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Department of **ENGLISH**

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date **7 June 1985**
Abstract

In recent years the study of Renaissance theatre has become an ideological battleground. After so many years of debating the language and themes of Shakespeare's plays, many scholars have begun to examine the social patterns of the world which produced these plays. This emphasis on the patterns and influences which comprise a complex culture has provided many enlightening looks at Shakespeare's world—a world which we desire to reconstruct in order to better understand these plays. However, one troubling factor of this method of criticism (usually associated with the New Historicism) is the gap it leaves between the medieval Christian world which came before it and the Renaissance secular culture of which the theatre was a prominent part. Is there a way to understand the textual composition of the theatre as a continuation of the medieval history which preceded it? More specifically, is there a justification for studying theatre as part of a literary history in particular?

The problem of literacy has long concerned scholars of late antiquity and the middle ages. They argue the statistics and the definitions of literacy, especially when considering the transitions between oral and written cultures. Clanchy and Gellrich, among others, have integrated into this study the concept of the book and its central place in the culture of the middle ages. The precise definitions of concepts such as book, work, and text have been questioned, thus creating a problem in understanding what it means to say that Christianity was a "religion of the book". A pioneering study which has allowed for ways to talk about these issues was done by Brian Stock in The Implications of Literacy (1983) and in his more recent Listening for the Text (1990). In these two books, Stock develops the idea of "textual communities", which he defines as "...microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script" and more specifically as "....group[s] that [arise] somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization." Stock's model allows for these groups to be regarded as interpretive communities, but also as social entities. Any group which comes together in order to engage in the process of interpretation around a text, be it written or spoken, may develop into a textual community. The members of this community gradually form a shared understanding of the text through a communal experience. As a result, these communities often combine
to form rules, to define moral aims, and to participate in rituals which recall this text. Because of the nature of this project, most of the models of the textual community have been applied to late antique and medieval Christian communities. However, surely an idea as workable as this can be used in other places where people interact around a text and form communities.

Shakespearean studies of language and representation abound, but can they be connected to earlier traditions of textual communities? Certainly the theatre is a community (albeit a commercial and often transitory one), and one especially concerned with the interplay between the spoken and the written word. In this thesis, I plan to examine Renaissance theatre in light of what might be called a Stockian model of the textual community. Although there are problems in applying a model developed for an earlier time period to a later one, this approach may in fact contribute to a broader understanding of the way language and community are formed around the representations of the stage in Renaissance plays.

This project involves situating Renaissance theatre in relation to the Christian literary history which preceded it and which was still a part of Renaissance culture. A central facet of Christian belief was the concern for the word, and this is a concern which was inherited by the early modern period, and which is evident on the Renaissance stage. Admittedly, the Renaissance theatre was not focused upon the central text of scripture, but the acting companies were nonetheless deeply concerned with words, and with defining themselves in and through a world of words. Stock explains that, "What one believes is shaped by the means of communication by which the content is transmitted." What, then, can we say about the methods by which the theatre presented the content of their plays? What is the nature of this community, and what is its relationship to the text?

Theatre itself can be seen as a sort of text, and within this large body, smaller texts, plays, work within it in order to form a community based on the word. In the case of Hamlet, we witness a play which is fraught with concerns about the word. Using Hamlet as an example, I intend to examine how the textual community of the theatre formed around the interactive play between the written and the spoken word.
Word as idea and essence

Hamlet's most famous moments involve his soliloquies, obviously because he broaches philosophical concerns of great interest. However, the very popularity of these scenes, and the endurance of his words, make clear that the theatre is able to present these ideas in a striking way. In these instances, the words themselves are the action of the play. Somehow this verbal action of the actor upon a stage, much like the action of an orator in classical times, or that of a priest during the Mass, has the ability to move the audience. It may be unclear how, exactly, these words affect the audience, but indeed many of the soliloquies involve a meditation on words and ideas themselves. Hamlet's repeated addressing of the audience allows for both a participation in his tragedy and an opportunity to remove oneself from the action of the play in order to meditate on that action, and on the words which describe that action. The formation of a textual community includes many moments of self-definition and self-fashioning, in order to establish the location and central textuality of this community. We see here through Hamlet the theatre's struggle to find its place on a stage. These isolated moments in Hamlet are a window through which we can see the theatre finding its own place between the institutionalized beliefs inherited from the church and the questioning or subversion of those same beliefs. Words themselves, given breath upon stage, become the vehicle for the creation of meaning and also of the questioning of that same meaning.

Word as action

The purpose of a textual community is ultimately that, once a group is formed around the central understanding of a text, its behaviour becomes distinctive as a response to this text. As Stock states, "Word is transformed into behavior." I want to investigate the possible links between the importance of actions based on a text in the textual communities which Stock describes and the complex relationship between word and action in theatrical representation. The very fact that a playwright constructs a script which the actors perform makes this interplay between word and action a central concern. It also parallels the other main idea behind a textual community--the interaction between the written and the spoken word. In theatre, they are completely intertwined, mediated by the action itself. This concern is evident in Hamlet, most strikingly in the scene where he confronts the players in order to talk about the nature of drama. Hamlet's insistence that the players suit the action to the word, and hold the mirror up to nature, shows a self-conscious moment of the theatrical community itself, as it struggled to define itself by its profession of acting. The character of Hamlet is one tormented by his inability to transform words--the words of the ghost, his own words, and what he knows--into action.
In this instance, it is evident that the textual community is not working properly, and so the very issues raised in *Hamlet* confront and problematize these links between text and community (and, perhaps, between theatre and community).

**Word as memory/history**

The full establishment of a textual community involves a process of historicization. This is the writing down of a community's experience. The playwright's function, of course, is the writing down, but at the same time, the historical placement of the theatre was not an easy one. The theatre accomplished this by personating historical or legendary figures, itself becoming the method by which history is mediated. Any ritual involves the reinterpretation of history through the eyes of the present, through a process of oral/aural interchange. The theatre had no trouble continuing this ritualistic tradition, but the essence of what it was attempting to establish was somewhat different. This process of historicization is directly connected to memory. What should be remembered upon the stage is central to its purpose. Hamlet's encounter with the ghost involves an immediate plea to remember, and he transfers the ghost's word to his own. Constantly Hamlet must remember his own promise, his father's fate, Denmark's history, etc. In the midst of events within the play, there are frequent reports about other events--other histories which are already being told. Hamlet's final plea to Horatio to tell his history is a fine moment of theatrical awareness that the play itself does just that--enacts and remembers Hamlet's story. Renaissance theatre thus was able to establish itself as a community which was in the business of interpreting words and setting them down on the stage for others to see.

Understanding Renaissance theatre as a textual community situated within, and continuing, in a literary context, allows for both a fuller understanding of the workings of this idea of the textual community and a fuller understanding of the conditions of Renaissance theatre itself, and how its methods exemplified in *Hamlet* were working to shape and reflect the world around it. In Stock's contextual word, "...culture does not resemble an evolutionary tree; it is more like a game, in which a central place is reserved for interactive play." Perhaps there is no more confusing, and yet no more rewarding, ground on which to examine the oral and written interplay within a textual community than in the Renaissance theatre. It is, after all, the place where "interactive play" is most appropriate.

Gretchen E. Minton
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Acknowledgments

In many ways, this thesis represents what is typical of me and my interests. I have always been fascinated with communities, interpretation, history, and Shakespeare, so this project has truly allowed me to work in all of these areas simultaneously. However, it was certainly never my intention to write yet another thing about Hamlet. It is, to say the least, a very daunting task. Now I am in a position to be glad that I did it anyway (even with the voices of thousands of other scholars ringing in my head), and I realize that I have learned many valuable lessons, and for these I have many people to thank.

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Tony Dawson, Mark Vessey, and Iain Higgins for their willingness to help me in many ways. Tony Dawson has been an exemplary advisor, who has exercised an inexhaustible willingness to aide my project every step of the way, as well as a patience in attempting to control my mind, which has "a tendency to expand outwards and sideways." Special appreciation also goes to Mark Vessey, for his continual encouragement and support, and, significantly, for first introducing me to the work of Brian Stock. I also thank Patricia Badir, who kindly read the manuscript in its final stages and provided some very useful suggestions.

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Gretchen E. Minton
7 June 1995
Introduction

Enter Hamlet, reading on a book
Gertrude: "But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading."

In his first appearance since his "transformation" at the end of Act One, Hamlet enters the play, reading. We already know that his intention to go back to school at Wittenberg has been thwarted by the pleas of his mother and uncle, and as Hamlet takes a reluctant centre stage, he does so with a book in hand. We may wonder, as Polonius does, what, exactly, Hamlet is reading. However, the frustrating response Hamlet gives to that questions is "words, words, words." Although this reply is in some ways appropriate, it is also haunting, and as we read or hear the words of the play called Hamlet, we are left with a multitude of questions concerning the nature of words and their interpretation on the Elizabethan stage.

This scene (II.ii), the longest in Hamlet (running a full 600 lines), begins with the King's welcome of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the school fellows who remind us of Hamlet's position as a student, followed by Polonius' claim that he has found the cause of Hamlet's madness. Before this revelation, however, there is a matter of business, and Voltemand must relate the course of the Danish affairs with Norway. Certain letters are passed around, and certain things are set down. Throughout the play, in fact, important matters are "set down", as if anything of great import must be written, thus making it part of a specifically literary\(^1\) context. Appropriately, the "evidence" which Polonius produces in support of his diagnosis of Hamlet's "love sickness" is a letter.

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\(^1\)Throughout this thesis, I will be using "literary" to refer to the traditional and general category of those things of and relating to the written word. Naturally, this term relates to "book-learning", or that which we may call "literacy" in a more advanced sense than the modern notion of literacy as the ability to read and write. The also relatively modern notion of "literature" will not figure here, where my concern is specifically how Elizabethans viewed and worked with words in a wide variety of contexts.
It is after these preparatory movements in the scene, with plans set down and plots devised, that Hamlet enters the scene, reading. Polonius is unable to discover what Hamlet is reading, unable to draw any intelligible answer from him, and must retreat in confusion. After destroying Polonius in this one-sided game of wits, Hamlet is in a position to meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to accuse them immediately of being sent for. Hamlet's subsequent melancholy rhetorical flight is sometimes considered among the most poetic and beautiful language in Shakespeare, but Hamlet's attention is successfully diverted, along with his audience's, by a most interesting interruption—the arrival of the players.

Here the self-reflexivity of the Shakespearean theatre reaches its fullest potential as Hamlet confronts the players and talks about the joy and the power of the theatre. He immediately asks for a speech which he remembers from

...an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine. (II.ii.435-441)

Significantly, the speech that Hamlet requests is based on a famous literary story—a dramatic re-telling of the slaughter of Priam. The effectiveness of the players lies in their ability to store and to act ancient stories which can somehow relate the past to the present. This speech, based as it is on the famous story of Aeneas/Dido as well as Pyrrhus/Priam/Hecuba, assumes rich layers of textual influences. The many versions of the story evolve over time, and the placing of the speech here in the play functions as a parallel to Hamlet's situation as well as a catalyst for Hamlet's plan which is to be implemented in Act Three. By line 600 of this scene, Hamlet has decided to use the play as a device—a diagnostic and a weapon directed against Claudius. The final lines of the

2All quotations from Hamlet are taken from the Arden Edition, ed. Harold Jenkins (London, 1982).
3On the relationship between the player's speech and Hamlet's situation, see Jenkins' note, 478.
scene reveal Hamlet's excitement as he realizes that "The play's the thing/ wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II.11.600-1).

This scene, like so many in Hamlet, never strays far from specifically literary concerns. Words are used in so many ways—the flatteries of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the orders of Claudius, the reading of Hamlet, the plots of Polonius, and the speech of the Player. Words are spoken, written, recited, and used in multivalent ways, all within the course of this one scene. Most specifically, however, we may find that not only are words used in so many ways, but particular attention is directed to this fact throughout this scene as throughout Hamlet in general. The clear implication at the end of II.ii is that, not only is theatre a profoundly literary enterprise, but it is one which can be used for specific and tangible purposes. What, then, can we infer about the use of the play Hamlet in terms of Shakespeare's theatre?

Although it may not be possible to deduce exactly what book Hamlet enters reading, we can not overlook the fact that he is a scholar and is reading. And as we may note the multitude of literary references, we may also wonder what benefit may be reaped from an attempt to understand the literary history of the theatre. Textual critics have worked very hard on tracing the literary sources of Shakespeare, tracing the origins of the various stories and the textual history of each quarto. However, this programme has not always been adequate in connecting these minute details to larger issues. One such issue is the relationship between the literary emphasis of the plays and the audience watching them.

Following attempts by many critics to answer some of these questions, in recent years the study of Renaissance theatre has become an ideological battleground. After so many years of debating the language and themes of Shakespeare's plays, many scholars have begun to examine the social patterns of the world which produced these plays. This emphasis on the patterns and influences which comprise a complex culture has provided many enlightening looks at Shakespeare's world—a world which we desire to reconstruct.
in order to better understand these plays. However, one troubling feature of this method of criticism (usually associated with the New Historicism) is the gap it leaves between the medieval Christian world and the Renaissance secular culture of which the theatre was a prominent part. Is there a way to understand the textual composition of the theatre as a continuation of the medieval history which preceded it? Although some have attempted to bridge this gap, rarely has there been an attempt to look at the social conditions of the theatre--the players, the playwrights, the venue, the audience--and how they relate to a particularly literary history of theatre.

If we are to ask whether there is a justification for studying the theatre in terms of literary history, we must understand the workings of the theatre in all its aspects and forms. How may we make the transition from Hamlet as a play to the social history of which its production was a part? Gabrielle Spiegel suggests that "...a genuine literary history must always to some extent be both social and formalist in its concerns, must pay attention to a text's 'social logic' in the dual sense of its site of articulation and its discursive character as articulated 'logos'." I would like to suggest that this link is largely available through a model developed by Brian Stock--the idea of the "textual community."

**Stock's Textual Community**

Brian Stock's original conception of the textual community is a central theme in his work *The Implications of Literacy* (1983). He developed this model in order to explain how several heretical and reformist sects in the eleventh and twelfth centuries used their attitudes toward the past in order to define themselves. As Stock explains:

A branch of this general field of inquiry concerns the manner in which the rise of literacy interacted historically with the formation of heretical or reformist religious groups....their uses of literacy were similar: in particular, both resorted to

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textual precedents for justifying deviations from what were considered to be merely customary or uncertain ecclesiastical norms.\textsuperscript{5}

Stock observes that textual communities arise when a group of people unite under a common understanding of a script. In this sense, the central feature of the textual community is the person or rule that determines how this group should interpret a particular work (such as the Scripture).

The defining factor of these textual communities lies in how they use literacy in order to constitute a homogeneous belief system (and subsequent action developed from this system of belief) which sets them apart from the rest of the world. This textuality is not only written, but oral, and Stock's model allows for much room in the interplay between the written and the spoken word, and thus for the involvement both of literate and illiterate members. No matter what the condition of traditional "literacy", these groups shared an understanding which arose from a textual backdrop. The three main requirements of these textual communities are: that the essentials of the text must be easily understood and remembered, that the group members must associate voluntarily, and that they must "make the hermeneutic leap from what the text says to what they think it means; the common understanding provides the foundation for changing thought and behaviour."\textsuperscript{6}

The concept of the textual community, developed for the study of these small sects of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, has interesting implications with regard to major changes in literacy and orality during this time period. Some of these changes involve an economy of producers and consumers, in which "literacy created a site of lexical and syntactical structures which made the persona of the speaker largely irrelevant."\textsuperscript{7} In tandem with this economic development is a similar movement in the scholastic market in which there was "a disinterested market of ideas, for which the

\textsuperscript{6}Stock, Implications 522.
\textsuperscript{7}Stock, Implications 86.
essential prerequisite was a system of communication based on texts."8 Perhaps most importantly, these groups had a level of self-awareness which caused them to define themselves as part of, or apart from, their inherited past. As a result, "Texts gradually acquired the capacity to shape experience itself and to operate as intermediaries between orally transmitted ideas and social change."9

This model of the textual community was useful and interesting enough to warrant expansion, and Stock himself did so in the intervening years between The Implications of Literacy and his 1990 Listening for the Text. In the latter work, he applies the idea of the textual community in order to explain changes in oral and written interaction with the Scripture in antique and late antique Judaic and Christian communities. In doing this, Stock finds that "There are therefore good reasons to modify the original scheme."10 These reasons include the differences in literacy due to the levels of education in the communities of the medieval and the antique period. In addition to providing this development, Stock also clarifies and adds some points to the overall working conceptualization of the textual community.

