Just Horatio

How Is Horatio Just? How Just Is Horatio?

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In late December 2007, the Shakespeare Division committee of the Modern Language Association (MLA) met in Chicago to discuss paper topics for the three 2008 divisional sessions. We wanted at least one session that would be tightly focused and would have a textual dimension, and we came up with “One Page, Three Readers: Shakespeare 1623 Folio, Sig. B4.” The B4 recto of Shakespeare’s First Folio is the final page of The Tempest, a page suggested by Jeffrey Masten; the three readers in San Francisco in December 2008 were Eric Rasmussen, Heather Dubrow, and Stephen Booth. I moderated, and it was, as we had hoped, a highly focused, provocative session with an unusually rich exchange with the audience after the papers. So the committee decided to do it again, and in December 2009 in Philadelphia I moderated “Two Lines, Three Readers: Hamlet, TLN 1904–5.” The two through-lines appear in most modern editions of Hamlet as “Horatio, thou art e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” (3.2.47–48).¹

Eric Rasmussen started things off with a PowerPoint demonstration of the slight variations in early editions (Q1, Q2, F) of TLN 1904–5, noting one early and contextually bawdy echo of the lines in Nathaniel Fields’s 1618 Amends for Ladies. He commented that generations of editorial commentary keyed to lines in Hamlet can be found at HamletWorks,² a by-product of the MLA New Variorum Hamlet project, of which he is an editor. Flashing up a variety of annotations from contemporary Shakespeare editions, he showed that no modern editors of Hamlet (including Rasmussen and Jonathan Bate in the RSC Shakespeare) gloss “cop’d” or “coped” in these lines with attention to its sexual meaning, although the later emendation to “as e’er my conversation met withal” in Davenant’s 1676 Q6 suggests a desire to ward off that sexual meaning, and although instances of “coped” in Othello and Lucrece clearly indicate sexual


meaning. Rasmussen also illustrated William Johnstone’s handwritten marginalia on the folio page containing the lines, and he left the audience with a much better sense, both visual and cognitive, of the issues that these lines present to a textual editor. Karen Newman’s and Jonathan Crewe’s extremely stimulating essays are included below. As you will see, they attend in part to issues raised by the local focus of the session within the history of close reading as a professional activity. A lively discussion followed them in the twenty minutes the three panelists had scrupulously kept free for it.

In what follows here, I am chiefly concerned with reading the word “just” in “Horatio, thou art e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” (3.2.47–48). The reading has points of overlap with both Crewe’s and Newman’s essays. Hamlet’s lines open a verbal portrait that is both an abstract of stoic virtue and a declaration of love. But it is also a portrait that notices Horatio’s place, or lack of place, in a local economy:

Nay, do not think I flatter;
For what advancement may I hope from thee,
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits
To feed and clothe thee?

(ll. 49–52)

Horatio has no income. Politically powerless, he can confer no advancement in return for insincere praise. Moreover, Hamlet seems sure that Horatio seeks no advancement save, perhaps, this sort of erotic declaration from Hamlet himself:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath sealed thee for herself; for thou has been
As one in suff ring all that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hath ta’en with equal thanks.

(ll. 56–61)

So it is precisely this freedom from economic or political determination of motive that makes Horatio appealing to Hamlet, a freedom that distinguishes Horatio sharply from more mercenary, or more impulsive, people whose “blood and judgement are . . . / . . . a pipe for Fortune’s finger / To sound what stop she please” (ll. 62–64). While Hamlet may well have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

in mind here (as Karen Newman notes), especially given the moral lesson he administers with the recorder to Guildenstern after the Mousetrap, he may also be thinking about his own emotional susceptibility to Fortune’s buffets and rewards, and the conflicts that have arisen already between his own blood and judgment. By the time the portrait of Horatio ends, we might be forgiven for not remembering that it sets all these qualities under the heading of the “just”:

Give me that man  
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee.  
(ll. 64–67)

But Hamlet still praises Horatio’s justice here. The dispassionate, and thus free, man will be the object of Hamlet’s passion, perhaps because such a man’s reciprocation of that passion can be trusted in the way the affection of a man more enmeshed in local economies could not.

