The Return of Logos: Language and Meaning in Hamlet

James Funk
Winthrop University Rock Hill, South Carolina
The Return of Logos: Language and Meaning in Hamlet

Keywords
Hamlet, William Shakespeare, Logos
The Return of Logos: Language and Meaning in *Hamlet*

James Funk  
*Winthrop University*  
*Rock Hill, South Carolina*

**Given the treachery and deception that pervades Elsinore at the beginning of *Hamlet*, the disparity between appearance and reality emerges as one of the central problems of the play. Because language contributes to this sense of uncertainty, Hamlet becomes distrustful of words: caught between the ghost’s call for revenge and Claudius’s insistence on normality in the kingdom, the prince sees no underlying reason in language and thus dismisses it as a random stream of sounds. For much of the play, logos is absent from linguistic discourse; for Hamlet, words are empty signifiers missing a logical center.** Corresponding
with this deconstruction of language is Hamlet’s inability to act against Claudius, the character most responsible for language’s de-centering. Only after the sea voyage, which contains a reversal that reorients Hamlet’s metaphysical center and guides him toward reason, does the prince embrace logos and accept his reality as ordered; in the meantime, the breakdown in logos results in hesitation. References to language and, in particular, to the word “word” thus provide a way to chart Hamlet’s epistemological journey.

The role of language in *Hamlet* has been the subject of some previous critical speculation. In *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet*, James L. Calderwood spends a great deal of time deconstructing the play’s language. Lawrence Danson devotes a chapter in his *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare’s Drama of Language* to a structuralist examination of language in the tragedy. Critics have more generally addressed Shakespeare’s treatment of philosophical themes in an edited volume entitled *Thinking with Shakespeare*, but a discussion of the connection between language and philosophy—so relevant when studying a work of literature—is conspicuously absent. I intend to demonstrate that an understanding of Hamlet’s difficulties with language sheds light on his inability to act against his uncle, an issue over which critics have struggled since the inception of Shakespearean studies. While this essay addresses the perspectives of Calderwood and Danson and also explores the philosophical underpinnings of Shakespeare’s tragedy, it focuses just as much, if not
more, on the prince’s efforts to restructure reality and again embrace logos, an important idea rarely explored by scholars. Let us begin with an overview of this key concept.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, logos is primarily concerned with the intersection of language and reason. Since its inception, the Western philosophical establishment has assumed the inextricable link between language and metaphysical presence. The philosophical importance of “The Word,” whatever its precise definition, extends from ancient thought to Stoic philosophy to Christianity. Beginning with Heraclitus, who introduced the concept of logos into philosophical discourse, Western thinkers have taken for granted language’s role as “a model for the world,” an avenue to logical understanding (568). Plato, for example, claimed that language could function as a human attempt to attach meaning to reality and as a path to spiritual or logical understanding. Hamlet’s attachment to a language grounded in logic invokes the relationship Plato identifies between logos and epistemology. As R. C. Cross claims, for Plato “true belief with the addition of a logos is knowledge, while belief without a logos is not knowledge” (433). Discourse in Claudius’s court fulfills the former function of Platonic language but not the latter: words comprise a socially constructed system of meaning—albeit a distorted meaning, but they do not approach the spiritual/logical realm or the realm of the Forms, which is defined in Plato’s Republic as “the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything…it controls and provides truth and understanding” (189). Claudius himself succinctly
illustrates this discrepancy between language and truth when he finds he cannot pray: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97-98).

Hamlet’s desire that language express metaphysical truth suggests his admiration for the Stoic interplay between “human logos” and “divine logos,” delineated in the *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy*: ideally, the former derives from the latter. Stoic philosophy holds that true logic in language comes when one conceptualizes reality as “one coherent system,” at which point he or she functions properly in the universe (“Logos”). The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* points out that the Stoic notion of linguistic truth is essentially a precursor to the Christian treatment of logos, represented by Jesus Christ. For Origen, an early Christian thinker, Christ—functioning as a symbol for language—reveals spiritual mysteries by way of reason (569).