In Listening for the Text, Stock defines the textual community specifically as "a group that arises somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization."11 More elaborately,

Wherever there are texts that are read aloud or silently, there are groups of listeners that can potentially profit from them. A natural process of education takes place within the group, and, if the force of the word is strong enough, it can supersede the differing economic and social backgrounds of the participants, welding them, for a time at least, into a unit. In other words, the people who enter the group are not precisely the same as those who come out.12

8Stock, Implications 85.
9Stock, Implications 527.
11Stock, Listening 150.
12Stock, Listening 150.
In addition, Stock stresses once again that it is the rules, not the Scriptures, which order and determine the behaviour of the members of this community.

Stock also concentrates on rituals in these groups, for rituals deal with the oral-aural dimension of communication. These rituals determine action, and, for Scriptural religions, action based on text is associated with ethical rightness. What causes these communities to differ from one another (in this case, Judaism from Christianity) is their attitudes toward their past. These attitudes of self-definition are partially solidified by writing, for "innovation in religious groups takes place in the present, but the moment writings enter the picture, the community acquires a historical dimension." This historicization of the community allows for attitudes toward tradition and modernity which contribute to social change. Thus the stages in the development of the textual community are 1) oral contact between a group and a pre-existing text which it encounters, 2) an educative process, and 3) the historicization of a group (that is, giving it a past through writing). And, significantly, Stock notes that "what one believes is shaped by the means of communication by which the content is transmitted." 

In other parts of Listening for the Text, Stock touches on crucial issues in modern theory, in the ideas of theorists ranging from Weber to Foucault to Ricoeur to Saussure. Hypotheses about how literacy and history work together to form textual communities resonate through these chapters. Stock's reworking of his own model developed for the eleventh and twelfth century heretical and reformist communities produces a promising sphere of understanding for examining the Late Antique developments of Judaism and Christianity. Is it possible, therefore, to continue to remodel this working conceptualization in order to look at other groups which seem to form around a shared understanding of a text, and to understand their actions as part of an interpretational community? One of the most attractive points of this model is its ability to incorporate

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13 Stock, Listening 154.
14 Stock, Listening 157 [my emphasis].
literacy with history, and to explain the delicate interplay between the written and spoken word in these communities. Stock never explicitly states that this model could be extended into other time periods, but surely his own precedent invites such practices.

Because of Stock's concern for the written versus the oral mode of text, he constantly uses dramatic metaphors in order to describe processes at work in the community. Some examples are "this reorientation of belief was played out as a drama in which the oral confronted the written"¹⁵ and "Rather than community alone, I would prefer to typify these groups as combinations of narratives, in which the actor's role is much like the dramatic performance of a script."¹⁶ Stock's stress on the relation between the means of communication and meaning leads him to emphasize that there are "subtle relations between voice and text in establishing verisimilitude."¹⁷ There are also the references to word being transmuted into behaviour, culture as interactive play, and to an individual who "gives a latent discourse a tangible form, breathes life into it, and creates, if only briefly, a new universe of discursive space in which relations between interpreter and audience recreate the old pattern of authority and tradition anew."¹⁸ At another point, he defines a textual community as "a group in which there is both a script and a spoken enactment and in which social cohesion and meaning result from the interaction of the two."¹⁹ The dramatic metaphors are numerous. Indeed, it is tempting to examine how dramatic communities form, and what the nature of a community might be whose purpose is the conscious acting, playing, and performing of a script. Stock's sole mention of drama itself involves a parenthetic remark that "In my view, medieval drama bridges the gap between the oral and the written in a similar way [to textual communities]."²⁰ Although this remark is tantalizing, there are no more like it. Nonetheless, Stock

¹⁵Stock, Listening 157.
¹⁶Stock, Listening 152.
¹⁷Stock, Listening 11.
¹⁸Stock, Listening 29.
¹⁹Stock, Listening 100.
²⁰Stock, Listening 152.
certainly provides a groundwork which can help in the examination of drama as a historical/literary enterprise which forms its own textual community.

The Theatre as Textual Community

My focus for the purposes of this thesis is the Renaissance theatre as a sort of textual community. Admittedly, there are immediate problems with this conjunction. For one thing, the theatre does not provide a consistent proto-text like the Scripture. Plays and playwrights constantly change. The plays and theatre-goers may form a community, but it is always transient. People gather for two or three hours at a time, and then move on. It is unclear that their actions are affected in the same way as those in the textual communities Stock describes. There is no definable ethical basis in various plays, and the consistency of Scripture is certainly lacking. Furthermore, there are no clearly-defined rules which can determine a common group experience. Much criticism of Shakespeare highlights the inherently unstable meaning of his plays, so how can one suggest that the Renaissance theatre can be a textual community in which people come together around the shared understanding of a script?

In order to modify this Stockian model so that it works as a way to examine Renaissance theatre, I would like to concentrate on and expand a few of Stock's ideas. First of all, in his stress on the rise of meaning and the means of communication, he states that:

...the rise of textuality also led to the articulation of relations between the producers and consumers of culture, as the focus of their interest was now the same externalized object. All this amounted to a transformation of the system of exchange and communication. Via written transcriptions, the real or abstract reading public became the frame of reference for the interpretation of works of literature, philosophy, and theology, and, through intertextuality, for the interpretation of experience.21

Like the rise of textuality, the rise of the secular theatre linked its medium to the intended audience. Although this new system of production and consumption may have had its origins in the medieval communities of which Stock speaks, surely it is more pronounced in the Renaissance. The capitalist marketplace in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries developed their secular theatre was a volatile market in which the theatrical companies had to constantly innovate ways to attract and maintain an audience. Again, although not speaking of theatre, Stock reveals the appropriate idea: "Of course, no literary work is directed toward all of an audience, but rather to a segment of it, a segment that can be defined in economic, social, or cultural terms. In the interplay of text and audience, the work helps to create that very segmented public." In this way, we can see the plays working to create the audience that forms around them. Thus, the economic factors of Elizabethan England suggest that the theatrical companies were compelled to create a text which would attract a specified group of people. This group of people, the audience, came to the theatre to watch a particular play at any given instant. In two basic senses, then, they can be considered a textual community: they gathered because of a text, and, as a result, they engaged in a communal experience.

But what of the absence of stabilized meaning? Here I return to Stock's idea regarding the interchange between the consumer culture and literacy. As he explains,

Just as the market created a level of 'abstract entities' and 'model relations' between producer and consumer, literacy created a site of lexical and syntactical structures which made the persona of the speaker largely irrelevant.

and later,

...the recognition of different levels of understanding between litterati and illitterati implied a turning away from ritual and symbol and towards an intellectualism inseparable from the study of texts: that is, a movement away from the performance of rites and from devotion to representational objects and

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22 Stock, Listening 103.
23 Stock, Implications 86.
towards the consideration of both primarily in terms of an inner lesson, meaning, or kernel of truth.\textsuperscript{24}

This movement is also quite applicable to sixteenth century England, when the Reformation shows that people were moving away from looking at meaning in terms of magical events, and instead looking to words as \textit{symbols} of truth. No longer is meaning centred in an event alone or a word alone, but in the \textit{combination} of word and event. Because of this concern, the structuring process of language and drama are of utmost importance, and the rules of language and representation begin to replace religious and ethical rules. It is, instead, the lexical and rational structure of language itself in which people begin to place their faith.

This is not to suggest that Shakespeare's plays neatly order everything so that they structure experience and life in a coherent way. On the contrary, most often these plays actually frustrate any attempt to find order. Of course this discussion has been borne out in the New Historicist backlash against Tillyard's idea of the Elizabethan world picture, but I suggest looking at the problem from a slightly different angle. Perhaps the community of the theatre was based on the \textit{experience of interpretation}—not the interpretation of various events, but on the experience and analysis of interpretation itself. Stock suggests,

\begin{quote}
Texts, as noted, when introduced into a largely oral society, not only created a contrast between two different ways of looking at the world. They also raised the possibility that reality could be understood as a series of relationships, such as outer versus inner, independent object as opposed to reflecting subject, or abstract sets of rules in contrast to a coherent texture of facts and meanings. Experience in other words became separable, if not always separated, from ratiocination about it; and the main field of investigation turned out to be, not the raw data of sense or the platonized ideal of pure knowledge, but rather the forms of mediating between them.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

It is my contention that the stage is the ideal place for mediation of this sort. Theatre is in a position to play with relationships, and to explore perceived truths. The ordering

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{24}Stock, \textit{Implications} 524. \\
\textsuperscript{25}Stock, \textit{Implications} 531. 
\end{small}
principle of drama sets truth not in any clearly definable terms, but in the experience of theatre itself. In this sense, one can begin to see how the audience attending a play, while it may have slightly differing views of what is happening on the stage before it, clearly engages as a group in the witnessing of this interpretational interplay before them. Again, the means of communication--drama--clearly contributes to what meaning is achieved.

The idea that the meaning in drama rests upon "interactive play" fits nicely with arguments by other critics. In *The Tudor Play of Mind*, Joel Altman contends that humanist rhetorical education privileged the ability to argue both sides of an issue, and that this tendency is carried over into drama. Thus, meaning arises not out of either side, but in the process of the argument, in the very fact and act of the argument on both sides. If we return to Stock's point about an individual who breathes life into old discourse and gives it a new presence, it is clear that this discursive space can be filled by the actor himself. Performance critics have long been frustrated by critics with a literary bias who try to situate meaning in the written words of Shakespeare's plays rather than taking into account that they were always meant to be acted. The fact that actors performed a script which was written provides much interesting material for analysis concerning the interplay between the written and the spoken word, as well as the realization that the actors were involved, every step of the way, in a process of interpretation. The idea of the theatre as a textual community can perhaps provide a pathway to thematize some of the tensions between the literary aspect of theatre and the one grounded in action, for the primary idea is that words are transferred into action, and if there is any truth on a stage, it lies in the discursive space of the actors' performances.

The playhouses themselves became discursive spaces for interactive play. The Globe, for example, was a specific site for plays, and one which the audience entered in order to witness and participate in this interpretive act for their own entertainment. The

textual community of Shakespeare exists, in its strictest form, inside the Globe during the two hours' traffic upon the stage. Mullaney and others have examined the spatial nature of the place of the stage. The theatres existed apart from the city of London in order to escape from its order and laws, but they did so in order to set up their own space and own rules. The very act of entering the theatre means becoming part of a group which will, in some way, share an experience based on the same play.

This may be a looser idea of community than Stock describes in his medieval sects, but communities are nevertheless always based on clear ideas of space. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church had controlled the spaces of interpretation. Communities formed in cathedrals, monasteries, or towns around a clear idea of how the Scripture should be interpreted. Thus, there was little danger that medieval drama could be misinterpreted (by the community at large; obviously there are isolated individuals in any given community who tend to deviate from the norm). However, in Renaissance England, spaces were opening in which secular groups could find ways to define themselves. And again, rituals of self-definition and attitudes toward the past are the determining factors in establishing a strong sense of community. One need only consider Greenblatt’s idea of Renaissance self-fashioning in order to understand that it makes sense that the theatre could become a successful enterprise by merely concentrating on rituals of self-definition, because it was such a concern of the time.

But this idea of discursive space need not take us too far away from a literary as well as historical basis for examining the theatre. Indeed, the theatre is mediated by and communicated with words. Christian ideas toward words and their interpretation certainly still had a hold on the Renaissance, and although Elizabethan theatrical

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28See Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980). Although Greenblatt is concerned with individuals and their identity in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, it is my contention that individuals find their identities in relation to communities, either as part of them, or apart from them.
companies may have been playing with the boundaries and ideas of interpretation, they were nevertheless basing themselves on something which they had inherited. Self-definition requires a specific awareness of the past which one has inherited. And although, as I have discussed, meaning can be seen as something unstable and located in action and the form of drama itself, it is also important to realize the inherited beliefs about the underlying meaning of words in general. As Stock emphasizes, "...above all, they [members of a textual community] must make the hermeneutic leap from what the text says to what they think it means; the common understanding provides the foundation for changing thought and behaviour." 29 This hermeneutic leap may not be clearly defined, especially among those who belong to a class not accustomed to intellectual interpretation, but it is my contention that the education of the Elizabethan theatre must rest first on the universal education of the Bible, in which words always mean something. Indeed, the precise meaning of words may be doubtful and confusing, which is where the theatre creates much of its fun, but there is always some meaning. And in entering the theatre and watching the play, making interior the exteriorization of the playwright, the audience is engaging in a hermeneutic leap that acknowledges (even as it questions) the latent meaning in the words.

The question may remain, does the audience's transient participation in this textual community really affect their actions in life (and in particular, Stock notes, it is the critical aspects of decision making which are affected by participation in a textual community)? It is difficult to make any such claim, but what is clear from Renaissance contemporary attitudes is that theatre was considered a dangerous place, a place which could indeed affect people profoundly. Admittedly, the theatre's aims could never be defined so clearly as a religious or heretical sect's could, but perhaps this conflation of event and meaning on the stage in itself had the potential to have a gradual effect upon the audience's views toward the world. Stock says, "Texts gradually acquired the capacity

29Stock, Implications 522.
to shape experience itself and to operate as the intermediaries between orally transmitted ideas and social change."³⁰ And perhaps, if the theatres were in fact (as has so often been suggested) instruments of social change, this capacity is best understood within the context of the theatre as a community in this intermediary position.

Taking one more idea from Stock's theories, we may apply it to how one may begin to look at Shakespeare's plays as units which work to form and solidify this textual community:

The individual who creates a work and the work as created object have socially definable careers over time. They can be studied through the reactions others have to them. There is also a reorientation of intentions. The originator's intentions are unknowable, but the work's intentions can be analyzed in its internal structure or in its describable effects, which are a part of its history.³¹ And indeed, much to our chagrin, Shakespeare's intentions are unknowable. However, we can look at his plays in terms of their internal structure or describable effects. Through this examination, it may be possible to understand how these plays worked to form a historical and literary community which caused the audience, somehow, to leave the Globe as different people from those who entered it. Looking at these historical and literary dimensions in theatre as part of a textual community may in fact contribute to a broader understanding of the way language and community are formed around the representations of the stage in Renaissance plays.

Theatre itself can be seen as a sort of text, and within this large body, smaller texts, plays, work within it in order to form a community based on the word. In the case of Hamlet, we witness a play which is fraught with concerns about the word. Using Hamlet as an example, I intend to examine how the textual community of the theatre formed around the interactive play between the written and the spoken word. In the first chapter, I will examine the role of words themselves within Hamlet, and see how the

³⁰Stock, Implications 527.
³¹Stock, Listening 148.
position of words as signifiers of meaning plays upon the stage. Next, I will look at words as action, noting the many senses of "act" upon the stage, and see how the theatre of Hamlet achieves the meaning of its words by putting them into action. Finally, I will explore how words within Hamlet relate to ideas of memory and history which resonate beyond the scope of the play itself.

