

Considering ‘Death’ in *Hamlet* in Company with Montaigne’s *Essais*

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According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Shakespeare was Michel de Montaigne’s ‘best reader’.¹ *Les Essais* (first published in 1580 and posthumously republished as the complete version in 1595), a collection of philosophically self-reflexive essays by Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) has been considered to be one of the most influential books for Shakespeare. In this paper, I would like to make a contribution to the history of scholarship on the relation between Montaigne’s *Essais* and Shakespeare’s plays by focusing on their shared mental attitudes, not really by pointing out the notable words and phrases which Shakespeare and Montaigne have in common. As for this approach, in particular, this paper deals with their respective treatment of ‘death’ in *Hamlet* and *Les Essais*.

Shakespeare and Montaigne

The parallels of words and phrases in Montaigne’s *Essais* and Shakespeare’s plays were first indicated by Edward Capell in as early as 1780.² By way of drawing attention to the correspondences between Montaigne and Shakespeare, Capell found out the verbal borrowings from Florio’s translation of *Essais* in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. As nowadays unanimously accepted as undisputable traces of Montaigne via Florio’s translation, Gonzalo’s description of imaginary commonwealth in *The Tempest* is based on the passages about the life of people in the New World in Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s “Of the Cannibals”. As Montaigne admiringly states, the people in the newly discovered world

hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politic superiority; no use of service, of riches, or of poverty; no contracts, no successions, no dividences, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common; no apparel, but natural. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulations, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard of amongst them (“Of the Cannibals”, p. 59).³

Montaigne’s description of ideal community infiltrates into the imaginary society which Gonzalo would create if he were to colonize the isolated island (“Had I plantation of this isle” (II. i. 139)), together with

¹ Cited in *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture, Politics*, ed. A.D.Schrift (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000), p. 46.

² For the scholarly history of source-hunting about Montaigne’s *Essais* in Shakespeare’s plays, I heavily owe to Robert Ellrodt, ‘Self-Consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare’, *Shakespeare Survey* 28, pp. 37-50, although Ellrodt’s approach is a cognitive one rather than source-hunting.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all the quotations from Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essais; A Selection*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt (New York: New York Review Books, 2014). The title of the essay and the page number in this edition are shown in brackets.

Florio's choice of Elizabethan words and dictions:

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure:
No sovereignty;—

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All things in common Nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth,
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people. (II. i. 143-60) ⁴

Gonzalo's ideally innocent society is articulated with Florio's turn of phrases such as 'traffic', 'letters', 'magistrate', 'service', 'riches', 'poverty', 'successions', and 'treason'.

Apart from the case of *The Tempest*, however, the direct borrowings from Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essais* have not been so far identified. A number of scholars have tried to hunt out the traces of Montaigne in Shakespeare's plays, paying attention to the shared phrases and ideas. They have cumulated one after another. But they always remain controversial since they may be some knowledge found in a commonplace book.

In recent scholarly approaches, even so, the importance of Florio's translation of Montaigne for Shakespeare has been refreshingly emphasized, as evidenced, for example, by Jonathan Bate's frequent references to Florio's Montaigne in his book, *Soul of the Age*, and Stephen Greenblatt's editing *Shakespeare's Montaigne*. In *Soul of the Age*, Bate has suggested that the reading of Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay "An Apology of *Raymond Sebond*" on part of Shakespeare some time before his writing *King Lear* provided him with the philosophical foothold of the play's spirits. Bate observes,

'What do I know?' asks Montaigne? I know experience, he replies to himself in his final essay. At the end of the *Sebond* essay, he suggests that all we can do is fall back on divine grace, on God: 'Whatsoever we attempt without his assistance, whatever we see without the lamp of his grace, is but vanity and folly.' Again, the attack is specifically upon Stoicism. We will be saved by 'our Christian faith', not 'Stoic virtue'. Raymond Sebond had argued that you could infer

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Frank Kermode, The Arden Shakespeare (London and New York: Routledge, 1964).

God from the order of created nature and from the reason. The ‘apology’ in Montaigne’s title is ironically meant: the essay comprehensively refutes Sebond’s natural religion and says that what you need instead is blind, irrational faith.⁵

Montaigne weighs with a vengeance the importance of the power of ‘experience’, not philosophical doctrines like ‘Stoicism’; for that matter, with Montaigne, the Stoic attitudes of defiance and patience are mitigated by the experience of ‘divine grace’. Bate has argued, furthermore, that *King Lear* reaches the same conclusion through the performing act, although not through Montaigne’s way of writing philosophically inquisitive essays.