Both Newman’s and Crewe’s essays link the portrait of Horatio to Hamlet’s speech to the players, and Crewe’s suggests that Horatio’s impartiality, as Hamlet commends it, amounts to a kind of freedom or distance from theatricality. I want to make this link too, but in a slightly different way. Hamlet embraces strategic theatricality when he devises the idea of the play within the play, after his “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” soliloquy beginning at 2.2.527. It ends as Hamlet tests his strategy in his excited conversation with Horatio at 3.2.249, after Claudius interrupts The Murder of Gonzago. There, the just Horatio supports Hamlet’s impression that Claudius’s response to the play-within-the-play has confirmed the Ghost’s accusation. In the soliloquy in 2.2, Hamlet portrays himself as a base coward, unable to force his soul to his own conceit, and incapable of the violent revenge the Ghost demands and Claudius may deserve. At the end of the soliloquy, after extremes of self-abasement followed by extremes of anger, Hamlet says “foh!—About, my brain” (l. 565). Hamlet then devises the Mousetrap, seeking “grounds / More relative than this,” reflecting on the power of representations over guilty parties: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (ll. 580–82). That is, Hamlet moves from angry self-portrayal that is preoccupied with images of violent vengeance to a calmer kind of theatrical portrayal that aims to elicit a moral reaction: theatrical mirroring that will reinforce the virtue of the good while harrowing the consciences of the bad. Horatio is the one living person whom Hamlet mirrors without negative critique, showing his virtue its own image, but Hamlet offers negative mirroring—parodic representations, delivered to their faces—of himself, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, and
Thus, it seems particularly important that Hamlet sees Horatio as “just,” since he will use Horatio as a second judge to interpret Claudius’s reaction to the Mousetrap. Indeed, the speech suggests that he will trust Horatio’s opinion of the reaction more than his own.

Why is Horatio just? As I’ve suggested above, partly because he is, as post-Kantians would say, disinterested. But how just is he? Hamlet’s formulation “e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” makes no absolutist suggestions of the possibility of complete disinterestedness. Horatio is relatively disinterested, as free from determination by profit and loss as any who has come within the bounds of Hamlet’s conversation, “as just” rather than “just.” Horatio’s dispossession and his lack of desire for advancement allow him to be, relatively speaking, resistant to the distortions of judgment caused by the proximity of power and the possibility of wealth: he is “A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards / Hath ta’en with equal thanks” (3.2.60–61). While Hamlet obviously values highly the way in which Horatio seems loyal to Hamlet personally (unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), Horatio’s interest in Hamlet jostles with Horatio’s disinterestedness in Hamlet’s feeling for Horatio. This detached attachment would seem a paradox, but the play bears it out. Horatio does not, in fact, appear to be a henchman of Hamlet’s in any consistent way, but rather some sort of participant in Danish court life both before Hamlet knows he is in Elsinore and after Hamlet has been sent to England—when Horatio advises Gertrude of Ophelia’s madness in 4.5, for instance. When Hamlet doubts what is right, he consults Horatio, and it is Horatio’s relatively nonpartisan stance that Hamlet prizes in Horatio’s judgments. Hamlet uses Horatio in this way in 5.2, where Hamlet first defends his own actions against Horatio’s mild interrogation of Hamlet’s arrangement for the killing of his childhood friends:

| horatio  | So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to’t. |
| hamlet   | Why, man, they did make love to this employment. |
|          | They are not near my conscience. Their defeat |

4 The Q2 “How all occasions do inform against me” (4.4.32) soliloquy offers a reflective and not uncritical mirroring of Fortinbras, as well.

5 For an example of the standard contemporary response to absolutist claims of disinterestedness, Christopher Warley writes, “The claim to universality—to objectivity, disinterest, and ‘justness’—is never really universal. It is always interested, impartial, and (maybe) unjust.” See “Specters of Horatio,” ELH 75 (2008): 1023–50, esp. 1024. (I suspect Warley’s “impartial” should read “partial.”) I am grateful to Jonathan Crewe for drawing my attention to this interesting and intelligent essay, which anticipates some of the points I make here while drawing very different conclusions from them. Warley accentuates the spectral qualities of Horatio’s ‘justice,’ drawing on his conviction that no universals exist but that lots of spurious claims of universality need to be exposed by modern critics; I see Hamlet’s claim that Horatio is as just a man as any he has coped with as appropriately contingent.
Doth by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensèd points
Of mighty opposites.