These three chapters correspond roughly to Stock's proposed stages in the formation of a textual community: the introduction of a script or proto-text into a community, the educative process which the community undergoes based on this text, and finally the historicization of the community (in other words, giving the community a sense of its own past and definition through writing). These loose correspondences relate to the roles of the playwright, actor, and audience respectively, but the categories are not exclusively defined, and there are naturally many overlapping elements in an organization as complex as the theatre. Throughout this project, I will be pointing to ways in which thematizing Hamlet as a text which was helping to define, form, and perpetuate the textual community of Elizabethan theatre can contribute to an interesting and useful way of examining how Renaissance attitudes toward interpretation were being played out on the stage. This may, in fact, lead to some suggestions about how the institution of theatre formed out of what was still, in 1601, a community.32

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32While the economic basis and designated playhouses suggest an institutional quality to Elizabethan theatre, it cannot properly be considered an "institution" in the way I (and Stock) use the term. Although the theatre was patronized by the monarchy, its role was still quite unclear in 1601. The theatre was certainly a social entity, but its position involved negotiation, subversion, and interactive play. In the realms in between the already-formed institution and the anarchic sect, in what Stock calls the interstices, there lies a place for experimentation which is specifically characteristic of a community still searching for its particular identity. In the theatre, we see many attempts to play with and manage various concepts, dualities, etc. The actual process of interpretation and representation is what gave the theatre its creative drive. In attempting to manage this diversity, however, the theatre came closer to an understanding and articulation of itself as a social entity and thus closed off some of the apertures and moved toward institutional standing. I do not mean to suggest that communities and institutions are opposites, but instead that they are stages along the same continuum.
Chapter I--Words as Signifiers of Meaning

The Hermeneutical Heritage of the Renaissance

It has long been recognized that one of the things which *Hamlet* is "about" is language itself. Among the plays of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in particular concerns itself deeply with words and what they signify. In order to examine the textual or literary basis for theatre, I begin with a look at the position of words themselves—how these fundamental building blocks of language were viewed in the Renaissance. Modern theory tends to link meaning to the reader or audience, which is a very important point, and without the audience, the community could not be formed. However, from the time that the playwright introduces the script into the playhouse, words, written words, become the basis for the action which subsequently takes place. Recent obsession with the relationship between the signifier and the signified may have the danger of obfuscating just how big a concern this same relationship was to Renaissance minds as well. Words are signs to be interpreted, and in the Renaissance the methods of interpretation were tied directly to three practices which I would like to examine further—*grammatica*, biblical exegesis, and rhetoric.

**Textual Culture and Grammatica**

As soon as there is a group bound together by a text, such as the Scripture, then the question of interpretation becomes of central importance to the textual culture of that group. Such was the case in the West. In *The Making of Textual Culture*, Martin Irvine traces this history of *grammatica* from its Classical origins through the Middle Ages. *Grammatica* provides the rules for interpretation, and training people in the art of *grammatica* assured that "proper" interpretation would be continued. Irvine argues that "...*grammatica* functioned to perpetuate and reproduce the most fundamental conditions
for textual culture, providing the discursive rules and interpretive strategies that constructed certain texts as repositories of authority and value."³³

The Roman *grammatica* had become part of Christian doctrine by the time of Augustine, but its function remained the same. Irvine brings a fundamental principle to bear upon *grammatica* when he states, "...interpreting texts, charged as it is with competition and conflict, always entails promoting the power and authority of a textual community through a method of reading and interpreting an authoritative set of texts."³⁴

In the Middle Ages, conflicting interpretations of the Bible resulted in the burning of heretics or schisms within the Church itself. Interpretation, because of its direct links with power, is a dangerous issue, and one invariably charged with emotion for those involved. I pause here to mention *grammatica* because it is the basis for the fundamental idea that people should be educated in a formal system in order to learn the rules for interpretation. This belief is evident in humanist education, but also clearly in exegetical methodologies of the Renaissance. Indeed, the monumental arguments in the Church in the sixteenth century over interpretation of the Bible show just how divided textual communities could become without any definite rules of *grammatica*. When the rules are questioned, the community is disrupted.

**Exegesis and Interpretation**

In her books *The Renaissance Bible* and *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, Deborah Shuger discusses the changes in interpretational modes which


³⁴Irvine 164. It should be noted here that Irvine attempts to conceptualize the idea of the textual community in a much broader way than Stock. Irvine writes, "Throughout this study I use the term 'textual community' in a broader receptionist sense than that used by Brian Stock" (15) and Irvine goes on in the endnote to the comment to say that the concept of the textual community is similar to Fish's "interpretive community" but he is using it in a "more historicizing sense" (470 n. 45). Unlike Stock, Irvine does not develop this idea as a working conceptualization, and has no clear theories about the formation or structure of these textual communities. Finally, it is unclear what Irvine means by these broader receptionist and historicist senses.
occurred in the sixteenth century. Although The Renaissance Bible concentrates on scriptural exegesis and theories surrounding it, Shuger convincingly argues that biblical interpretation was central to habits of thought which were reflected in the community at large. Admittedly, no homogeneous movement arose in the fifteenth or sixteenth century toward a new method of criticism, and often Renaissance exegetes were distinguishable as much by their differences from one another as by their differences from medieval exegetes. The wide variety of movements in this area make it difficult to characterize changes in ideas of interpretation in the Renaissance, and indeed it seems quite unrealistic to attempt to mention theories of Erasmus, Calvin, and Hooker in the same breath. However, there are two important similarities in these methodologies which can help point more clearly to Renaissance attitudes toward words themselves as signifiers of meaning.

The first of these is the tendency to emphasize the position of the individual within the interpretive process. Whereas a medieval Christian may not have concerned himself so deeply with his individual interpretation as long as he was in the midst of his Church which had a specific doctrine, the Renaissance Christian was asked to become much more aware of what he was doing when he interpreted a passage from the Bible. In England, Hooker in particular emphasized the importance of the presence of the individual within interpretation. Shuger explains Hooker's theories:

The Holy Scriptures do not mediate presence but, like any other text, require interpretation, and interpretation is a matter of human judgment: "between true and false construction, the difference reason must shew"....The reader cannot passively receive meaning and presence but must reconstruct the intention, scope, and application of the text, and "all this must be by reason found out." Presence is thus deferred, a space set up between divine meaning and human reading--a space mediated by reason but therefore almost always productive of probabilities and conjectural inferences rather than certain knowledge. Like the emphasis on history, that on reason distances and objectifies the text, disallowing
an experiential participation of the Spirit by interposing the interpretative act between object and subjectivity.\textsuperscript{35}

This discursive space which is created for and by the interpreter is of utmost importance. It is the interpretive process that stands between reading and meaning, and the interpreter must fill it with a hermeneutics based on reason.

In an attempt to objectify and rationalize the text, many Renaissance exegetes also tried to locate the language of Scripture in its cultural context. By the fifteenth century, many no longer believed that meaning could be derived, as it was in the Middle Ages, from an ideological standpoint which reflects meaning back into the text, assuming that statements in the Scripture could clearly prefigure the situation hundreds and even thousands of years later. Instead, a major strand of Renaissance exegesis tended toward a detailed understanding of the time in which the Scriptures were written, focusing for example upon the facts of Jewish customs. As Shuger states, "...late Renaissance exegetes tend to view individual words less in terms of either theology or lexical meaning--the fixed relation between signifier and signified--than elements in a culturally specific discursive system..."\textsuperscript{36} and later, "Subjectivity dissolves into language and culture--into philological and historical analysis."\textsuperscript{37} Viewing meaning in such a way points to a belief that words, rather than being transcendent truths in themselves, are imbedded in a system, and as such, words are always something to be \textit{used}. The use of words varies based on the event, the time period, and the author/speaker. Such an approach leads to an analysis not in terms of a transcendent quality in words or in words as a direct fulfillment of doctrine, but instead in the situation of meaning in terms of linguistic systematization and formalization. This practice resulted in systems of classification, and the meticulous concern with differences and similarities in language.

\textsuperscript{37}Shuger, \textit{Bible} 45.
These two points can be seen as opposites, of course. On the one hand is an emphasis on cultural meaning, and on the other, a concern with personal meaning. However, this duality is characteristic of Renaissance tensions between all sorts of extremes. The middle ground which can be achieved through attempting to manage these apparently opposite issues is one which locates personal meaning in terms of cultural meaning.

Order and Disorder in the Realm of Rhetoric

In The Order of Things, Foucault writes about the Renaissance concern with order and identification. Through finding similar traits between things, people were able to identify, classify and explain the world around them. Foucault also sees the sixteenth century as a breaking point when there was a shift from a system of identification through similarity to one based on difference. His emphasis on "breaks" is useful, but has a tendency to oversimplify a process which was more complicated than the simple break he describes:

The relation to Order is as essential to the Classical age as the relation to Interpretation was to the Renaissance. And just as interpretation in the sixteenth century, with its superimposition of a semiology upon a hermeneutics, was essentially a knowledge based upon similitude, so the ordering of things by means of signs constitutes all empirical forms of knowledge as knowledge based upon identity and difference. The simultaneously endless and closed, full and tautological world of resemblance now finds itself dissociated and, as it were, split down the middle...38

Shuger posits a more complex view of Renaissance attitudes toward similarity and difference. She sees it as a dialectic between order and disorder, similarity and difference. Nonetheless, the Renaissance interest in difference cannot be underestimated. For example, within exegesis, as stated above, there was a keen awareness of difference

and even conflict within Scripture. This leads Shuger to suggest that "Renaissance biblical scholarship...should be viewed as an episode in the conceptual management of diversity, as a way of categorizing and analyzing the unfamiliar...."39 This listing of differences, and even delight in the multivalent abilities in language, is characteristic of Renaissance personalities such as Erasmus.

Joel Altman points to the humanist rhetorical education as one which took delight in arguing both sides of issues. The humanist project to structure education toward the goal of providing linguistic mastery had a profound effect on interpretive strategies. However, this rhetorical mode (with its Aristotelian origins) had a deeper purpose than mere delight in the talent of the debaters. As Altman says, "...by considering all the particulars of an act--the full set of circumstances--one could discover a new way of seeing the case which might drastically alter one's judgment of its nature, and result in the establishment of virtually 'a new kind of law.'"40 The result of this system can be seen as leading to an interpretational mode which defines things by their relationship to one another.

Shuger lists two important traditions which arose from the Renaissance fascination with listing diversity and subsequent attempts to manage it. The first tradition is one which tends to ease history, subordinating diversity to the repetitive pattern of language and history, thus seeking meanings in exemplary or typological patterns, and proleptic repetition over linear sequence. The other tradition does not attempt to resolve the differences in terms of objective meaning, but instead locates meaning in a study of codes governing social praxis, and thus takes delight akin to wonder in the irresolvable differences created by linguistic occasions. Of course this dichotomy is not reflective of a polarity in hermeneutic beliefs in the Renaissance, for Shuger notes as well that there is imperfect differentiation of essentialist and historical method in the Renaissance.

39Shuger, Bible 48.
40Altman 390.
However, the main point is that both of these tendencies did exist and gained prominence in sixteenth century ideas of interpretation. The fascination with order and disorder alike surrounded the practice of interpretation, and of course this does not involve just biblical exegesis, but also interpretation in general.41

Although managing diversity and noting difference may have been liberating on one hand, it could also, on the other hand, be a frightening idea, especially in a world where the individual was the centre of the interpretational practice. Wheeler explains:

But Reformation thought, in promising a new relationship to the sacred, also put worshipers at risk in new ways. In areas where the Reformation triumphed, extraordinary anxiety could be generated by the absolute importance conferred upon the individual's faith in the grace of a God no longer accessible through the ritual work of the church, and whose eternal wrath toward those not saved was beyond the mitigation both of the church and of individual action.42

At every turn, it was possible, as it had always been, to interpret incorrectly, but now, without the clear grammatica to provide the rules, interpretation could indeed be an especially daunting task. The unreliability of words and those who use them was a popular Renaissance concern. Indeed, the fear of hypocrisy connected in particular to post-Reformation thought could cause people to distrust those around them, and to be tormented by a questioning of themselves and their worthiness for salvation. Greenblatt stresses the presence of a sort of anxiety in Renaissance minds, prompted by these changing beliefs. He further argues that this anxiety was intentionally used as a dramatic device in the theatre.43 However, seeking form and meaning not in individual words but in their context—in the greater system of language, history, and Providence—was the saving grace for these troubled minds. Thus, there is a paranoia about the instability of

41 It might be argued that these rhetorical flights of fancy were tendencies among the intelligentsia alone, but sermons preached to the common people also reflected these new ideas in scriptural interpretation (indeed, many of these sermons serve as Shuger's sources, as well as philosophical treatises on these subjects).
meaning alongside an insatiable desire to discover the meaning within the underlying structure which is hidden beneath. And even if this meaning could not be readily seen, the second tradition of linguistic differences reminds us that, when in doubt, the variety of language and the uncertainty of purpose can be regarded not only with fear, but also with wonder.

The Proto-Text and Rules of the Theatre

If we may assume that there was anxiety about, as well as interest in, the process of interpretation in post-Reformation England, then it would only be natural for people to be attracted to those who can be regarded, in a sense, as professional interpreters. Theatre is, first and foremost, from the moment when the actors speak the words from the playwright's script, a business of interpretation. Not only does the audience witness the actors' interpretation of the playwright's words, but the audience, too, becomes part of the community that is involved in interpretation. The confrontation between the written and the oral word which occurs first when the actors read the playwright's script can be seen as parallel to the first stage of a textual community in Stock's terms.

The first stage of a textual community is the one in which the written text is introduced. This written text comes from a background of literary tradition. However, when this text becomes orally transmitted, imbedded with a particular interpretation, it defines itself and its hermeneutic method in contrast to what has come before. In this case, when the actors take the script, they act out, and hence interpret, forming an oral and different view of these words. The proto-text, or original text introduced to the community, is the "script" of the plays themselves, even in the fragmented forms in which they were produced in Renaissance theatre. Although the plays changed frequently, they formed, as a genre, the basic beginning point for the textual community. What completes the formation of the community, however, is the audience members watching this process and participating in it. They share the interpretation of the play script with the actors,
and become part of the rules which govern interpretation, and hence make strong this community.

If it is the rules which form the community, what are the rules which cause the theatrical community to cohere? What provides the rules that *grammatica* would? How can rules of interpretation surround a text which is, as the scripts in a theatre are, always changing? In his article "Renaissance Drama as a Proto-Text", R.L. Kesler suggests an answer to these questions. He argues that the *form* and *structure* of drama provide the basis for controlled interpretation. What replaces the determined meaning of medieval drama in Renaissance drama, Kesler argues, is "the integration and regularity of the form itself."44 Through providing a variety of dramatic situations within the same essential framework and structure of drama, the theatre established what Kesler calls "a new standard of conceptual operation."45 Most importantly, Kesler relates this idea to how the audience received the drama:

By modeling and abstracting such processes, and by training audiences in their use through the repetitive experience of 'plot', drama prepared its audiences for the textual world of objectified, planned futurity, and the technocratic and individual appropriation of time.46

This model is a very useful one in considering the position of Elizabethan theatre in relation to interpretive practice. We see here the same two conflicting elements—the desire to note difference and to celebrate it along with the related desire to manage it, and to see it working within a larger structure which is solid and stable. The theatre provided an arena for just such a practice.

The Renaissance theatre tended to thematize the idea of interpretation itself, playing off the fact that it was in the business of interpretation, and playing with meaning.
The delight in difference and the wonder at the many possibilities which lie within language is a prime concern in many Elizabethan plays. Double meanings, misunderstandings, wordplays—such themes become the centre around which the plots of these plays (especially the comedies) are improvised. The attraction of the theatre is that it played with these ideas of interpretation, which were a concern to the audience (and, after all, if they had been in church rather than the theatres, they certainly would have been hearing about interpretation as well). However, what gives this role of the theatre its power to create a community around it lies not in the interpretation itself, but in the way it makes the audience an active part in this interpretation, thus involving them in the construction of a meaning within the comfort of a community rather than in the lone interpretation of a troubled soul.

