process of metaphorization and *what* is metaphorized? In other words, *how* can it be "made to mean so many different things" (to paraphrase Lewis Carroll's Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*).

There is no accident that the signification of all these infinitives, having *to be* as a pivot, is exploited here through such a mind-trap-catching display of connotative folds awaiting to *unfold themselves* in front of those able *to see*! With the infinitive, there begins the act of naming, not of a human being, but of a series of events and of states of mind leading to violent or gentle actions. The infinitive shows the action beyond temporal perspectives, but when it *predicates*, the verb *to be* means *to exist*; as such, it shows the quality of the subject (with an implied temporal reference; see also Aristotle's *Rhetoric*)

The decoding of *to be* [, *or not to be*], obliges the reader to perform a backward – forward movement from "what I [the Ghost] shall unfold" [in act I, V, 6] to Horatio's having to "report" Hamlet and his "cause aright/ To the unsatisfied" [in act V, II, 343-344] while being asked "To tell my [Hamlet's] story" = the tale of a "wounded name" [V, II, 354, 349]; all this framed by a play within which there is another play placed en-abyme.

Thus, one function of *to be* is the *restoring* of a name's identity through the *healing* power of the verb, which is made to move along its axis and, thus, to display the essence of worthiness after getting rid of the 'fleshy', "stale, flat, and unprofitable / … uses of this world" [I, II, 133-134]. Through his/her moving to and fro, the reader traces the metamorphosis of the name's horizontality (a name without memory, a 'garden full of weeds'; the *weeds* connoting Claudius) into its verticality (a sign that contains within its presentness a cultural *his*tory of honour; hence the last image of the play with Hamlet being honoured as a brave "soldier"). Such a becoming is intricately woven in the textual and discursive fabric of the five acts and is supported by: puns and paradoxes, a subtle mixture of prose and verse, soliloquies, antitheses and contrast[11], all types of repetitions, metonymies, epithets, similes, but above all, metaphors and irony; the 'mise en abyme' technique (the play-within-a-play-within-another/miniature-play, all of them within semiotic games); the "device" of madness as self-defense; mythological and religious names and motifs as resourceful tools for hyperbolization; the use of blank verse, of metre and rhyme with shrewd variations; the exploitation of supernatural elements and of superstitions; the strategy of exploiting other characters – see Ophelia – as decoy, or that of making use of the effects of music on stage, to mention only some of them, since Shakespeare's readers should always bear in mind that the act of unfolding significations turns most words in this play into signs that require not only a careful decoding of inter-

[11] The most striking example of contrast is the one between the two brothers: old king Hamlet and the usurping king Claudius, a contrast which is meant to reveal two states of things in Denmark, while the young male characters (Hamlet, Horatio, Fortinbras, Laertes, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz) are grouped into distinctive pairs as they are assigned different roles (see, for example, the significance of Hamlet and Horatio "going/ being together").

BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)

and intratextuality, but also a keen mental and visual experiencing of words while observing and interpreting the semiotic relatedness between them[12].

Who is unfolded by *to be* = *to exist*? Out of the "orts, scraps and fragments" of grammar (the subversive game of (a)temporality performed at the level of paratextual elements and of *en abyme* linguistic technique ! – the *who are you* question arising from the depth of consciousness to the surface of expression as general truth) there emerges the answer: "Hamlet. / I am Hamlet./ My name is Hamlet = I *exist* as a sign-name[13] "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/ So long lives *this* [my name as a signified in a work of art as signifier, *Hamlet*], and *this* gives life to thee." (*Sonnet 18*).

From "I'll call thee Hamlet/ King, father, royal Dane …" [I, IV, 44-45], to "What piece of work is a man …[II, II, 303] and to the "wounded name" left behind, there is the record of finding meaning in human experience.

The second part of the syntagm – [*to be*], *or not to be* shows the verb as *helping predication*; it works as a linking verb, which may also turn into *to* become, or *to seem*. And [*to be, or not to be]*: *that is the question* of the human condition: *how* to find meaning in *what* a human being is. The identity of a "great" name connotes true, healthy existence, "sovereignty" and equilibrium of mind, heart and will.

> …What is a man
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? … [IV, IV, 33-35]

May a man exist only as a paragon of animal-like needs? – this *is* the question. The answer is given by Hamlet himself in the same soliloquy – "A beast no more" – (line 35), where he identifies a righteous name with the moral quality of honour[14] (an idea sending to the medieval concept of a hero).

> …Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
> That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep, while to my shame I see... [IV, 4, 53-55]

---

[12] In order to fully understand Shakespeare's "wrestling" with words, readers should keep in mind that: scenery was altogether absent on the Elizabethan stage, hence the playwright's providing the characters with word pictures of setting, time (natural, chronological, historical), geographical locations; verbal stage directions were meant to suggest the emotions of the characters; there were few props that were carried upon the stage during the performance as there were no breaks between acts; the play-within-a play was performed on an inner stage divided from the main one by a curtain; the women parts were played by men actors.