Hamlet and Montaigne

‘Whatsoever we attempt without his assistance, whatever we see without the lamp of his grace, is but vanity and folly.’ Montaigne’s ultimate viewpoint of the grace of God in the *Sebond* essay cited in Bate’s above argument about *King Lear* seems to also chime with Hamlet’s final recognition that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (V. ii. 10-11).⁶ When it comes to the matter of Florio’s influence on *Hamlet*, however, it will not be able to be ascertained for good; for it cannot be known whether or not Shakespeare had a chance of reading Florio’s translation before its publication of 1603; the performance of *Hamlet* was done about three years before its publication. But the kinship of the spirits of Montaigne’s *Essais* and *Hamlet* is so close that we cannot but be tempted to consider some sort of their correspondences. So Bate says, “If there is a single book that parallels his journey, that brings us close to the workings of the mind of Hamlet, it is Montaigne’s *Essays*...Imagine that Hamlet could have read Montaigne” (p. 410). Avoiding her engagement in the futile question of whether and how Shakespeare knew Montaigne’s *Essais*, Terence Cave unfolds an imaginary episode that Shakespeare’s encounter and interaction with Montaigne in London led to the writing of *The Tempest*: “I prefer instead to state my conception of thinking with Shakespeare in the form of a quasi-allegorical counter-factual story in which Montaigne, as the representative of a particular kind of discursive thought (essaying, trial-thinking), encounters and virtually changes places with Shakespeare, the thinking dramatist and poet”.⁷ Thus, the following argument about ‘death’ in both *Les Essais* and *Hamlet* presupposes the shared mental attitude of ‘essaying’ or ‘trial-thinking’ in respective writers.

When reading through a series of various titled essays in Montaigne’s *Essais*, we come to notice that one of the consistently referred topics in many of them is ‘death’; Montaigne says in one of his essays, “It appeareth by the shuffling and huddling up of my examples, I affect no subject so particularly as this. Were

⁵ Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Viking, 2008), pp. 388-89.

⁶ All the quotations from *Hamlet* are from *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London and New York: Methuen, 1982). Act, scene, and line numbers are shown in brackets.

For the phrasing of this speech of Hamlet, some scholars have pointed out its relation to Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s another passage: “My consultation doth somewhat roughly hew the matter, and by it’s first shew, lightly consider the same: the maine and chiefe point of the worke, I am wont to resigne to heaven” (“Of the Art of Conferring”, III. viii) This quotation from Florio’s Montaigne is from *The Essays of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, vols. 3, translated by John Florio, Everyman’s Library, ed. by Earnest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1910), vol. 3, p. 171.

⁷ Terence Cave, “When Shakespeare Met Montaigne” in *Thinking with Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays for A.D. Nuttal*, ed. by William Poole and Richard Scholar (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), pp. 115-19; p. 117.

I composer of books, I would keep a register, commented of the diverse deaths which, in teaching men to die, should after teach them to live" (p. 14). Among such essays, in particular, "That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die" is the one in which Montaigne is engaged in doing 'trial-thinking' about the uncertain thing of 'death'. The beginning of this essay goes like this:

Cicero sayeth, that to Philosophize is no other thing than for a man to prepare himself to death: which is the reason that study and contemplation doth in some sort withdraw our soul from us, and severally employ it from the body, which is a kind of apprenticesage and resemblance of death. Or else it is that all the wisdom and discourse of the world doth in the end resolve upon this point: to teach us not to fear to die. (p. 13)

Montaigne thus encourages us "not to fear to die", declaring in the end of this essay, "Behold here the good precepts of our universal mother Nature" (p. 33). In the interim, his "discourse" evolves in this way:

Let us learn to stand and combat her with a resolute mind. And being to take the greatest advantage she hath upon us from her, let us take a clean contrary way from the common; let us remove her strangeness from her; let us converse, frequent, and acquaint ourselves with her; let us have nothing so much in mind as death; let us at all times and seasons, and in the ugliest manner that may be, yea with all faces shapen, and represent the same unto our imagination. At the stumbling of a horse, at the fall of a stone, at the least prick with a pin, let us presently ruminare and say with ourselves: what if it were death it self? And thereupon let us take heart of grace and call our wits together to confront her. (p. 20)

Otherwise, for my part, I should be in continual fear and agony; for no man did ever more distrust his life, nor make less account of his continuance. Neither can health, which hitherto I have so long enjoyed and which so seldom hath been crazed, lengthen my hopes, nor any sickness shorten them of it. At every minute methinks I make an escape. And uncessantly record unto myself, that whatsoever may be done another day may be effected this day. (p. 21)

The passages quoted above are the lessons which are teaching us the Stoical way of confronting death with a resolute and reasonable mind. Having said that, Montaigne undermines the absolute power of reason in the face of death:

Our religion hath had no surer human foundation than the contempt of life. Discourse of reason doth not only call and summon us unto it. For why should we fear to lose a thing which, being lost, cannot be moaned? But also, since we are threatened by so many kinds of death, there is no more inconvenience to fear them all than to endure one. What matter is it when it cometh, since it is unavoidable? (p. 27)

There are in these passages some hint of relativism in confronting death. Montaigne then recommends us live through a life as death is unavoidable:

Life in itself is neither good nor evil; it is the place of good or evil according as you prepare it for them. (p. 29)