The Significance of Words in Hamlet

The opening of Hamlet not only presents a mysterious and exciting scene, but it also presents a sign. The ghost appears on stage as a sign of many things—the dead king, the warlike past of Denmark, that something is "out of joint", a representative of the undiscovered country, and any number of other things. Although ghosts appeared on the Elizabethan stage relatively frequently, they did not always represent the same thing. When they appear, those characters who see them begin to interpret what this appearance means. Horatio and Marcellus agree that the ghost looks like the king of Denmark, and Horatio immediately deduces that "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.72). However, the troubling dumbness of the ghost in this opening scene underlines the need to solve the mystery through language. Until it speaks, they will not know how to interpret this sign, so Hamlet is employed from the very beginning as the one who can interpret the ghost's appearance and his subsequent words. In Hamlet's absence, the
others look to Horatio, for a scholar should be learned enough to engage the ghost to talk. Hamlet, certainly no less a scholar than Horatio, is equally equipped as one who studies other-worldly events as well as language and philosophy, but he also has a certain advantage in this interpretive task, because the sign seems to have appeared specifically for him. Hamlet immediately demands for the ghost to tell him "What may this mean" (I.v.51). Paradoxically, even though the ghost tells Hamlet explicitly the reason for his visit, and exactly what has happened, and further, exactly what Hamlet should do, there is still uncertainty in what Hamlet understands. Hamlet's reaction is "O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?/ And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,/ And you, my sinews, Grow not instant old,/ But bear me stifly up" (I.v.92-95). Hamlet's swooning, followed by his reaction when the others find him, shows that, while he has talked with this sign indeed, he certainly does not know exactly what it means. Through at least the next two acts, Hamlet attempts to interpret the ghost's words, and soon he finds ways to test the words to make sure that this is "an honest ghost." The integrity of the sign is questioned, but through it all, there is an absolute imperative to uncover the truth which the ghost represents.

From this act forward, the audience is drawn into this interpretive quest along with Hamlet. This is a quest made equally difficult for the audience as for Hamlet, because both exist in a world fraught with illusions, hypocrites, and words with double meanings. It is within this house of mirrors that both the audience and Hamlet must seek to discover the meaning of this sign which appears in the first scene in the form of a ghost. Like the participants in a murder mystery, they are given clues at the beginning and must move through a world of dangerous and misleading characters and events which can bring them closer to solving the mystery. The further paradox of Hamlet, however, is that the object of the mystery keeps changing, and with it, the nature of the sign. Hamlet changes his mind many times regarding the meaning of the ghost, and throughout the play the ghost can represent the elder Hamlet, the state of Denmark, fratricide, the underworld,
or even Hamlet's own conscience and possible madness. The irony is that the ghost can in a way represent all of these things, and yet he really represents none of them. Words are not sufficient to describe the ghost, and Hamlet doesn't even try to do so when his friends join him after that fateful meeting. Nowhere is the protean nature of the ghost's meaning clearer than at the end of Act Three when Hamlet sees the ghost as a representation of his inability to act, and Gertrude sees merely "th'incorporeal air" (III.iv.119) and takes the absence of the sign which Hamlet sees as evidence of his madness.

**Slipping Signifiers**

Like many Renaissance thinkers, Hamlet realizes the unreliable nature of words, especially when they are taken out of their contexts. Throughout *Hamlet*, he experiments with the instability of words and what they mean--even at times, in the midst of his sorrow, seeming to delight in everything that words can mean. From the moment that he plays with "kin" and "kind", and focuses on Gertrude's troubling use of the word "seems," Hamlet displays his acute awareness of these issues. His tendency to play with meaning is most obvious around characters who cannot match his intellectual pace, such as Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric. His puns to the so called "fishmonger" Polonius in II.ii show a delight in trapping the old man. Hamlet deliberately mis-takes Polonius' meaning. He answers the question about the book he reads, "What is the matter, my lord?" with "Between who?" (I. 193-4). Polonius' attempt to get Hamlet to go inside, "Will you walk out of the air?" receives the retort of "Into my grave?" (I. 206-7). In desperation, as Polonius decides to "Take [his] leave", he is answered by the haunting "You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will not more willingly part withal--except my life" (I. 215-6). Despite Hamlet's certain amusement at his own wit, he is brooding over his situation, and thinking bitterly about the words in the book before him. Although they are written with a supposed meaning which can be
uncovered, to Hamlet they, too, are empty. His response that he is reading "Words, words, words" (I. 192) shows a deliberate contemplation of the difference between these signs and what they are intended to signify, and his pun at Polonius' departure on "taking one's leave" only causes Hamlet to fall into a reflective mood in which he wishes for death.

Similarly, Hamlet's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has a tendency to move from delight in the multiple levels of meaning in words to a sad contemplation of this fact. At first, Hamlet plays the game with his school fellows, punning with them about the "private parts" of Fortune (II.i.234-5). However, the emptiness of this moment is followed by his great attempt to endow the world with the beauty of words in the "What a piece of work is a man" speech (II.i.293-310). However, even as Hamlet constructs the world around him in dazzling words, it is still a prison to him, and the beauty, too, is a quintessence of dust. The meaning of even this beautiful rhetorical flight becomes hollow. This problem is made worse by his unappreciative audience, who can do nothing but make petty jokes. But Hamlet is used to this world. At the end of his deeply revealing speech, Hamlet is drawn out of his philosophical thoughts by catching the expression of Rosencrantz and assuming he was thinking of a pun after "man delights not me" (I. 309-10).

The players seem to evoke Hamlet's most "merry" wordplay and mood, which is evident in his behaviour before the play (III.ii). One after another he plays with words at the expense of others--"capital a calf" (I. 104) to Polonius, "lie in your lap" (I. 110) to Ophelia, and "The players will not keep counsel; they'll tell all" (I. 137-8). All of these characters seem at Hamlet's mercy in wit, but it is a game which Claudius will not play. Like all the other characters, Claudius receives a puzzling riddle in response to his simple question to Hamlet, "How fares our cousin Hamlet?" (I. 92). However, Claudius answers Hamlet's riddle with "I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet. These words are not mine" (I. 95-6), refusing to enter into a game which would put him at Hamlet's mercy.
Claudius is wise to choose thus, because any attempt to interpret Hamlet's words would implicate him in their intended meaning. Hamlet's response to "These words are not mine", "No, nor mine now--" (I. 97) emphasizes the transitory nature of words, especially as they are spoken. In a world where Hamlet feels that he is the only one keeping the memory of his recently dead father, and clinging to his precious word, Hamlet is only too acutely aware that, once words are given away, they belong to no one, and lose their meaning as soon as attempts to remember and interpret cease. Hamlet's world is one constituted by words, and in his temporary happiness after the success of the play, he is singing and punning even further. Consequently, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to get him to communicate with them at all until he flies into a rage against them. Beneath all these words, though, lies Hamlet's deepest sorrow, which he is unable to express in such a world to any but Horatio. Hamlet is able to keep the interpretive play about the shape of the clouds going for as long as Polonius will humour him and pretend, and ironically it is Hamlet who tires of this game first, and ends with "'by and by' is easily said" (II.ii.378), once again emphasizing what seems to him a chasm between words which are spoken and the event or truth to which they are supposed to point. In his following soliloquy, he vows to "speak daggers" to his mother, but to "use none" (III.ii.387). Once again, the power of words is asserted along with Hamlet's frustration that words always fall short of expressing what he really feels or desires.

One danger in any interpretive act is that it can be plainly wrong, that the sign can be interpreted to point to the wrong referent. Throughout Hamlet, things are not what they seem, meaning is constantly frustrated, and hypocrisy is more common than honesty. Claudius towers over the play as an archetype of hypocrisy, surrounded by others who also are guilty, in varying degrees, of this same crime--Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Polonius, Osric, and even Ophelia. Claudius (with his "most painted word") is the most obvious example of one who says one thing and does another, but this obsession with the truthfulness of vows is also the main theme in Hamlet's relationship with
Ophelia. Polonius and Laertes accuse Hamlet of not meaning his love vows to Ophelia even before he is apparently guilty of etymological infidelity to her. However, Hamlet's inconsistent speeches about having loved her and having not, about never believing the vows of men, are interspersed with his accusations toward her about woman's brief love. The player king ironically echoes these sentiments with his lines, "I do believe you think what now you speak; /But what we do determine, oft we break" (III.ii.181-3). This hypocrisy is carried through with the various play metaphors about "counterfeiting." The painful presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern throughout the play serves only to reinforce Hamlet's realization that he is surrounded by hypocrites, and words in rotten Denmark mean nothing. Indeed, this problem extends not only throughout the court, but also to the fickle people of Denmark, whom Gertrude calls "false Danish dogs" (IV.v.110). Thus the honesty of everyone must be doubted by Hamlet. His question (with its double meaning) to Ophelia, "are you honest?" (III.i.103) shocks her, apparently because Hamlet has been driven into a state that causes him now to doubt what he never would have in the past. And even though the supposedly honest ghost tries to convince Hamlet of Gertrude's innocence, Hamlet still doubts her and even makes threats to her. It is Horatio alone whom Hamlet trusts, because he remains faithful to Hamlet and to an ideal which they may have shared as scholars.

The Scholar's Eye

The position of Hamlet as a student cannot be overlooked when one considers his attitude toward words and their interpretation in the play (especially when we consider the influence of the humanist ideal of education). Hamlet and Horatio are clearly defined apart from the other characters, in contrast to Laertes who appears to be reveling in France, and to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who apparently have learned about language only so that they may flatter and thus gain the favours of the king. But despite Hamlet's ability to play with language and to wallow in and wonder at multiple meanings,
his fear of hypocrisy is so great because he does believe that there is a "truth" underlying words. In fact, his faith in words is at times far greater than his pessimism about them. He is willing to live and die for words, and it is no coincidence that it is the ghost's "word" which obsesses Hamlet. He undeniably believes that people should keep their word, and he makes Horatio and Marcellus swear not to reveal anything about the ghost because they, the few honest characters, must keep their word. In addition to maintaining silence and not revealing the secret, "keeping one's word" carries the implication that, if one doesn't, then the word can be given away, and lost entirely (just like Hamlet's words to Claudius, Gertrude's vows to the elder Hamlet, and Yorick's jibes). Time erases all words, and giving them away, not keeping them, makes them disappear all the sooner. It is this transitory nature of words which causes Hamlet a great deal of concern, for when the words are lost, the signifiers are lost, and the signified is separated from him by an unbridgeable gap.

This tendency not to keep one's word bothers Hamlet most in his mother. Gertrude believes that the player queen uses too many words, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.225). For this reason, Hamlet makes sure to let her know of the player queen, "Oh, but she'll keep her word" (I. 226"). Marriage vows are the words which Gertrude should have kept, and the incestuous bed Hamlet broods upon is a sign that Gertrude's words were meaningless, and the name of frailty is woman because of Gertrude's lack of strength and honesty in this matter. It is no surprise, then, what conversation follows Hamlet's killing of Polonius:

Q: O what a rash and bloody deed is this!
H: A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother,
      As kill a king and marry with his brother.
Q: As kill a king?
H: Ay, lady, it was my word,--

(III.iv.26-30)
In this interchange, Hamlet transfers Gertrude's remark about killing the king from one meaning to another. He refers first to the killing of the elder Hamlet, but, as he has his sword stuck in the person behind the arras whom he thinks is Claudius, he transfers her sense of "kill a king" to the realization that he may have killed the current king of Denmark, and thus kept his word to the former king of Denmark. He feels, if only briefly, that he has finally kept his word, and is frustrated once again because the signifier pointed to the wrong signified, who was hiding again, this time not behind hypocrisy or language, but an arras.

However, despite these many frustrations, and the inability to keep his word, Hamlet still believes in words, and is ready to die for them. Although he told Ophelia many conflicting (and apparently misleading) things when she lived, upon her death he is ready to fight with Laertes on the "theme" that he loved Ophelia (V.i.263-4). To the end, despite all the frustrations, Hamlet is endowing his words with profound meaning. His harsh words to Laertes were a matter of Hamlet's "forgetting himself" (V.ii.76), and this is just another instance of his anger pointing in the wrong direction. Hamlet is playful at the final duel, but his begging of pardon from Laertes does have a noble quality, and it is easy to believe that Hamlet, indeed, does mean what he says. When Hamlet gives his dying voice to Fortinbras--a sentence which shall determine the future of Denmark--there is at last a sense of the transcendent meaning of words. Interestingly, when Hamlet dies, the overwhelming thing he notes is that there are no more words.

**Interpretation within Dramatic Form**

The audience at the beginning of *Hamlet* has to join Hamlet in his interpretive efforts, and therefore they, too, must be frustrated by the hypocrisy, the multiple levels of meaning, and the ominous idea behind the emptiness and silence of words. And yet, by the end of the play, there is much less ambiguity. Which characters are bad, which good, is relatively clear, and when Hamlet and Laertes exchange dying forgiveness with each
other, there is no implication that they are not honest, or that their words represent anything other than their truest feelings. How does the process of moving through the play, and advancing through the plot, help to make interpretation easier for both Hamlet and the audience? Most of the problems in meaning come from words which are taken out of context. Most of the above noted wordplays by Hamlet involve this, but it can be an even more innocent problem than that. Horatio, still disturbed by seeing the ghost, answers Hamlet's "My father, I think I see my father" with a serious "where?" to which Hamlet responds with a puzzled, "In my mind's eye, Horatio" (I.ii.83-5). The contexts differ, because Horatio knows more than Hamlet at this point. Similarly, the cases of hypocrisy arise when the whole truth is hidden, and thus Gertrude is able to mistake Claudius for the elder Hamlet, unable to see with a clear eye how different they really are, because she does not perceive the truth.

Interpretation within the play thus becomes unreliable in particular when words are taken out of context (or with incomplete understanding of context), much like biblical exegesis. Here we see the Renaissance concern for putting things back into their proper context in order to understand and in a sense recreate a meaning which can be drawn out of the text. The natural danger of putting things back into context and drawing out all the possible meanings is that there are more to choose from, and thus the "hermeneutical leap" is more difficult. In the absence of divine Providence which governs and directs interpretation, meaning is derived, as mentioned earlier, by the structure and form of language itself. What does Hamlet imply about the relation between structure and rational interpretation?

There is a definite connection in Hamlet between madness and an absence of form in language. It is the lack of form in Hamlet's language which causes others to fear that he is mad, and they urge him to "put [his] discourse into some frame" (III.ii.300). Claudius recognizes the lack of form in Hamlet's language, but still says that it does not sound like madness. The reason is that he can see, as even Polonius had earlier, the
method in the madness. And indeed, Hamlet is able to maintain an antic disposition and to make his language lack form while still having a definite point behind it. However, Polonius speaks an interesting line when he says, "for to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (II.ii.93-4), because here the strength of madness is beyond, or outside, any normal constraints of language. This is the madness which we witness in Ophelia, whose "speech is nothing", and yet it still has the power to move the hearers to collection. She is, as Claudius says, "Divided from herself and her judgement, / Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" (IV.v.85-6). Here Claudius posits the common view that it is judgement/reason which makes humans what they are, and it is through language that reason is achieved. Divided from herself and missing form in her discourse, Ophelia indeed dies as a picture of madness.