[13] See James Joyce's *Ulysses* with its subtle *Hamletian* intertextuality experienced by Stephen/ Bloom/ Odysseus.

[14] This idea recalls to mind *The Tragedy of Othello, Moor of Venice*, with Iago's metaphor in "a good name is a jewel of the soul". And yet, ambiguity towers over the *whatness* of a great name as well, as Hamlet *interprets* Fortinbras's deeds.

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

Hamlet's soliloquies, structured on *not to be* as a linking verb, and his actions seen as his own way of responding to what is happening at court *re-identify* the legitimate heir to the throne through *what he is not*. If the unity of *nobility of action* and *nobility of mind* gives greatness to a name, then *cowardice*, *pride*, *revenge* and *ambition* turn that name's owner into "a quintessence of dust", which connotes *not to be* a good, brave, honourable man. He defies spaces of transition ("to sleep" is such a space, where man is neither dead, nor alive; or, to live as a decoy, without experiencing the beauty and honesty of true feelings is equivalent to death) and dares his own *being-in-the-world* through his attempts to *unweed the garden*.

*What* is Hamlet? Ophelia's portrait in act III, scene I [152-163] may be *interpreted* as the metaphorical *unfolding* of *to be – not to be*, when it *predicates* or when it *helps predication*:

> Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
> And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
> That sucked the honey of his music vows,
> Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
> Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
> That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
> Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me
> T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

As shown above, in order to map the identity of his name, Hamlet plays several roles in a fan-like display: he is son and stepson, heir to the throne, scholar, courtier, friend, lover; but above all, he turns into a spy, and, in spite of the ironic game of spying on and being spied upon which catches all the characters in the play in its trap, it is only Hamlet that interprets his and the other characters' words, gestures, actions from the perspective of perfection, of an existence that harmoniously unites *nobility of mind, heart and action*.

Hamlet the spy-interpreter wants to understand himself and the others, and the signification which his understanding achieves defies time only through language; hence, the complex use of the connotations of the *closed spaces* (such as the "prison, confines, wards, and dungeons" in act II, scene II) and of the *fragmented body* (used both as tenor and vehicle) throughout the play as the protagonist and the playwright seem to be interested in *how* one thing *becomes* another / something else both in nature and in a being's existence. "To unpack the heart with words" (II, II, 581) reveals both Hamlet's (un)folding states of being through language and the age's epistemological crisis.

The *joints*, the *skull*, the *flesh*; the *eye* and the *ear*; the *heart*, the *brain*, the *voice*, the *tongue* with images of unhealthiness, are all parts of Denmark's *body*, of language's *body*, of time's *body*. The significations of this metaphor acquire new dimensions and value through associations with all the other tropes, devices and motifs of the play, thus, making up a *new identity*, that of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, the text that finally *restores* Denmark, and time, and the name "that was born to set [everything] right".

## Conclusion

> Pol. "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. – Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)

> Ham. Into my grave?
>
> Pol. Indeed, that's out of the air. – [Aside] How pregnant sometimes his replies are – a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. [II, II, 205-211]

The dialogue between Hamlet and Polonius and the latter's asides hide between the words' folds the ironic game of spying observers and interpreters on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the gap between meaning-laden layers of signification arising from the (conceptual) metaphor *a mind is a (pregnant/ dry) womb*. The decoding of this metaphor is illustrative of Shakespeare's craftsmanship with words when trying to disclose the working of one's mind. Such an exercise brings to light *what is* before the metaphorical structure and *what* comes after it. The context shows that both characters put each other to the test of *reading* thoughts while pursuing actions. The metaphor is, then, founded on the contextual idea that words are the representation of thoughts and what the reader encounters is a two-sided perspective of the same act of reading: what is meaningful for one interlocutor proves to be meaningless for the other. Thus, the womb becomes both a space accommodating germination, or a prison for those minds that are not capable of seeing beyond a literal sense. This is the difference between the two minds: one can breed connotations and work at different levels, the other one is confined within the rigid walls of duty.

This exchange also 'foretells' the famous soliloquy in act III. *To be, or not to be mad: this is the question*. Polonius's curiosity as a loyal courtier to Claudius and a dutiful father to Ophelia needs to be satisfied by a straightforward honest answer to his unuttered thoughts. And yet, Hamlet's retorts subvert the literal meaning of Polonius's words. The gap between what is said and what is thought is also sustained by the opposition to be – to seem: Hamlet is considered to be mad, and yet, his mind is free of any mental illness. The metaphor reaches another level of signification as it displays a paradoxical situation: Hamlet, the free spirit, able to *see* beyond the denotative shell of words, is supposed to be/ to live his life within the constraints of a 'diseased' place. Shakespeare continues the wordplay by making latent meanings come to the surface, or too obvious ones "go backwards". The complexity of such metaphorical structures lies in their generating ever new significances through various associations, allusions and images that reflect on other characters, other situations, other "pregnant" words, capable of begetting a new tale with each act of reading.