Hamlet’s yearning for the Stoic understanding of reality manifests itself in his fondness for Horatio, his Stoic friend. Recognizing the relationship between “human” and “divine” logos, Don Perry Norford argues that, in the play, “the ear provides a channel between [the inner and outer worlds] because it is the medium of the word, which is the logos, the expression of the mind” (567). Logos will eventually enable Hamlet to avenge his father’s death, but it will take a great deal of spiritual and intellectual work to achieve that action. Hamlet must first overcome what the Stoics consider an inevitable progression from chaos to transcendental truth. According to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the
Stoics posited that the universe “periodically perishes in a conflagration that turns all the elements back into fire, from which a new world arises, seeded by seminal logos, a structural principle that directs the cosmogony” (569). To reconnect with logos in the Stoic sense, Hamlet must sort through the confusion that pervades Elsinore, moving from metaphysical violence and chaos to metaphysical unity. Only by re-establishing the center will Hamlet recapture the logos that once provided unity to his existence.

The linguistic indeterminacy that surrounds Hamlet bothers him because, as a student, he expects language to convey reason. Hamlet relies on his “brains,” and the absence of reason in Elsinore’s discourse bewilders him (2.2.588). Claudius’s usurpation of the throne has de-centered not only the power structure of Elsinore but also Hamlet’s faith in metaphysical presence, a product of what Jacques Derrida terms logocentrism, the privileging of language as the possessor of some overarching truth outside of itself. It is helpful to conceptualize discourse in Hamlet as a sort of linguistic de-evolution: during the reign of Hamlet Senior, language fulfilled its role as an accurate conveyor of truth. When the king—who represents goodness and truth—dies, a disruption in the organic unity of language within Elsinore occurs: the succession of Claudius corresponds to the replacement of knowledge with epistemological chaos. In poststructuralist terms, the play moves from a state of metaphysical presence to one of absence, with Claudius challenging any notion of reality that Hamlet once held. Under Claudius, life is reduced to mere appearance: words
add layers of deceptive signification to discourse rather than providing an avenue to objective reality. Claudius, then, functions as a figure of metaphysical and linguistic destruction; because of Hamlet’s logocentrism, Claudius’s language-based deception translates into an emptying of fundamental truth. Faced with his uncle’s reversal of the truth/untruth binary, the prince must dismantle the erroneous signification system and restore the kingdom to a level of reality where language conveys truth rather than obfuscates.

In the midst of the deception at Elsinore, Hamlet can no longer privilege speech as a source of logos. His comments regarding language clearly convey his distrust of words. Indeed, his attitude toward language for much of the play is diametrically opposed to logos. This skepticism stems from the disjointed sense of reality at Elsinore, the absence of reason and, by extension, of logos. When Polonius—who tries to ingratiate himself to Hamlet—asks the prince what he is reading, Hamlet’s reply—“words, words, words”—suggests that, at least in the Danish court, Hamlet considers language meaningless because it cannot legitimately convey truth (2.2.193). Hamlet tells Gertrude that the queen in “The Murder of Gonzago” will “keep her word,” a sarcastic comment on the unreliability of verbal oaths (3.2.229). In the closet scene, Hamlet claims that his mother’s marriage vows to King Hamlet were little more than “a rhapsody of words” (3.4.50). Hamlet’s remarks indicate that he views language not as a valid expression of reason but as a series of empty signifiers. Elsinore’s questionable discourse leads him to believe that systems of language are not inherently
tied to logos; according to Lawrence Danson, Hamlet is unable to “understand the language of the court—a language which . . . has lost its necessary relationship to a world it no longer adequately describes” (28). Prior to his father’s murder, Hamlet could assume that language accurately conveyed some underlying meaning; Claudius’s court, on the other hand, undermines language’s validity and presents an epistemological challenge that Hamlet struggles to overcome.