Characters who are villainous or less heroic seem to use language less effectively. The most obvious example is Polonius, who gets tangled in his own words every time he begins to speak, which leaves even Gertrude and Claudius impatient for the "matter" of which he is speaking (II.ii.95). That Polonius is a "foolish, prating knave" (III.iv.217) is evident through his speech. Similarly, Osric also "...did comply with the dug before he sucked it" (V.ii.184), but Hamlet is able to run linguistic circles around these two men, somehow showing himself the more honest and true man by his use of language. Paradoxically, Hamlet shows himself to be the truest person by being the most deceiving. However, he achieves this level through a manipulation of language and its form. No matter which way the form falls, in these instances, it is clear that interpretive efforts would lead one to believe that there is a relation between reason and structure in language, that deceitful people use language well, but that the more honest use it better still (and, by implication, the playwright best of all). There lies, then, within the core of language, a meaning, and one connected to reason and form.47

47See Shuger quotation on page 19.
Yet, although form in language points to something solid to which one can cling within interpretation, there is still a relentless and ominous suggestion that words by themselves are things, empty signifiers which change, slide, and cannot be trusted in the hands of most people. When Hamlet says "The King is a thing" (IV.ii.27) he empties Claudius and the word which defines him of their meaning. These ideas are further complicated by the suggestion that, within the very core of madness, there is some sort of true reason. This reason cannot be bound by language, and indeed, perhaps is hindered by it. In stressing the play metaphor in his drama, Shakespeare comes dangerously close to suggesting a nihilism associated with the stage. If life is merely a play, then the play is merely an imitation of an imitation, and really can be reduced to nothing (or a signifier of nothing). How could this suggestion possibly be good for the image of the theatre? The important point to remember is that, while words in themselves may be empty, and they are thus not objective truths, they may be seen as a means to get to the truth. We have seen that, despite the tendency for words to be unreliable, the plot of the play reveals certain truths--the most noble people keep their word, those who are mad lose form in their language. And, despite all the frustrations of the process, Hamlet does eventually get to the truth, and he uses words to get there. He uses language to appear mad, or to confuse and frustrate others, or to induce Gertrude to change, but all the uses and artifices in language, like Prospero's books, are discarded at the end of the play, for when the mysteries are discovered, then the artifices which were used to arrive there may be dissolved. The ability of the theatre to employ these devices and then discard them at the end helps to validate the theatre as a useful and entertaining enterprise, and thereby to solidify the community surrounding it.
Interpretive Space

Hamlet is alone, struggling to find truth in a world overwrought with illusion. He is in danger of misinterpreting his surroundings, so he sets up devices to check his beliefs, such as *The Murder of Gonzago*. However, mistaking Polonius for Claudius is a fatal mistake which results in Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes. Further, though Hamlet knows Laertes to be a "noble youth", Hamlet for a time misinterprets (forgets himself to) Laertes. Alone in a world of hypocrites is not an easy place to be, and here we may note a certain similarity to how the post-Reformation Christians could feel, for the emphasis in their world had moved from communal interpretation to individual. The intensely personal psychological level of Protestantism may have allowed for more freedom from doctrinal tyranny, but it also may have left people feeling terribly alone and in grave danger of misinterpreting the Word or not receiving Grace. The psychological nature of *Hamlet* shows Shakespeare's understanding of these concerns, and the freedom in Hamlet's interpretive choices emerges in some of his soliloquies where he displays existential-like angst. The audience must have understood these concerns, and if nothing else, they were able to sympathize with Hamlet's hermeneutic plight.

I would further contend that the theatre was filling a gap at the time which had been left open by the changes in Christianity in the sixteenth century. The troubled soul was looking for a direction...how should things be interpreted? Ironically, the theatre was able to offer a food which could partially fill this gap, first of all, by emphasizing these concerns and playing with them, and, secondly, by providing an arena where people could come together and learn something about interpretation. They may not have been told what to believe, but perhaps they may have learned something about *how to decide what to believe*. The actor is the first site where the interpretational act takes place, as the medium of signification passes from the playwright's script to the actor's spoken words. The audience also becomes involved in this construction of meaning through their own

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48See Shuger's chapter "The Hungering Dark" in *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*. 
journey through the play, to the point where things are clearer at the end. And even if not everything is perfectly resolved, the play will end, and there is a comfort in the certainty that dramatic illusion is always known to be an illusion. The paradoxical initial situation of spectators at a drama is that they know that, whatever else may be true, drama is not. The audience travels with Hamlet throughout this interpretive journey, but stops short of its culmination (and, therefore, short of the point of choosing an interpretation or of escaping from the realm of language as Hamlet does). The dangers and failings of this enterprise fall on Hamlet, and the audience lives and goes on to enter more journeys on which they can begin with a sign, a riddle, a problem, and throughout the next couple of hours, come to understand what it means (or, at least what it may mean). Like rhetorical education, with the more hypotheses discussed and refuted the better, so it is with theatre, and perhaps the more plays seen the better (and hence, a real commercial pull). In this way, the theatre formed a sort of paradoxical community, based on a collection of privately interpreting individuals. Moreover, it is my contention that, if they are engaged with the same dramatic form, then their interpretations necessarily have to be bound to it in some common way.

If individuals interpret the other, they also interpret themselves, and like Hamlet, who, through this interpretive journey, is led to seriously question himself and his own existence, the audience members must have, in some way, been led to question themselves. And whenever the self is interpreted, it is done through language, and thus fashioned, like drama, in a linguistic form. The power of language in the Renaissance is clear. Self-fashioning was thus a dangerous business. People could be changed by language, even physically, as the Ghost seems to suggest his tale of the underworld would physically alter Hamlet. There is also a suggestion that people can change through confession and prayer, and, as noted before, that in the end, people will be proven to be who they really are. In much the same way, the theatre itself could work as the place where beliefs are questioned and disguises are put on, but, in the end, the spectators
rationally know that they are watching actors, and where they belong in the scheme of things. Despite the danger of interpretation, if it is pushed far enough, past the forms of language and the counterfeits of hypocrites, the truth lies somewhere beneath, and it is this truth toward which drama gestures. This promise, made in a vague way at the end of *Hamlet*, is only fully realized when interpretation rests not upon mere words themselves, but upon the combination of words with action.
Chapter II--Words as Action

"Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle terms it in the word mimesis, that is to say a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth (to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture) with this end, to teach and delight."\(^{49}\)

-Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*

**Education Through Action in the Theatre**

To Hamlet, the purpose of playing may be to hold the mirror up to nature, but this feat is achieved through suiting the words to the action and the action to the words. Renaissance dramas themselves regularly suggest that the importance of interpretation lies in the action upon stage, not just in the words that form the script. The scripts Shakespeare wrote were never intended to be read in the forms in which we see them now, and indeed, they were written with complete consideration for the actors who would interpret the story of *Hamlet*, for example, on stage. Theatrical meaning is achieved through the combination of words and action, but how did this synthesis cause an attraction to the theatre in particular? In the previous chapter, we considered what happens when the script is first introduced to the community. In noting the fundamental importance of interpretation, the idea of education was repeatedly involved--in *grammatica*, exegesis, rhetoric, etc. Now, we are in a position to examine what the education of the theatre involves, as it is grounded in action, and how this education results in actions which serve to define the boundaries of textual communities.

The second step of Stock's textual community involves the process of educating a community orally after they have formed around a written script. In the theatrical

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business of playing, the education provided for the audience was one based on many senses of the word "act", and in particular, upon the interpretive act.

**Medieval Drama**

Because it involves the acting or playing out of a script, any drama necessarily involves the combination of word and event. However, I would like to concentrate on Medieval drama in particular because it formed communities that were closely allied to the study of Scripture (and thus it was an important predecessor of Renaissance drama). From its inception, Medieval drama involved enactment and representation based on the Scripture. Any time people gathered to witness a Christian drama, they were involved in a communal construction of Scriptural interpretation. The Catholic Church tended to connect drama and ritual--visual avenues of participation--to the meaning of the divine Word.

The most basic example of medieval drama is the Catholic Mass. Through the ritual enactment of the Mass, the audience became participants in the great drama of Christian history and part of the divine plan. As Hardison states,

> Among other distinctive features of solemn Mass, the symbolism of the unity of all Christians in the mystical body of Christ is predominant. The church is a major basilica or cathedral capable of holding large crowds (symbolic of the Christian community) and hallowed by the presence of a martyr's grave or the relics of a saint.\(^{50}\)

It was a drama in which allegorical interpretation was carried to its extreme, literally enacted on the stage, with the priest performing actions based on the perceived meaning of Scripture and assuming various roles throughout the ceremony. This visual experience enabled those unable to read to still be connected to the interpretive process. This ritual of Mass was a repeatable experience whereby the congregation was able to live and

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\(^{50}\)O.B. Hardison Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965) 42.
participate in the spectacle. If the Mass worked as it was supposed to, the spiritual unity of the people was achieved, and the eschatological theme incorporated all Christians within the mystical body of Christ and Christian history. The Mass, then, clearly serves to gather people in a common interpretive practice which brings them closer together, forming a community which is bound not just by the Scripture, but by the way that they all interpret that Scripture together, as a community partaking of the Mass. Through the performance ritual of the Mass, the Scripture is interpreted, and the oral performance transfers into an aural understanding by the participants, and thus the information is transmitted successfully.

In the Cycle plays, as in the Mass, the "script" of the performances is derived from the holy Scripture. The venue of these plays, designed specifically to aid the meaning and enactment of the dramas, enables the audience to experience sacred history in a designated place (and thus the performance places function much like a cathedral). The audience was an integral part of the play; in fact, they were players in a drama of human history. The illusory nature of life was made quite explicit in these plays. No direct address to the audience was necessary, because the drama was never assumed to be set apart from the audience. The purpose of these dramas was to reveal, to teach the audience important truths about the world and the divine plan. Gathered in a designated place and experiencing the visual representations of the stage, the audience was able to become part of an experience in which the structures of drama enabled the words of the Scripture to come to life, and to achieve a "reality" that was based on action. Both the Mass and the Cycle plays served a distinctly educational purpose. Interpretive rituals formed the structural basis which organized the Christian community. The plays helped to organize Christian experience. The actions of the community members could be influenced by this experience in such a way that the members could be defined by these actions.
The later development of the Morality plays, which also served an educational purpose, brought a more psychological dimension to medieval drama. Hardison contrasts these plays with the Mass, saying,

The Morality play is not history but fiction. It is not based on fidelity to an historical source but on fidelity to doctrine...Since the doctrine is moral and depends on the sacraments, the morality play is of necessity psychological drama. The characters do not act in such and such a way because history says they did but because a sacramental psychology requires them to do so.\textsuperscript{51}

Furthermore, the action on stage began to cover a smaller time period, and to acknowledge the audience not in their role as "participants" in the Cycle plays or the Mass, but instead as the ones who would identify with the Everyman presented on the stage. This mimetic transference and psychological internalization can be seen as clear forerunners of Renaissance drama. Always before, the action on stage had represented a reality far greater than the reality of the audience who watched it. Now, however, reality is not on the stage per se, but in the individual consciousness and how it reacts to the play. Righter explains,

By associating Reality with the spectators and separating them slightly from the world of the play, morality writers had come dangerously close to an idea of drama more familiar to Plautus and Terence than to the author of the Towneley "Crucifixion". It was hardly surprising that in the hands of the professional players, men who depended for their evening meal upon the collection taken up at the afternoon performance, the Reality possessed by the audience should transform itself into a consciousness of the importance of people watching a play, people to be amused and flattered, diverted and entertained.\textsuperscript{52}

This stress on individual consciousness which finds its focus on the audience of theatre can be seen as parallel to a similar stress on individual interpretation, as discussed in the

\textsuperscript{51}Hardison 289.
previous chapter. By the time of the Elizabethan plays, dramatic action became even more pronounced in its tailoring of event to the view of the individual audience members.

Clearly medieval drama also shows some characteristics of a textual community. In some ways, medieval drama produces a more accurate picture of a textual community than Renaissance drama, because of the focus on a common interpretive goal, and the more regular attendance and participation in the dramatic rituals (i.e., a less transient community and also one directed toward sacred rather than secular concerns). However, when Stock describes the textual community as "...a group that arises somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization," he clearly implies that institutions cannot be textual communities, even if they started as such. The introduction of Scripture and subsequent Christian doctrine had occurred hundreds of years before these medieval plays, and the solidification of interpretation surrounding the Scripture had been ingrained in these people for centuries. Admittedly, each new interpretational mode refigures the relation between people and the text around which they have formed, but the Mass was hardly new, and the plays, too, developed over a long period of time. In this way, a community is indeed kept together, bonded closely by this interpretational experience, but more as an institution to be maintained rather than one to be formed (and it is the latter which involves a closer picture of a textual community).

The Place of the Renaissance Stage

By contrast, in Renaissance drama, the theatre was doing something new, and forming a community that had not been formed before. The concern to carve oneself a

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53 Stock, Listening 150.
54 This idea intersects nicely with Steven Mullaney's work in The Place of the Stage which views theatre as a marginal organization that defined itself in contrast to the established limits of London and thus operated successfully in a realm of licensed licentiousness.
niche in the commercial marketplace necessitates attempts to draw people into a select
group. As made clear in chapter one, the secular theatre was not in a position as the
Church would have been to form a solid community based on common interpretation of a
proto-text such as the Scripture. Instead, the theatre stressed the process of interpretation
itself. However, the very medium of the theatre suggests how incomplete it is to think of
words as if they were written on a page, and not acted on a stage. Like the orator, the
actor must realize that, without action, his words are nothing. Action itself is the
fundamental interpretation of language. When one reads, words have to be interpreted
from the page, internalized, and then meaningful action can arise from them. In drama,
this process is even more pronounced, for, in order to act, the actor must first interpret the
words from the script. The actor is the physical manifestation of a direct transference
from the signifier to the signified--the means by which signification can be achieved.

As we noted in the Morality plays, drama was moving toward an emphasis on
individual consciousness, and this is one of the most commonly cited differences between
Medieval and Renaissance cultures. Of course this development cannot be said to have
come to the fore suddenly and with no warning, but it does seem to be a larger concern in
the Renaissance, and one which reflects and is reflected by the development of
Protestantism.\textsuperscript{55} These shifting focuses certainly altered the feeling away from one of
communal interpretations--a fabric of history of which medieval Christians had been a
comfortable part. Keith Thomas calls the medieval communal services and common
prayers acts of "collective solidarity", emphasizing that homogeneous groups could be
achieved through communal actions. Moreover, Thomas also notes that it was not until
post-Reformation times that Christianity could be considered a religion of "belief" and

\textsuperscript{55}I do not mean to suggest a huge split between Medieval communal and Renaissance individual
consciousness. Instead, I merely want to suggest that, in order to look at Renaissance theatre as a textual
community, it is necessary to take into account what seems to be a stress on the individual specifically with
regard to interpretation. Both theatres were communities, but had different concerns. The dialectic
between the individual and the collective interpretation is one of the areas of play most notable in
Renaissance drama.
not a set of religious practices. Removing the everyday actions and rituals from the realm of Christianity results in a greater emphasis on the individual, and specifically on his consciousness and beliefs. Left to the individual, however, meaning can be unstable and capable of signifying an infinite number of possibilities. And although one may see in this liberation of interpretation a certain degree of personal freedom, to the Renaissance mind this freedom must have been accompanied by a great deal of fear. Although action is the goal of interpretation, action is monumentally difficult without the proper education in interpretation. These concerns are reflected in Renaissance drama, where interpretation was as important as it was in medieval drama, and yet where it was also dependent upon not just communal interpretations, but also upon individual interpretations within that community.

There is a tension in Elizabethan drama between distance and participation. On one hand, there was an emphasis on the individual and a conscious level of interpretation. On the other hand, participation in the theatre and identification with the action on the stage was of utmost importance. Through metatheatricality which emphasized both participation and a consciousness of the individual that he is interpreting, and a constant play with the many senses of act, the theatre was able to benefit from this tension, and to connect action on stage to the actions of the audience.