(5.2.57–63)

Hamlet's disparagement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern implicitly reminds us of his view that Horatio, by contrast, is not one who makes love to power or insinuates himself among the great aiming for rewards. Moreover, Hamlet here opens his conscience to Horatio's judgment, although what he reveals is his lordly indifference to collateral damage to parasites in a titanic duel. Horatio's response, "Why, what a king is this!" (l. 63) might as easily refer to Hamlet's own assumption of the Machiavellian willingness to kill in order to obtain princely power as to Claudius's attempt to do the same in order to retain it. But Hamlet then solicits Horatio's moral judgment more directly:

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,
Popped in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(ll. 64–71)

That is, Hamlet constitutes the unpropertied, relatively disinterested Horatio as his "perfect conscience" in determining whether it is morally imperative to "quit" Claudius. Horatio, characteristically, offers a practical response rather than confirmation of Hamlet's moral certainty that it is perfection to kill Claudius and damnation not to: "It must be shortly known to him from England / What is the issue of the business there" (ll. 72–73). This reminds us of Horatio's relatively cautious response to Claudius's interruption of The Murder of Gonzago:

hamlet     O good Horatio, I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?
horatio    Very well, my lord.
hamlet     Upon the talk of the pois'ning?
horatio    I did very well note him.

(3.2.263–67)

Horatio confines himself to the registration of his own reaction. His “justice” here again is a kind of self-limitation. No thousand-pound bets for Horatio. Karen Newman’s invocation of “thrift” at the end of her essay seems relevant.

Given this, Hamlet’s accolade to Horatio’s justice bears in interesting ways on a strong recent discussion of the play that seeks to read it as preoccupied with property, inheritance, and power politics, Margreta de Grazia’s “Hamlet” without Hamlet. If Hamlet in fact thinks Horatio the one good judge of Claudius’s behavior, or of Hamlet’s own, because Horatio is not propertied and does not seek political advancement, this suggests that the play incorporates a supplement to her powerfully presented claim that “possession of dirt” (5.2.89) is one of the play’s basic concerns and that revenge for dispossession of dirt one of the Renaissance Hamlet’s completely comprehensible motives. Hamlet’s repeated consultations with Horatio mark Hamlet’s desire for something other than the interested motives of succession and possession that de Grazia emphasizes. But his need for Horatio’s judgment may also mark Hamlet’s awareness that he himself has the interested motives de Grazia points us toward.

De Grazia does not discuss TLN 1904 and the lines following, but she does write interestingly about Horatio, and she presents his suicide attempt in the final scene as a critically unrecognized marker of his awareness of the power-political stakes involved in Fortinbras’s retaking Denmark:

As the English Ambassador is moved to observe in Q1, “O most most unlooked for time! Unhappy country” (I4r). Denmark has fallen, without a fight, into the hands of Denmark’s inveterate enemy. Horatio knows full well what this means, “I am more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.346). Editors stop short of a full gloss here, identifying his “antique” Romaness with a preference for suicide over dishonorable life without explaining that the source of dishonor derives from submission. Cato the younger and Brutus and even Portia chose death by their own hands in order to avoid the indignity of subjection. The import of these lines has been missed because tragedy has been defined to play down, if not rule out, historical events like a regime’s downfall or foreign occupation.  

De Grazia certainly shows us something worthy to be glossed here. But Horatio declares that he is more a Roman than a Dane to Hamlet in all three versions of the play just before the announcement or entrance of Fortinbras along with the ambassadors from England. Neither Horatio, Hamlet, nor anyone else has shown any signs of thinking about Fortinbras since Hamlet’s “How all occasions do inform against me” soliloquy in the Q2 version of 4.4 (4.4.32–66), as Fortinbras marches through Denmark to assault a bit of Poland.

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So it takes some slight juggling of sequence to imagine the character Horatio as, like Cato the Younger, committing stoic suicide in reflective protest at the onset of an unwelcome regime; he is more like Enobarbus and Eros in *Antony and Cleopatra*, loving subordinates who wish not to outlive sociopolitical superiors. Horatio’s suicide attempt shows that he is less disinterested than Hamlet said he was, but that his interest is less a political one in the Danish regime than an erotic one in Hamlet. Moreover, Horatio’s love for Hamlet gains value from Horatio’s general freedom from interested attachment. Indeed, Hamlet’s response to the suicide attempt re-instantiates the relatively just Horatio, the more-or-less objective witness Hamlet claimed to wear in his “heart of heart,” while acknowledging Horatio’s reciprocal love for him:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

(5.2.288–91)

In sum, then, TLN 1904–5 suggest that for Hamlet, being just and being conscientious derive from being able to take a disinterested, nonstakeholder’s attitude toward what one is thinking about. Hamlet admires this attitude in Horatio without claiming to have it with any consistency himself. He does not constitute this attitude as an absolute possibility, but as a relative virtue. This mode of moral thinking looks forward toward the post-Kantian Romantics, whose way of discussing the play has proved so contagious ever since. It also anticipates the form in which moral disinterestedness survives modern skepticism about the possibility of pure or absolute virtues.