Part of Hamlet’s trouble stems from his tendency to conceptualize people and situations in binary terms. When he first encounters the ghost, for example, he regards it with an either/or mentality:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,  
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. (1.4.40-45)

After considering interpretations that are binary opposites—the Ghost as human or demonic, good or evil, Hamlet concludes that he has seen his father’s spirit and then indulges in further binary thinking: the ghost’s benevolence versus Claudius’s malevolence. Hamlet’s interpretation of the ghost suggests that he believes in linguistic stability, the idea that the signifier and signified are reliably linked. But while Hamlet struggles to establish this signifier/signified
connection, Claudius confounds the binary by presenting himself as a noble and proficient king who is concerned for his nephew. Indeed, Claudius’s opening speech reveals his desire to maintain order and peace in the kingdom through eloquence. Discussing his hasty marriage to Gertrude, Claudius claims that he, “as ‘twere with a defeated joy— / With an auspicious and a dropping eye, / With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, / In equal scale weighing delight and dole,” has taken Hamlet’s mother for a wife (1.2.10-13). Claudius recognizes the importance of binary thinking, making sure that he mourns sufficiently and thus presents himself as a well-balanced and sensitive ruler. According to Danson, Claudius wants “to make language swallow up irreconcilable differences” and thus smudge the line between appearance and reality (27). The king is fully aware that his courtly, ornate language has successfully covered up his crime: “The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art, / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word!” (3.1.52-54).

Hamlet’s problem, then, is a lack of knowledge: he is left in a state of deconstruction rather than logos because he does not know whose words to trust. According to James Calderwood, “in place of Hamlet’s implied and Aristotle’s explicit law of the excluded middle . . . we have Shakespeare’s law of the included middle,” or the presence of uncertainty within the play (xiv). Elsinore’s discourse does not fulfill the prince’s logocentric expectation of an objective reality grounded in reason; Claudius’s dishonesty complicates the good/evil binary in which Hamlet indulges
and thus increases the epistemological difficulties the prince endures. The ghost’s nocturnal wanderings also prove to be problematic; while Hamlet is more concerned about the ghost’s ontological existence than the validity of its words, the spirit’s presence certainly increases the confusion surrounding Elsinore.

Because Hamlet senses the unreliability of language, he deemphasizes its value in his own conversations and actions. The prince does not believe that words can properly express his sorrow over his father’s death, telling Gertrude that “windy suspirations of forced breath” cannot approach the level of his mourning (1.2.79). By reducing speech to its simplest physical element, Hamlet is making a forceful statement about language’s inefficacy. Falstaff, another Shakespearean character wary of language, summarizes Hamlet’s attitude well in 1 King Henry IV: “What is honor? A word. What is in that word ‘honor’? What is that ‘honor’? Air. A trim reckoning!” (5.1.133-35). Hamlet and Falstaff realize that a word—the signifier—cannot do justice to a concept—the signified; indeed, language can just as easily mislead as clarify.

For Hamlet, speech functions as a receptacle of dishonesty and deception, not as a conveyor of reason. Because there is no spiritual or intellectual substance underlying the machinations of characters like Claudius and Guildenstern, Hamlet acts in a similarly empty way, affecting his “antic disposition” and babbling to throw others off his trail of revenge (1.5.181). It is worth noting that the prince’s diversionary madness, the only strategy he
can conceive amidst the uncertain environment of Elsinore, provides him a level of paradoxical stability. After all, he provides clues for his strategic madness throughout the play, telling Guildenstern that he is “but mad north-north-west” (2.2.378) and admitting to his mother that he is simply “mad in craft” (3.4.195). Hamlet’s fictional insanity, in other words, functions as a means of constancy in the de-centered Elsinore. Since other characters are willing to empty language of its value, Hamlet follows suit. This tendency toward kenosis—a term that, according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, originated in theological circles to convey the theory that “the divine Word relinquished some or all of His divinity in becoming man” but that poststructuralist scholars later adapted to convey the inherent emptiness of language—is most apparent when the prince renounces his love for Ophelia (143). When she reminds him of his previous romantic statements, he tells her that “we are arrant knaves all; believe none of us” (3.1.130). Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia indicates his alienation from logos. Hamlet did love Ophelia; her claim that he uttered “words of . . . sweet breath composed” suggests that his romantic language was once real and substantive (3.1.119). But because words have lost all meaning, Hamlet feels that no one, including Ophelia, is trustworthy in the kingdom.