Altman relates the importance of individual consciousness to action in drama: "Thesis (the abstract question) has been 'actualized' in hypothesis (the particular question) through mimesis." Instead of questioning philosophical matters, the audience is able to see these issues being acted out on the stage before them by specific characters. This focus on specific characters causes a more complex and more complete picture of the situation, but it can be achieved only through an enactment of the situation on the stage--a theatrical event or spectacle. Until the words are transferred into the action on stage, they remain abstract theses rather than crucial or tangible hypotheses. Altman stresses the

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56 Altman 392.
connection between what the audience sees and what the audience learns. The medium of
drama is one which pushes actively toward the education of its audience.

Interestingly, Sidney comments on the ability of the poet to provide this middle
ground between abstract and specific questions,

Now does the peerless poet perform both, for whatsoever the philosopher says
should be done, he gives a perfect picture of it by someone by whom he
presupposes it was done, so as he couples the general notion with the particular
example. A perfect picture, I say, for he yields to the powers of the mind an
image of that whereof the philosopher bestows but a wordish description which
does neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other
does.57

The efficacy of poetry is clear here, with words such as "strike" and "pierce." How much
more effective, then, does drama have the potential to be, where the picture of poetry can
exist not only in the imagination, but on the stage. The goal of all this efficacious poetry,
in Sidney's terms, is to provide the audience with an education: "...the ending end of all
earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have
a most just title to be princes over all the rest."58 Once again, Renaissance drama was in
the perfect position to provide the audience of its day with these skills.

This is clearly the second step of the textual community, in which an educative
process bonds the members of the community together, in order that they may learn from
the text which has been introduced to them. Stock explains, "Something has happened,
and this experience affects their relations both with other members and with those in the
outside world. Among the members, solidarity prevails, with the outside, separation."59
Within Renaissance drama, each play involved introducing the audience to a new script
and drawing them into an interpretation which involves the action produced by words on
the stage. And, if the community has functioned properly, then this experience will bond

57Sidney 17.
58Sidney 14.
59Stock, Listening 150.
members together in order to form a sort of community whose actions result from these words and this experience. But what view did the Renaissance audience take of the actor and his actions?

**Actor and Action in Renaissance Acting**

"...asked to name the three most important parts of oratory: 'Action,' Demosthenes is said to have replied, 'Action, and again Action'\(^{60}\)

The rhetorical heritage of the stage is central to understanding acting principles in the Renaissance, especially because Classical ideas about rhetoric began to flourish again in the sixteenth century. Roach explains the connection between orators and actors in *The Player's Passion*. The relationship between the player and passion is the key here:

The actor is the source and focus of a process, an action that begins and quickly extends beyond it. What orators and stage players do, then, is to discover the passions of the mind with their bodies--larynx, torso, and head together--thereby transforming invisible impulse into spectacle and unspoken feeling into eloquence.\(^{61}\)

Significantly, the passions are a danger to all involved--the audience as well as the actors. However, what this emphasis on and fear of passion alike makes clear is the widespread belief that action itself had a power that goes far beyond words. However, this action, on stage, is obviously grounded on the words with which it begins. Putting those words on stage, making a spectacle out of them, brings the theatre to another realm altogether. Roach explains that the rhetoric of the passions includes the belief that the actor was endowed with the ability to act on his own body, on the physical space around him, and on the bodies of the spectators. The physical importance of the actor and the space in

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\(^{60}\)This is from Plutarch's account of Demosthenes, related in Heywood's *Apology for Actors*. Cited here from J.R. Roach, *The Player's Passion* (New York: Associated University Presses, 1985) 32.

\(^{61}\)Roach 32-3.
which he was acting emphasizes that drama was able to bring a meaning to words which could not be brought with words alone. Through action, the actor brings an image and a voice to the words, and now the spectator is more completely involved in the process, bound to the event by an entire range of sensory impulses.

The efficacy of acting means that it can be something good, but it is also dangerous. This tension between acting as good and acting as bad was an interesting focus for the Renaissance theatre, which also had to attempt to validate the enterprise of acting for its own self-preservation. Recent research has begun to draw connections between the affective power of the theatre and the body of the actor. If the fundamental difference between drama and the written or spoken word is that it involves the physical action and presence of an actor's body, then it is well to ask what difference in interpretation might result. Anthony Dawson argues that "...Shakespeare...stages the conflict between body and meaning in a way that locates fundamental, though of course not exclusive, signifying power in the theatrical body." If this is true, then the predominant question, when relating the ideas of words and action to the textual community, becomes--how does the signifying presence of the actor serve to educate the audience? In *Hamlet*, we may ask how we get from the acting out of a script to the resulting actions of the audience. Not surprisingly, this path leads us through the body of Hamlet himself.

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Words Transformed into Behaviour—Hamlet's Education

For Stock, a textual community is "a group in which there is both a script and a spoken enactment and in which social cohesion and meaning result from the interaction of the two." It is interesting that this condition is one that is absolutely central to drama. Without the spoken enactment of Shakespeare's scripts, the drama is nothing, and the plays are lifeless. The meaning of the play is bound inextricably to the action associated with the words. The first problem in applying words to action, as discussed in the previous chapter, is deciding how the words should be interpreted. Hamlet's difficulty in interpreting the ghost's words and the meaning of the world around him is reflected in his fundamental inability to act.

The multivalence of the word "act" is well worth noting here. In one sense, to act means to do something. In another, it means to play a part, or to behave in a certain way. I would also stress the idea of an "interpretive act", because deciding what words mean is also an action. The important thing, though, is that words, once they are interpreted, often result in some sort of action. This is the case in Hamlet, where the ghost appears so that he may tell his son the story of the murder, and thus induce Hamlet to act—to kill Claudius. However, even from the beginning, the action Hamlet must take is not only acting in the sense of doing something, but also in the sense of playing a part. He has to play the part of a character in a revenge tragedy, so the actions he takes toward revenge are not entirely his own. Thus throughout the play we see Hamlet fighting against this part which has been determined for him, and instead acting in other ways. Ironically, immediately after the ghost disappears, Hamlet has decided not to act, that is, to kill Claudius immediately, so much as he has decided to become an actor, and to "put an antic disposition on" (I.v.180).

63Stock, Listening 98.
The Efficacy of Actions with Words

Hamlet's decision to become an actor in I.v contrasts with his first appearance in I.ii. in which he does not know "seems", and denies that there are moods or shapes of grief that can describe his sorrow: "These indeed seem,/ For they are actions that a man might play;/ But I have that within which passes show" (I. 83-5). His clothes are "but the trappings and the suits of woe" (l. 86). He naturally detests acting a part, which is what he sees his uncle doing before him. It also might be noted that Hamlet does not like acting the part which is his by birth and by royal pronouncement—that is, the part of a prince. He refuses to use the royal "we" which Claudius is so fond of, and repeatedly refuses to be treated as superior to others. He is especially irritated around characters such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric, who flatter him and his position. An actor is necessarily a hypocrite, and Hamlet feels a distaste for this as he does for everything around him. However, with the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet realizes that he, too, must be an actor. This duel sense of acting a part and performing an action resonates throughout the play. Paradoxically, Hamlet becomes an actor who can act only the part of inaction.

Perhaps it is Hamlet's simultaneous fascination and difficulty with action that explains his attachment to the players. The players' profession is to put words into action, which is what Hamlet cannot do. Words have a physical impact upon the first player when he gives his speech about Hecuba, and this fact is even recognized by Polonius who notes, "Look whe'er he has not turned his colour and has tears in's eyes" (II.ii.515-6). The efficacy of the player's passion is so great that the process alters him physically, and he is able to endow the words with a meaning which is also reflected into the audience. In a supreme sense, Hamlet sees words in action before him, which fascinates him, but it also angers him, because this is all, indeed, an act, and there is no real cause for sorrow as he has. That the player "Could force his soul so to his own conceit" (II.ii.547) is something both monstrous and wonderful to Hamlet. Whether the words have an outside "reality" or
not is not the concern of this protean player. To him, when he acts the words, they become real, endowed with emotion and feeling and direct identification with the character whom he is portraying. Words divorced from action are disgusting to Hamlet, but he seems to be unable to make this necessary connection. Instead, he "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (II.ii.581).

The solution at which Hamlet arrives by the end of II.ii is one based on the power of drama. It is no surprise that the action which Hamlet does take at that point involves the engineering of the play. Taking the premise that dramatic action can "Make mad the guilty and appal the free,/ Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed/ The very faculties of eyes and ears" (II.ii.558-60), Hamlet constructs his own mousetrap in order to catch his uncle. This is, of course, another delay, and another way that Hamlet becomes more of an actor, for his behavior at the play shows that he is as insincere as anyone around him (even if there is reason for it). He has replaced action with acting. His fascination with the players themselves and the nature of their profession, however, never leaves him, even in the midst of devising his plot.

If the players are to suit the action to the words, they are to do it in a way which appears, above all, to be natural. Holding the mirror up to nature assumes that there is some consistent form to nature. In Hamlet's own words, holding the mirror up to nature "Show[s] virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III.i.22-24). Here Hamlet clings to a belief that there is an order in the world which the form of drama, specifically if the action and words are conjoined, can reflect. The fact that The Murder of Gonzago is a more formalized performance than Hamlet cannot be overlooked. However, bearing this in mind, how can we believe that the players are holding the mirror up to nature? Of course the distinction lies in what one calls "natural." Although little is known about precise acting methods in Shakespeare's day, it is probably safe to assume that the actors were much more formalized than we have become accustomed to seeing in a post-Stanislavskian world. Form and unity in the
Renaissance were intended to reflect nature not as it is, but as it should be. It is no wonder, then, that Hamlet wanted to construct a drama. His world had been turned upside down, and he could trust no one; their words were all deceiving, and everything was profoundly disordered. In that world he could not act (or could do nothing beyond acting) because of the uncertainty, but it is through drama that he attempts to bring some form and order into the court. By drawing all the loose and uncertain words and meanings around the court into one place, where the script is written, a truth is allegorically revealed, and some framework of order is established in which Hamlet is able to see more clearly and to work himself into a state "...from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody or nothing worth" (IV.iv.65-6). Note that this framework is one which depends explicitly on the combination of words and action.

Hamlet uses drama in much the same way that the Elizabethan theatre used it—in order to provide a closed discursive space in which interpretation could be played with, and yet controlled. Claudius is the audience member who really matters, and it is toward him that the action is directed (at least in the mind of Hamlet). In holding the mirror up to nature, the drama is supposed to reveal the unnatural actions of Claudius. Righter says of the play metaphor,

The play, holding a mirror up to nature, was bound to reflect the reality represented by its audience. Yet this audience was also forced to recognize the encroachments of illusion upon its own domain....In sermons and song-books, chronicles and popular pamphlets, Elizabethans were constantly being reminded of the fact that life tends to imitate the theatre.64

The relationship between theatre and Claudius' actions does not escape Hamlet.

Not only does Hamlet appropriate the story of Gonzago for his own purposes, but he also sets down his own speech. His words, combined with the action set forth in the play, will endow the drama with a meaning which cannot escape the attention of the audience. Many have argued over why Claudius fails to react to the dumb show, but

64Righter 83.
perhaps the reason is that for the full meaning of the drama to be realized, the words had to be combined with the action. This was the power of Renaissance drama, and meaning resulted in a way which could not fail to affect the audience. A script alone has no breath, and action alone has no soul. When either is divorced from the other, meaning cannot be accurately transferred throughout the community. Although Shakespeare's plays were certainly not directed toward one audience member, they were directed to a specific community, and through the process of mimesis in watching the drama, the audience could potentially react as personally to the action upon the stage as Claudius did. It is the form and order of drama itself which is able to achieve these "miraculous" effects.

The Problems with Suiting the Actions to the Words

The success of Hamlet's plot causes him to change his uncertain attitude and history of inaction, "Now could I drink hot blood./ And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on" (III.ii.381-3). He speaks of action, but although one may think that he is ready to fulfill his promise, and to commit murder in the name of revenge, his lines about his mother make clear that he will not leave the realm of acting in favour of action entirely. He will "speak daggers to her, but use none" (III.ii.387). Notably, his "...tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:/ How in my words somever she be shent, / To give them seals never my soul consent" (III.ii.388-90). This may partially be a dramatic device to assure the spectator that Hamlet does not intend to hurt his mother (as she misinterprets his actions in III.iv), but it also underlines Hamlet's continued difficulty with the separation between his words and his actions.

But it is not only the queen who escapes any violent action from Hamlet. Even after he claims he is ready to drink hot blood, he cannot bring himself to murder Claudius because he is praying (an obvious contrast to the vengeful Laertes, who would cut Hamlet's throat in the church in the name of revenge). Instead of relying on his own word, or the ghost's, Hamlet immediately launches into new words, and rationalizes why
he should not kill Claudius right then. In a sense, Hamlet produces new scripts so quickly that there is not time to act them out, but only to sit and learn the parts. The greatest irony of this scene lies in our knowledge that Claudius, too, is experiencing a similar disunity between words and actions. He cannot properly repent if he retains the results of his sin, and he cannot be forgiven if his words are disconnected from his thoughts. The act of repentance is rendered meaningless by this discontinuity—"Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (III.iii.98).

When Hamlet confronts his mother in III.iv., he stresses what she has done, that "act" which has caused all the sorrow. He stresses the word "act" repeatedly, "Such an act" (l. 40), "Is thought-sick at the act" (l. 51), etc. Gertrude picks up this terminology and wants to know "what act/ That roars so loud and thunders in the index?" (l. 52-3). When Hamlet succeeds in getting her to see the blackness in her soul, the ghost insists that Hamlet "...step between her and her fighting soul" (l. 113). The result of the combination of words and action (in this case, knowledge) can cause so powerful an effect that Gertrude may not be able to withstand it. Once again, the full power of drama to act upon the audience is made clear through Hamlet's dramatic confrontation with his mother. However, at this point, Hamlet's action is subject to his words, and he is still divided from his ability to act. Hamlet notes the power of the ghost because "his form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,/ Would make them capable" (l. 126-7). Thus the unity of the ghost's actions, words, and essential purpose contrasts sharply with Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" (l. 111).

As the play progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Hamlet has recognized that he is acting a part in a revenge tragedy, even though he does not want to. This part, this acting, seems meaningless to him, and he cannot put his soul into the words in the way that the first player did for Hecuba. However, as his wrath at having to act a part which requires action increases, so do his real actions. Yet when he does act, it is always spontaneously, and not after the depth of thought which characterizes his inability to act.
at all. He murders Polonius rashly and accidentally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in
self-defense, Laertes accidentally, and finally kills Claudius quite impulsively, and more
for the death of his mother than his father. The people around Hamlet always refer to his
actions (in particular the killing of Polonius) as "deeds." The idea that he is acting a part,
fulfilling some obligation, never leaves the realm of Hamlet's actions. Thus we reach a
central paradox in *Hamlet*. The words must be suited to the action, and acting a part
means interpreting words so that they are transmuted into action. The problem is that, the
more words proliferate, the less possibility there is for interpretation which brings about
meaningful action. If Hamlet's world were filled with as few words as Laertes', there
would be no problem with his ability to revenge. However, Hamlet's mind and world are
overrun by words to such an extent that they render him unable to act. The point which
remains the same throughout is that drama has the ability to combine words and actions
in such a way that meaning is formed, and this process affects the audience.