To transfer the meanings of the pregnant womb onto a being's mind means to bestow value upon what *the* mind creates: the act of investing words with substance, with signification, that is of making "pregnant words" out of "dry shells", partakes of divinity and can never die.

## REFERENCES

Blake, N. F., 2002. *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language*, New York, Palgrave.

Carter, Michael, 2003. *Where Writing Begins: A Postmodern Reconstruction*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Cmeciu, Camelia-Mihaela, "Timpul în sonetele lui William Shakespeare", in *Studii şi cercetări ştiinţifice*, No.9/10, Bacău, pp.24-37.

Cmeciu, D., 1972-2014. *Lectures on William Shakespeare*, delivered at the ("Vasile Alecsandri") University of Bacău.

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**

Cmeciu, D., 1999. *Virginia Woolf, or the Quest for the Poetic Word*, Bucureşti, Ed. ProHumanitate.
Cmeciu, D., 1999/2000. "Nebunia" lui Hamlet/ *Hamlet, Prinț al Danemarcei*", in *Studii și cercetări științifice*, No.9/10, Bacău, pp.38-60.
Cmeciu, D., 2003. *Signifying Systems in Literary Texts*, Bacău, Ed. "Egal".
Cmeciu, D., 2014. *A Theory of Discourse*, Iaşi, Ed. PIM.
Coleridge, S.T., 1987. *The Collected Works of S.T. Coleridge. Lectures 1808 – 1819. On Literature*, ed.by R.A.Foakes, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Curtui, Aurel, 1977. *"Hamlet" în România*, Bucureşti, Ed. "Minerva".
del Lungo, Andrea, 2003. *L'incipit romanesque*, Texte traduit de l'italien, revu et remanie par l'auteur, Paris, Ed. du Seuil.
Drakakis, John, 2001. *Alternative Shakespeares*, London and New York, Routledge.
Easthope, Antony, 1990. *Poetry as Discourse*, London, Routledge.
Eminescu, Mihai, 1870. "Repertoriul nostru teatral", in *Familia*, Pesta, No. 3.
Hackett, Helen, 2009. *Shakespeare and Elizabeth. The Meeting of Two Myths*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.
Hawkes, Terence, 1992. *Meaning by Shakespeare*, London and New York, Routledge.
Keir, Elam, 1984. *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse. Language Games in the Comedies*, Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney, Cambridge University Press.
Muecke, D.C., 1982. *Irony and the Ironic*, London and New York, Methuen.
Murdoch,I., 1973. *The Black Prince*, London, Chatto & Windus.
Raymond, Jean, 1982/1978. *Practica literaturii. Roman/ Poezie*, trans. Mioara Izverna, Bucureşti, Ed.Univers., (Pratique de la littérature: roman/poésie, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1978).
Reynolds, Peter (1991):*Shakespeare:Text into Performance*, London, Penguin Books.
Riffaterre, M., 1983/1978. *Sémiotique de la poésie*, traduit de l'américain par J.J.Thomas, Paris, Seuil.
Serpieri, Alessandro, 2001. "Reading the Signs. Towards a Semiotics of Shakespearean Drama", trans. by Keir Elam, in Drakakis, 121 – 147.
Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, edited by A.W.Verity, 1953, Cambridge University Press, 17th edition.
Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prinț al Danemarcei*, trans. by Leon Leviţchi and Dan Duţescu, 1964, Editura pentru literatură universală, Bucureşti.
Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited by Harold Jenkins, 1982, the Arden Shakespeare.
Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited by T.J.B.Spencer, with an Introduction by Anne Barton, 1980, Penguin Books.
Shakespeare, William. *Tragedia lui Hamlet, Prinț al Danemarcei*, an English-Romanian text, with Preface, Introduction, Notes and Commentaries by Vladimir Streinu, 1965, Editura pentru Literatură.
Shakespeare, William. *Tragica poveste a lui Hamlet, prințul Danemarcei*, translated by Dragoş Protopopescu, 1942, București, Ed. "Biblioteca pentru toți".
Smith, D., Vance, 2001. *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century*, University of Minnesota Press.
Smith, Herrnstein, Barbara, 1968. *Poetic Closure. A Study of How Poems End,* Chicago & London, the University of Chicago Press.
Spolsky, Ellen, 2007. *Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare's England,* New York, Palgrave.

**BDD-A26608 © 2016 Editura Universităţii din Suceava**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.11 (2026-11-19 23:01:41 UTC)**