Hamlet internalizes the absence of logos at Elsinore to the point that he even doubts the underlying truth of his own language. After the ghost demands Claudius’s murder, Hamlet claims that revenge is at the top of his agenda, even writing down a “word” of commitment in his diary.
(1.5.111). But because he is caught between the demands of the ghost and the linguistic façade of purity that Claudius erects, the prince cannot act. Hamlet “must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words” instead of physically seeking revenge (3.1.586). He may tell the acting troupe to “suit the action to the word, / The word to the action,” but this request is Hamlet’s projection of his own inability to achieve a balance of speech and action (2.2.17-18). In this sense the Player who delivers the Pyrrhus speech acts as a foil to Hamlet: the Player’s ability to “force his soul so to his own conceit” contrasts heavily with Hamlet’s hesitation and ineffectiveness (2.2.553). The Player thus participates in an interesting dichotomy: Hamlet’s feelings are real, but he cannot translate them into words; the player’s emotions, so easily expressed in language, are in reality contrived.

Hamlet fails to realize that the act of theater merely reinforces the air of linguistic illusion in Elsinore; the players are fulfilling a role, not embracing logos. Even after observing Claudius’s reaction to the “Murder of Gonzago,” Hamlet’s supposedly bona fide evidence for his uncle’s guilt, the prince continues to suffer from the same disjunction between language and objective reality. Hamlet’s signifying is still broken because he does not know whether the king reacted to the play with fear or guilt—after all, “The Murder of Gonzago” presents a death threat, arising because Lucianus is nephew to the king. According to Aaron Landau, Hamlet’s acceptance of theater as a form of logical discourse is problematic because “playacting, which Hamlet has turned all of a sudden into a ‘decisive’ epistemological tool, had
in fact been deprecated” by the prince earlier in the play, especially during his soliloquy upon the arrival of the acting troupe (227). So while Hamlet tells Horatio that he will “take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” after observing Claudius’s reaction, he still cannot take substantive action against the king (3.2.284-85). Before he confronts Gertrude, he notes, “how in my words somever she be shent, / To give them seals never my soul consent!” (3.3.395-96). Consequently, when Hamlet implicates Gertrude in King Hamlet’s murder, his “word” to her is just that: there is no real intention of action behind his language because the king’s reaction has not furnished him with the necessary evidence for revenge (3.4.31). No matter how he “reword[s]” the matter, Hamlet has no metaphysical center from which to proceed (3.4.150). In fact, in his final injunction to her (“one word more, good lady”) he demands that she continue to keep his secret: in essence, he is using language to further blur the distorted reality of Elsinore (3.4.187).

The restoration of logos in Hamlet’s world depends on the rediscovery of a metaphysical center in his existence. For much of the play, Hamlet operates outside the boundaries of logic because it is not conducive to Elsinore and the empty signifiers of the court’s discourse. Elsinore’s skewed reality has created fragmentation within Hamlet: because he is unable to reconcile the competing words of Claudius and the ghost, Hamlet is unable to unite reason and action. While he realizes that God, who endowed humans with “such large discourse” (4.4.37), did not mean for “that capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused,” he
balks because he lacks the very reason he addresses (4.4.39-40). Hamlet must achieve psychological wholeness before he can embrace logos and interact properly in his exterior environment.