**Audience and the Interpretive Act**

If we return for a moment to the situation of the Lord Chamberlain's Men acting
*Hamlet*, what can we say that the play conveyed to the audience about the interpretive
act? Indeed, it is appropriate to call it an act, because any instance of interpretation
involves a drawing out of meaning, and then putting that into action. Of course thought
itself is the action of the mind, so I am not limiting these issues to physical action alone.
But every word spoken by the actors is a visible act of interpretation, and the audience
watching the play must know this on some level. The theatre is equipped to play with
various forms of interpretation, but this always happens on the stage, in front of people, in
the realm of acting. Montrose emphasizes,

In some members of an audience, the open-endedness of Shakespearian drama
may create a disposition to work out the potentialities of the play experience
within their own world, which resumes its normal flow after the characters' final
exeunt. In the society in which Shakespeare lived, wrote, and acted, the practical effect of performing his plays may have been to encourage the expansion and evaluation of options. Plays are provocations to thought and patterns for action.

Thus, the introduction of the text in theatre may result in some action by the audience. Importantly, this potential action is linked explicitly to the process of interpretation, which is the education that the theatre provided for its audience.

Let us assume that the audience at the Globe was somehow affected by the action on the stage, and the experience of watching a play. The characters within Hamlet certainly display signs of being affected by such things. Hamlet's reaction to the ghost, the first player's speech, Claudius' reaction to The Murder of Gonzago, and many other instances show characters reacting to the action within the play. Right before his death, Hamlet addresses those around him, "You that look pale and tremble at this chance,/ That are but mutes or audience to this act" (V.ii.339-40). The emphasis here on the act of Hamlet and the act of the play, and the double meaning of the audience within the play and the audience in the Globe, brings the significance of Hamlet and its impact upon the audience to the fore. But how does watching the play affect the audience? Stock suggests that "...in textual communities, concepts appear first as they are acted out by individuals or groups in everyday life. Only later, and within norms structured by texts, is there a collective consciousness." Although the nature of the theatrical community is transitory, as stressed in chapter one, the importance of interpretation in the Renaissance was connected to participation. The "norms" structured by the texts in this case are the theatrical conventions which develop within the community, and hence we may begin to see a hint of the collective consciousness Stock describes.

Kesler argues that one of the signal differences in Renaissance theatre is that it enforced a separation from the audience, and thus

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...drama defined a new standard for subjectivity in its audiences, who were in turn defined, not as participants in a system of narrative that included them, but as observers of actions that were viewed at a distance. The imposition of drama as a medium that, like an optic, intervened between the observer and the observed, placing observers at a distance while defining and regularizing perception, coincided as well with the internal physical structure of the theater that literalized representation by producing it as an object or show physically presented before its audiences.67

How is this claim tenable with the idea that participation is integral to the theatrical community? Perhaps the answer lies in the emphasis on the psychological condition of the individual, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. It may seem paradoxical to speak of "a community of individuals", but the secular theatre is not able, unlike medieval theatre, to draw spectators into the drama through ritual actions which are tied to religion. Whereas the conventions in medieval drama are connected to worship and divine rites, the conventions in Renaissance drama are determined by the form and structure of drama itself. Theatrical conventions, rather than religious ones, become the structuring process for the theatrical community. Consequently, the hermeneutic leap, the willingness to participate in the drama, becomes the responsibility and the desire of the audience. This attitude toward poetry is advocated by Sidney, for teaching and delighting can occur only when this process of mimesis on the level of individual belief takes place. Barber explains this in relation to Renaissance drama specifically,

It is crucial not to lose touch, as so much criticism does in describing 'content,' with the process by which the play realizes itself as an experience. Moment by moment, poetry is so combined with action as to force us to participate....In considering the structural resources Marlowe developed for the new drama, the crucial thing is not only the power of his poetry but the way the poetry is used to put pressure on the stage action.68

The ability of Elizabethan theatre to provide a space for participation and yet to show action which was one step removed from the audience could indeed result in education toward action—specifically, toward the interpretive act.

67 Kesler 4.
68 Barber, Journey 52.
Montrose remarks, "To most of the faithful, the essence of their religion was not a theological system, but rather a structure of practices that endowed their material existence with greater form and meaning." Unlike Hamlet, most of the people watching the play would have been less concerned with the philosophical questions about the nature of existence and more concerned about how they should live. It is the rules, the rituals, and all other forms of what Montrose calls a "structure of practices" which determine the meaning (and thus answer the "how") for individuals. This structure of practices includes tools that begin to enable the audience members to know how to interpret, and consequently they are able to transform the theatrical experience into meaningful action in their own lives. Hamlet seeks this form and order within drama, so it would seem likely that theatregoers in the Renaissance may also have found some sort of form in theatre. Although plays may have been varied, and although they may have played with the various levels of meaning, there is still an underlying consistency in theatrical representation. In his book *From Text to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre*, David Bradley argues that the stage doors, props, scenery, etc., all helped to dictate acting conventions in the Renaissance:

Universally characteristic of both printed texts and manuscripts is the extreme meagreness of their stage directions, their frequent failure to mark segments of the action, including entrances and exits, their almost total silence in registering indications of time and place, and their complete indifference about stage positioning and the workings of spectacular effects...May we not infer, from the very absence of such information, the existence of a regular and universal method of theatrical interpretation that allowed the texts to achieve their proper effect in performance?70

These formal conventions, defined as they are by the physical dimensions of the stage, allow the necessary boundaries, and define the discursive space in which the education of the theatre can take place.

69 Montrose 59.
The education of the Renaissance audience takes place in the form of theatrical representation, and it is one which is directly tied to action. This means interpretation as an act, acting as physical meaning, and the action which results from this educative process. What did the audience take from *Hamlet*, what had they learned, and could this play ultimately affect their actions? Stock does note that it is the crucial aspects of decision making which are affected by the participation in a textual community. For Hamlet, the result of watching a drama, and how it affects Claudius, really does result in crucial action. However, what happens to the audience watching *Hamlet*? How are they affected in any way which will be crucial? Again we run into the problem of the transitory nature of drama. People gather momentarily, and then move on. They do not stay together to hear the news from England or any such thing. However, interpretation itself cannot be considered anything other than a crucial aspect of decision making. Any time we interpret something, how we achieve meaning has a great impact on what we come to believe, which in turn determines how we act in situations which include important issues such as theology. What if the theatre provided the audience with interpretational methods, a place where they could safely interpret and watch interpretation in a space which attempts to hold the mirror up to nature, not as the world is, but as it ought to be? This option is not available to Hamlet except for the brief time he engineers the drama, and similarly, it is only available to the audience when they, too, are watching a play. Even if the play does not paint a utopian world, or a perfectly happy ending (and indeed, it is characteristic of Shakespeare's plays to leave many issues unresolved at the end), a problematic ending can serve as a contrast to an idea of the world as it should be. Leaving drama open-ended causes the audience to fill in the blanks and the blind spots, to answer the very pressing questions about how things should be, or how they would have acted in certain situations. Thus, although *Hamlet* does not answer for the audience specifically how they should act or interpret, it does insist that they ask
themselves those questions.\textsuperscript{71} And even if the individual and transitory nature of the theatrical community causes many different views on the subject at hand, the important part is that people gather in order to contemplate the same subject which arose from the same script. In essence, this contemplation and psychological consideration is the educative process which the script of \textit{Hamlet} produces.

\textsuperscript{71}One of Altman's major premises is that the plays themselves are questions.
Chapter III—Words as History and Memory

Without the sorting structure, there is no invention, no inventory, no experience and therefore no knowledge...there is only a useless heap, what is sometimes called silva, the pathless 'forest' of chaotic material. Memory without conscious design is like an uncatalogued library, a contradiction in terms.

-Mary Carruthers

Theories of History and Memory

The subtitle of Listening for the Text, "On the Uses of the Past", is indicative of Stock's larger concerns. Stock describes the essays put together for this volume: "they are about recollecting the past by putting words into writings. They are equally about the past that is written about and the writing that brings it to life. In other words, they deal with the creation of the past as a text." This stance is what gives Stock his particular slant and enables him to deal with related concerns in history, linguistics, and textuality. The historicizing element is the third of the three majors steps in the formation of the textual community. The historicization is what gives the community members a sense of their past, and consequently, of their identity. Only when this element develops is the group of people truly a community. Writing the history gives definition to the group experience--it places it within a larger framework, one surrounded by a sense of temporal and spatial continuity. Above all, it forms the memory of a community.

73Stock, Listening 1.
The Importance of Memory

I would like to concentrate here on an aspect of historicization to which Stock pays little specific attention. History, creating and constructing a past, has everything to do with memory. It really is a two-fold process, which involves both the recollection of the past and the written construction of a history which works to determine how the community will remember their experience in the future. The importance of memory, and the "art of memory" (which dates from the sixth century BC story of Simonides), has received much attention in the past thirty years. Most notable are the studies by Frances Yates (The Art of Memory) and Mary Carruthers (The Book of Memory), and these have spawned many subsequent studies. The basic chronology of the art of memory they trace is that, in Classical times, artificial memory systems were developed in order to assist orators; in the medieval period, memory was tied to remembrance of the Scripture and Christian doctrine through various pictorial and literary representations; and by the Renaissance, many of the traditional uses of memory became part of occult practices or else were absorbed by scientific concerns with order and classification.

One thing that remains constant, however, is that memory's specific use involves the organization of various materials into an order so that information can be easily accessible. Memory always involves the collection and reorganization of material. The literal meaning of thesaurus, storage box, brings to light the idea that memory was conceived as a physical place--a place where information and experience could be gathered and stored. Once in the mind, however, memory served as the sorting principle which enabled one to recall, recollect, and in all ways remember. In Classical times, this was done by assigning various memory loci--places in a building, for instance, each of which would be associated with a particular word or thing to be remembered. Memory systems made a distinction between res and verba, for there were different ways to remember things and words. This forced separation of the thing from what it signifies echoes what I have discussed in chapter one. These concerns are evident in Augustine as
well (see especially Book X of the *Confessions*). For Augustine, the importance of memory is connected to what might be considered a Neo-Platonic idea of God. In this case, the knowledge of God and everything that has to do with Him is something that is already imprinted within our memories, and we must only draw it out again. It is through memory that we can find God within, something we have always known and yet have been separated from.

The cathedrals of the Middle Ages contained artwork that functioned as memorial aids. Much had to be remembered, especially about the nature of heaven and hell, the seven deadly sins, and orthodox beliefs. Confession itself can be seen as a sort of memorial process, in which sins are remembered and brought to light so that they can be forgiven. Again, these ideas all concentrate on memory as the path to order and unity—both in the self/soul and in the church and community. Through a common experience and history, people could feel part of a community in which their identity was securely fashioned. This fashioning of the Christian identity had its most important growth in late antiquity, a point which Stock does not overlook. It was then that Christianity became a "religion of the book." To Plato, as expressed in the *Phaedrus*, the written word is not to be trusted, because there is a danger that it could take the place of the natural memory. This written word, for Plato, just brings one farther away from any knowledge of the reality which one seeks. However, to the Church Fathers, writing became the way in which they drew the Christian communities together, forming textual communities by commenting on Scripture and debating doctrine. The nearly 300 years between Origen and Cassiodorus saw Christianity move from a marginalized sect to an institutional religion with a library full of texts and a solid history. Through the writings of Eusebius and those who came after him, Christian history was constructed. Relating memory to time was of central importance to the Christians. The totalizing scope of medieval drama, for instance, unites existence from the garden of Eden to the Second Coming. There is a

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74See chapter 10 in *Listening for the Text*. 

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sense of temporal continuity in Christian memory—memory of the past is made strikingly present by rituals of participation (the Eucharist being the most obvious).

As Mary Carruthers points out, the relationship between the written word and memory was firmly ingrained in medieval culture. Books did not take the place of memory, but instead served as memorial aides. In the great monastic libraries, much care was taken for what can be considered the construction, production, and preservation of Christian memory. As Jesse Gellrich suggests in *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*, the book became a symbol for a totalizing and perfect whole. Through writing, memory is preserved, and history takes on a position in Christianity which is able to unite time and space under an identity within a beautifully constructed artistic whole. It is important to note that, with the emphasis on the book as a memorial device, there comes a constant interest in interpretation. The book contains signs which must be interpreted, and thus memory is connected explicitly to interpretation. It is through the interpretation and organization of signs that history and memory are constructed and immortalized in the form of the written word. As Stock notes, in Christian communities, the interplay between the written and spoken word which centered on a sense of history and identity told as a story placed a particular emphasis on aesthetic coherence. As a result, "Aesthetic coherence thereby becomes associated in the members' minds with ethical rightness...What is essential is a subjectively perceived and intertextually supported rightness of conduct."75 Thus, once again, memory is the vehicle for organization, but this organization is not just serving the purpose for convenient recall of information, but instead for crucial knowledge and ethical correctness.

However, Yates suggests that, by the Renaissance, memory served a different function than it did in its central position in medieval Christianity. There are two important things to note about Renaissance ideas of memory in relation to the present study of Elizabethan theatre. The first is that Camillo's memory theatre, which Yates

75Stock, *Listening* 152.
discusses in great detail, later inspired Fludd's "memory theatre" as well (and it is this theatre which Yates believed to be based on the Globe). There is a connection between memorial places and the Renaissance artistic conception of the construction of a theatre. Something in the theatrical geography of a playhouse made it conducive to memory systems—a thought which can hardly be overlooked when considering the Elizabethan stage. The Globe in particular could be seen as a microcosm of the world—one in which the heavens and hell were painted, and there was a sense of order within this theatre which held a small reflection of a greater order. If we are to believe at least the principle behind Hamlet's statement that the role of the players is to hold "as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.22), then it is significant that the Globe serves not only as a mirror of the world, but also as a place where experience can be ordered so that the structure of the world can be properly understood and remembered.

The other important direction for Renaissance memory, which is not part of the occult (as Yates suggests the memory theatre was76), is the emphasis on classification. The name perhaps most associated with memory in the Renaissance is that of Peter Ramus. In an effort once again to kindle ideas in rhetoric and memory, Ramus developed a memory system which banished fantastic images and the creative imagination for various memory loci in favour of a system of memory based on a "dialectical order." Yates explains:

This order was set out in schematic form in which the 'general' or inclusive aspects of the subject came first, descending thence through a series of dichotomised classifications to the 'specials' or individual aspects. Once a subject was set out in its dialectical order it was memorised in this order from the schematic presentation—the famous Ramist epitome.77

76Frances Yates, in concentrating on the memory systems of Camillo and Bruno, posits that they "belong in that particular strand of the Renaissance which is the occult tradition" (230). Mary Carruthers argues against this one-sided concentration on occult memory, for it leaves the mistaken impression that the art of memory is linked to the occult rather than part of mainstream practice. Carruthers' view is one with which I agree.
This banishment of images in favour of an order based on a linguistic or other syntactical system is also evident in Bacon, Descartes, and others. Bacon's memory system divided things in a certain order and arranged them according to the principles of classification. By identifying the characteristics of the things in the world around him, Bacon was able to order them in a scientific way which is not, essentially, different from the much older ordering process used by philosophers two thousand years earlier. The principles of memory had not changed much from the Classical to the Medieval period, but memory was appropriated for different purposes. In the Renaissance, the emphasis on classification was connected to what science saw as the perfect shape and form of natural order. It was Ficino who introduced the specific ideas of proportion and harmony into memory. These ideas are not essentially different from a Platonic ideal of memory. Memory is not something which comes from without, but something which should be known instinctively and deeply within the soul. The renewed interest in Classical thought in the Renaissance complemented the developments in science which sought to define the natural harmony of the world and universe, in which everything had its proper place. Although, as so many of Shakespeare's plays show us, memory is not stable and objective, memory and history nonetheless still seek to discover and define, always headed toward the principles of order.