Greenblatt notes Montaigne's gradual development of philosophical mind from Stoicism to skepticism to Epicureanism in the course of his shifting essays. He observes that "the early essays share many of the preoccupations of Stoicism, with its central desire to free the core of the self from vulnerability and terror. Appalling things may happen in the course of a life, and everyone without exception must confront death, but pagan moralists like Plutarch and Seneca taught themselves acceptance of necessity" (xx); that "yet his dying friend's strange words haunted Montaigne and seemed to undermine the Stoical arguments of the early essays, even as he piled them up" (xxi); and that "Montaigne has shifted in these later essays from the Stoical pursuit of vulnerability in the face of pain and death to the goal that characterized the Stoics' great philosophical opponents, the Epicureans: the pursuit of pleasure" (xxiv). Furthermore, Greenblatt witnesses the probability of Montaigne-like change of mind in Hamlet with such a linear philosophical development:

There is something strikingly Montaigne-like in Hamlet's intertwining of Stoicism—

Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core— (III.ii.64-66)

with philosophical skepticism—

And yet to me what is the quintessence of dust?— (II.ii.297-98)

and inner acceptance—

If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (V.ii.158-60) (xxx)

As it is, Hamlet has been confronted by the uncertainty of 'death', that is, such fearful questions of what 'death' is like or how the dead are after they die since he meets the Ghost. He is not certain whether the Ghost is really his father's spirit: "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable, / Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane (I. iv. 40-45)." Yet at the end of their encounter, Hamlet calls the Ghost a spirit: "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit (I. v. 190)". In his irresolute mind wavering between revenge and self-slaughter, his thought extends to the situation of afterlife: "To die—to sleep, / No more;...To die, to sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:... / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will (III. i. 60-80)". In such a horrifying uncertainty, Hamlet highly admires Horatio's attitude of Stoic defiance. After getting back alive from the doomed sail for England, narrowly escaping Claudius's assassination plan, Hamlet seems to take life as a philosopher: "We defy augury.

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all (V. ii. 215-18)". This development of Hamlet's mind seems to correspond with the shifting mind of Montaigne, not only in his whole essays as Greenblatt suggests, but also in one essay "That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die"; it appears to match with Montaigne's various expressions about the way not to fear death that I have quoted above. Hamlet's ultimate recognition, "the readiness is all", seems to interact with Montaigne's "whatsoever may be done another day may be effected this day".

All the same, there is still some hint of uncertainty and ambiguity in both Montaigne's and Hamlet's minds in spite of their apparent inner acceptance. The rhetorical "discourse" of Montaigne's essays is wandering back and forth rather than going a liner course. Montaigne frequently puts on trial what he has just ascertained in the form of dialogue. Sometimes Montaigne, the speaker himself, speaks to another self of him:

Life in itself neither good nor evil; it is the place of good or evil according as you prepare it for them.

And if you have lived one day, you have seen all: one day is equal to all other days....This sun, this moon, these stars, and this disposition is the very same which your forefathers enjoyed and which shall also entertain your posterity. (p. 29)

The sudden change of the grammatical subject of a sentence, that is, an abrupt insertion of "you" who are speaking to another self makes loom large the nature of Montaigne's *Essais*—self-questioning, essaying, trial-thinking. By way of this rhetorical trick, his quasi-Epicurean recognition of living through a good life is immediately undermined by its counter questions.

Like the same association, Hamlet is nothing less than unsure about 'death' when he appears in the grave yard as a changed and resolute man. Hamlet is surprised to find a grave-digger singing while he is digging a grave, tossing the skull of a supposed politician in his life time. The grave-digger's nonchalant way of treating the dead is diametrically opposed to ordinary people's, and Hamlet's meticulous way of treating them: "Here's fine revolution and we had the trick to see't (V. i. 89)". In light of Hamlet's old habits, the grave-digger's work is the "one that would circumvent God (V. i. 78)". Hamlet asks Horatio with astonishment:

Ham. Has this fellow no feeling of his business a sings in grave-making?

Hor. Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

Ham. 'Tis e'en so, the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

(V. i. 65-69)

In explaining the mind of the grave-digger, Horatio, a student in philosophy, sounds like Montaigne who says about 'death' thus: "let us remove her strangeness from her; let us converse, frequent, and acquaint ourselves with her". On the other hand, Hamlet sounds like another self of Montaigne who thinks of 'death' as horror and anxiety.

When Hamlet faces his own death in the final scene, he prevents Horatio from committing a suicide and asks him to live and tell his story:

Ham. Horatio, I am dead,
Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

Hor. Never believe it.
I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
Here's yet some liquor left.

Ham. As th'art a man
Give me the cup. Let go, by Heaven I'll ha't.
O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw the breath in pain
To tell my story. (V. ii. 343-54)

Probably things will remain “unknown” even after Hamlet dies. Yet what Horatio is tasked to do by Hamlet is to live to pass down an obscure story rather than die to seek to stick to his principle.