The experience that fundamentally changes Hamlet’s perception of his existence and brings him closer to logos is the sea voyage he undertakes in the fifth act. Hamlet’s discovery of Claudius’s letter to the English king demanding his execution provides the prince with the stable sign he needs to return to logos. In a rather literal illustration of Jacques Lacan’s “Name-of-the-Father” concept, which stresses the patriarchal underpinnings of metaphysical presence, Hamlet returns to the linguistic and intellectual center embodied in Hamlet Senior by using his father’s seal to replace the letter. Hamlet’s subsequent encounter with the pirates provides a further revelation about the character of Claudius: while his words suggest that he is innocent of murder, the pirate incident proves to Hamlet that a person like his uncle can be bad but pretend to be good. According to Matthew A. Fike, Hamlet’s abduction by pirates amounts to a confrontation with his Jungian shadow: “the pirates are shadow projections with whom he effectively negotiates during his sea voyage.” Fike also notes that the thieving pirates, ostensibly a group of bad people, do a good deed by returning Hamlet to Denmark (146). Hamlet’s newfound knowledge essentially reverses the black-and-white binary that a person is definitively either good or evil. He finally understands Claudius’s posturing for what it is: just as pirates who are bad can do a good deed, Claudius—who seems to
be a good and just king—can also be an attempted murderer. The sea voyage allows Hamlet to reorient his position in the truth/untruth binary: finally understanding Claudius’s malevolence, the prince now swings toward the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum.

Hamlet’s psychological integration also allows him to cast off his façade of insanity; consequently, his language takes on a new significance. Even before he returns, Hamlet sends Horatio a letter asserting the power of language, claiming that he has “words to speak in [his] ear will make [him] dumb” (4.6.24-25). It is clear that Hamlet has a new grasp of language as he stands over Ophelia’s grave. Whereas he disavowed his love for Ophelia at the nadir of his deconstructive phase, he is now able to mourn her death openly and truthfully. His language of affection is a sharp departure from the emotional constipation he expressed in his soliloquies. Hamlet now can “force his soul to his own conceit” (2.2.553): “Forty thousand brothers, / Could not with all their quantity of love, / Make up my sum” (5.1.272-74).

The prince also achieves a spiritual understanding that brings him closer to the Stoic integration of “divine” and “human” logos, an achievement that will allow him to function properly in the universe. Hamlet assures Horatio that “[t]here’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). Providence, in other words, provides an overall comic shape to existence despite humanity’s manifold errors. Having wrestled with uncertainty and overcome it, Hamlet’s epistemological
struggle takes on positive value and he swings toward faith rather than disbelief. Hamlet’s new attitude, embodied in his declaration that “the readiness is all” (5.2.220), suggests that he is willing to wait for the divinely inspired opportunity to avenge his father. The evidence for a fully justified revenge comes when Hamlet realizes that Claudius has poisoned Gertrude. Not only does Hamlet act decisively against his uncle, but he accomplishes his revenge under the dictates of reason and Providence. He has aligned his actions with God’s will and thus returned to logos. In this sense, Hamlet fulfills the Old Testament conception of logos; according to the New Catholic Encyclopedia, Revelations treats logos “as eschatological Victor and Judge. The Logos of God exterminates the unjust” (760). By recapturing logos and aligning his will with that of God, Hamlet can capitalize on the opportunity for revenge and still maintain a clear conscience. Revenge for Hamlet now represents a return to structure rather than an affirmation of bloodshed.

Hamlet’s reacquisition of a spiritual and intellectual center corresponds to his renewed faith in words and signifying. Language is no longer a system of signs that conveys nothing beyond its structure; rather, words possess a transcendent quality that goes hand in hand with reason. The fact that Hamlet asks Horatio—a Stoic—to “report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” suggests that Hamlet’s revenge against Claudius signals the restoration of logos in Denmark (5.2.341-42). Danson argues that the revenge constitutes “a fully meaningful linguistic and gestural expression”; in other words, Hamlet’s joining of
word and action legitimates the role of language in the play (49). Of course, the prince understands by the time of his death that one cannot automatically privilege language as a conveyor of metaphysical presence and reason; words can be easily emptied of meaning and binary thinking can be confounded. Nevertheless, Hamlet has moved from a state of deconstruction to one of spiritual acceptance and, ultimately, an adherence to logos.
Works Cited