**History and the Written Word**

Much research on oral and literate cultures has attempted to emphasize either the "evolutionary progress" of societies which move from oral to written culture, or the opposite view, which privileges a "pure" idea of oral culture until it gave way to the "tainted" notion of the written word. Stock suggests that the interaction between these two modes is much more complex. Most cultures, rather than moving from one to the other, are involved in an *interaction* between the two. The introduction of the written

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78 See Yates 160.
word to a society has ramifications on their oral constructions, too. These two modes are in a dialectic, changing one another as they themselves are altered by one another.

Looking at the theatre in terms of literary history, it is important to consider the idea of the book as a totalizing whole. The written word was considered in ancient Greek times a metaphor for memory (or even a poor substitute for it!). However, once the metaphor is extended and people concentrate on words as signs in particular, the idea of the book as a symbol of a totalizing whole with a greater logic is quite apt. The written word gradually came to be endowed with a certain permanence, or even a legal authority. As Stock comments, a textual community is "...a movement based on a literate inner core, a set or written legislation, and a wider, unlettered membership united orally to the same norms." Stock, Implications 238. We needn't assume for the purposes of this study that the audience of the plays was "illiterate", but in any case the script of the plays provided, as we have seen, the necessary beginning, and even the rules around which the community was able to form.80 In addition, it is important to note that, whenever the written word holds a particular weight and permanence over the spoken, there is a corresponding shift to concentration on history.

As historians attempt to comment on the early modern period, there are many difficulties. In particular, we might ask how one may view the dialectic between the present and the past. Montrose, among others, has emphasized the importance of historicizing the dialectic between the past and the present, and Stock also points out that it is important to note how the past was viewed by a group of people in order to construct that group's history accurately. Spiegel comments on the usefulness of the "text analogy" in historical study:

It is interesting that the notion of play, inconsistency, and difference so subtly deployed in the analysis of textuality never seems applicable to the treatment of

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79 Stock, Implications 238.
80 Elizabethan playwrights would have been acutely aware of the connection between law and words because of a related issue—the requirement that their scripts be authorized by the government.
history, although surely this is one place where the 'text analogy' might prove useful to historians and certainly would be salutary for critics.\textsuperscript{81}

If we return to the idea of interactive play within the theatre, of the space where the text can mediate--between the past and the present, the oral and the written word--then the textual community once again becomes the vantage point from which we can see much of this negotiation taking place. Nonetheless, it is still a negotiation which tends toward a certain order, or at least towards a methodology which enables the theatre to survive as a stable enterprise.

I have suggested throughout this thesis that Elizabethan theatre provided a sort of ordering principle which allowed for the formation of a group which can be considered a textual community. Now I would like to examine how the ideas of history and memory are reflected in \textit{Hamlet}. To tell a story, to weave a history, is to create memory. And to enact these stories before people on a stage is to make the memory of a remote time or place immediate to them.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, once again, whether the story be fiction or no, it becomes immediate to the people watching it--either a challenge or a confirmation, and definitely relevant to their own concerns with identity. Through historicization, memory is preserved, and a community solidified.

\textsuperscript{81}Spiegel 74.
\textsuperscript{82}Obviously, much of this argument is most applicable to the history plays, which did bring the history of the English people closer to them, and were a definite attempt at a national self definition. For more on this subject, see also Richard Helgerson, \textit{Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).
The Spoken Word

It is natural that stories should circulate in a court so obsessed with image and identity as Elsinore. Throughout Hamlet, the characters orally pass on narratives to one another that tell stories of immediate concern, or of a historical or fictional nature. On the most basic level, histories are told throughout the play in order to fill in the blanks, to let the audience know the background and peripheries of the plot. The play opens with a Danish history lesson mixed in with the appearance of the ghost, and the plot never strays far from the implicit sense of circulating stories and rumors. Some stories retell action which the audience has witnessed, such as when Horatio tells Hamlet about the ghost, or when Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet murdered Polonius. These re-tellings often serve as a contrast which could be witnessed by the audience—the narrations about the action can never fully capture the event itself (a problem in history and memory which figures deeply into the play later).

Most of the stories, however, narrate an event that the audience has not witnessed at all. The ghost tells Hamlet the history of his murder (not to mention how he burns in flames during the day!), and Ophelia tells Polonius of Hamlet's strange behavior. We are led to believe that Hamlet has been acting depressed for quite some time, or that he has been spending much time doting on Ophelia, but none of this information is confirmable in the action of the play. In a world in which so few words can be believed, one may remain skeptical about the nature of these stories. However, they are of essential importance to the continuation of Hamlet's plot. These are all stories which fill in the blank spots of the play, which provide a background and a sense of temporal continuity in the story. These stories narrated by various characters also give a sense of action and event beyond the scope of the play. When Hamlet describes the sea voyage with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or Gertrude laments the death of Ophelia, the audience is
able to participate in events which they could not have actually watched. One reason for keeping the audience away from these scenes is that many of them could not be adequately portrayed on stage. However, these stories also add to the sense that there is always something happening off stage, behind every curtain and in every chamber at the castle. The secrets, rumors, and plots all contribute to the construction of a "real" world which surrounds the play, and the audience is indeed, like those invited to a murder mystery, seeing only half of what is happening. The rest of the evidence is crying to be uncovered underneath every speech and in every secret letter that Claudius passes off to England or every conference he has with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which are not (save the first one) fully enacted on the stage.

Other stories also find their ways into Hamlet--mythological or historical narratives, such as the story of Hecuba, of Julius Caesar, and The Murder of Gonzago. The weaving of these fictions or histories with the unacted scenes on the peripheries of Hamlet serves simultaneously to draw attention to the artifice of drama, the improbability of Hamlet's story, and also to obscure it behind a world in which one really cannot tell the difference between truth and fiction. The narrative weaving of the text called Hamlet creates a fabric which is made up of a variety of threads, but all of them involve words and their interpretation. Whether these devices serve to make the play called Hamlet more fictional or more "real", they certainly make conscious the role of stories and history both in and beyond the play. The particular interest in words, in exchanging stories, serves an important purpose within Hamlet--the fashioning of identity.

Identification through history is of great importance throughout the play. From the very beginning, Horatio is narrating the history of the war between Norway and Denmark, and reports from Fortinbras' army serve as a regular backdrop to the action at Elsinore. The history of Denmark, its last king, the day young Hamlet was born--all of these national events are ingrained in a sense of history shared by everyone from Horatio to the gravedigger. The implication that the play and characters have a very profound
history, and one which is being constructed by the characters all the time, can help the audience to realize on some level that the next piece of Danish history is being constructed before them within the action of the drama. Even though crowds are not seen on the stage in *Hamlet*, there is the idea of them—the idea that "the distracted multitude" who love Hamlet or support Laertes, are also part of this narrative, and a large part, pressing against the castle, adding to Hamlet's feelings of the prison, the claustrophobic nature of Denmark. Increasingly, an important question within the drama becomes whose story will serve as the history of the events on the stage. The characters struggle to be in the position of power over discourse which will give their voice the authority to determine history.

When Guildenstern wants a word with Hamlet, Hamlet offers to give him "a whole history" (III.ii.290). Acutely aware of the historical constructions which are going on at Elsinore, Hamlet makes desperate attempts to construct his own history in opposition to the forgetful people around him. He creates his own version of history through spontaneous eulogies and soliloquies, all the while searching for a way to speak in order to preserve others in his own memory, and more importantly in the memory of those forgetful characters such as Gertrude. It seems to Hamlet horrifying that no one knows the identity of the skulls in the graveyard, and that no one remembers his father the way he does. Despite Hamlet's attempts at recalling his father through speech and signs such as wearing his inky cloak, nothing that he does causes anyone to remember for long. That Claudius admits that the memory of his dear brother's death is still "green" serves only as a bitter irony for Hamlet, who is the only one in the play who really seems to hold his father in memory. His bitter remark to Ophelia about how "there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year" (III.ii.129-30) looks forward to the gravedigger scene, where Hamlet is troubled by the nameless skulls which the gravedigger tosses about irreverently. In a most striking instance of remembering, Hamlet reconstructs Yorick piece by piece, tracing where the lips should have been to their flesh which he
kissed to the jibes which they once pronounced. However, this complete linguistic
memorative effort cannot hide the fact that the skull smells, or that Alexander may be
stopping a beer barrel. At every turn, Hamlet's words become the dust which prefigures
his own return to the same.

Hamlet's most painful memory dwells not upon his father alone, but on the
"incestuous bed" to which his mother moved so quickly. Even before he knows of the
ghost, he pronounces in agony, "Heaven and earth,/ Must I remember?" (I.ii.142-3), but
remember he does, and he tries to make his mother remember, too. In the closet scene,
Hamlet desperately tries to make Gertrude remember her first husband and what she has
done. Although it seems that Gertrude has remembered (realized) what she has done
wrong when Hamlet confronts her, in the next scene she returns to Claudius, tells him
what has happened, and has apparently forgotten what Hamlet said to her, and dismissed
him as mad. Of course it is possible that Gertrude is in some way protecting Hamlet, but
her own utterance upon seeing her son sitting in amazement, "Alas, he's mad" (III.iv.106)
cannot be overlooked. It is the coinage of Hamlet's brain which makes him converse with
the incorporeal air, but that is because Hamlet's mind is able to re-member the ghost piece
by piece, until he stands in front of his son, ready to chide him. Words that are spoken, as
discussed in chapter one, are temporary, fleeting, and cannot be trusted. Worst of all,
they disappear as soon as they are spoken, and without memory what they signified is lost
as well.

The one possible exception to this is Horatio, who understands that the wedding
followed hard upon the funeral, and who knew the king: "These hands are not more like"
(I.ii.212). Indeed, perhaps Hamlet's love for Horatio stems from their shared interest in
history and identity. Hamlet recognizes Horatio, "or I do forget myself" (I.ii.161). His
absolute memory of and dependence upon Horatio contrasts sharply with his view of his
other two school fellows, whose names he does not seem to know half the time. It is
Horatio who narrates the history of the elder Hamlet's war with Norway in the opening
scene, and it is Horatio who must narrate the history at the end of the play. First and last, he is cast in the role of the play's historian. When Horatio is asked to be the teller of the story at the end of the play, it is almost immediately clear that his narration will not be the same as what the audience has just seen. As John Kerrigan asks out in his article "Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Remembrance",

But can Horatio report either Hamlet or his cause aright? His brief account to Fortinbras, with its 'carnal, bloody and unnatural acts...accidental judgements, casual slaughters', suggests that he cannot, for everything that seems most essential to Hamlet's tragedy is left out. Honest, compassionate and intelligent though he is, Horatio is simply not equipped by circumstance to inform the yet unknowing world about the nunnery scene, Claudius's words to heaven, 'To be or not to be', or, indeed, any of those decisive soliloquies. Only the play can report such things...

A narration, a historiography, cannot possibly include everything that happened. Instead, it must be selective, and choose what will make up the story which becomes the memory of a community. Events do not happen in an ordered way, and it is memory which gives them a place in time and thus a coherent structure. This structuring of history is, first and foremost, a linguistic act. In his article, "Hamlet and the Myth of Memory", James P. Hammersmith emphasizes the relationship between memory and language:

Memory is a linguistic act, a mental activity manifested in language...for without the historian time fragments into discrete particles of present moments with no connection to past or to future. Memory and language are the conquest of individual death, for they give to the whole of human existence a sense of continuum, of the past ever re-presented.

Hamlet's concern for language and meditating on individual death and death in general shows him striving toward an answer to how one's memory can be preserved. The conclusion that he comes to is evident in his request to Horatio, but as Kerrigan points out, this ending may leave the audience in doubt as to how adequate this memory of

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Hamlet will be. In these helpful but ultimately inadequate or misleading stories which circulate throughout *Hamlet*, the audience may begin to believe that drama itself is the vehicle for memory, and thus it may somehow provide a more complete and "true" sense of history. It is the drama itself which is the answer to Hamlet's plea to be remembered. And thus, the burden of remembrance is shifted from Horatio to the audience.

**The Written Word**

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Western tradition has privileged the written word, for once words become part of paper, they can be considered authoritative, as a voice frozen in time, and collections of words could be preserved to form totalizing wholes known as books and canons. This connective interplay between history as spoken and history as written is extremely important in understanding how history and memory are being constructed within *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's encounter with the ghost in Act One establishes a connection between the spoken and the written word which remains important throughout the play. The ghost's parting plea to remember holds a lasting resonance. However, this linguistic resonance is not all, for memory is linked to writing specifically. Hamlet responds to the haunting phrase, "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me" (I.v.91) by clearing all else from his tables in order to remember the ghost's words. Hamlet's position as a scholar does not rule out the possibility that when he says "My tables" (I.v.107) he could actually have been writing on physical tablets (or his common-place book). However, even if these tables are metaphorical, Hamlet is driven to change the ghost's *spoken* words into his own *written* words. Indeed, he promises to wipe all else from the tables of his memory "...whiles memory holds a seat/ In this distracted globe" (I.v.96-97). Hamlet uses the popular metaphor of his mind as a table which has memorial images engraved upon it, completing the process of interiorizing the ghost's message by completely memorizing it, and making it his own. This metaphor extends to the mention of the "distracted Globe",

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which can refer to both Hamlet's mind and to the Globe theatre. If we return to the idea of the theatrical sphere itself as a place where theatregoers enter to experience a different world, this image is very important. The interiorization of the ghost's message which occurs by setting down the words in the table of Hamlet's memory becomes the parallel to a similar interiorization of the play *Hamlet* by the audience members. Perhaps Hamlet is evoking the memory theatre of the Globe, and of its audience, to assist him with the remembrance of something which could of course never be realistically forgotten, but this stress on memory is not of a nominal kind; it is instead of absolute crucial importance to Hamlet. But why does Hamlet say "Meet it is I set it down/ That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I.v.107-8)? Surely we know, as Horatio, that this is not a very original thought, and it surely isn't the ghost's words. However, the context in which he says "Now to my word" (l. 110, my emphasis) suggests that he has also written "adieu, adieu, remember me." From that moment forth, the ghost's word has become Hamlet's own, and his memory is tied to the supposed permanence and comfort of the written word. The ghost's words are to be *all* that Hamlet remembers until he achieves his revenge. As discussed in chapter one, this word obsesses him throughout the play, but here I would like to emphasize that it is the first and most important step of Hamlet's memorial process. At the same time, making the ghost's words his own has the effect of causing Hamlet to think at length about himself and his place in this natural order which his memory is attempting to construct.

The emphasis on the written word continues through the play, for Hamlet is the scholar, the wretch who comes reading, one who is constantly portrayed in the company of some book or other. No play of Shakespeare's seems so concerned with written words and books as *Hamlet*. From the very beginning, letters are being passed around to commanders, love notes have been circulated, and there are plenty of books. As has been pointed out by many scholars, the concern with memory, *memento mori* figures, death and remembrance, also crowd *Hamlet* like no other play. Written words may not be more
reliable than spoken words, but they are certainly more permanent. As a scholar, and a frustrated student who really would prefer to be back at the university, it is natural that Hamlet would seek answers to his terrible situation in books. Nevertheless, already in Act Two, he is dwelling upon the emptiness of "words, words, words." His play with Polonius does imply that there is truth in the books after all, but he twists the meanings and admits that "...though I most powerfully and potently believe [this], yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down" (II.ii.201-2). Despite Hamlet's bitter sarcasm in this scene, it is a very telling moment, and one which repeats the essential connection between authority and setting something down. Once something is "set down" it is made part of a law and authority which controls history and thus memory as well.

Polonius reveals Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia as an authority on Hamlet's condition. Similarly, the authority of Claudius is exercised explicitly through letters. At the beginning, Claudius gives a letter to Voltemand, and through the play the king continues to exercise this written authority. He "sets down" that Hamlet should go to England, and what should happen to him there. It is only when Hamlet begins to intercept these letters and write some of his own in Act Four that he gains some power over Claudius. Orders are given and changed. When Hamlet happens to have his father's signet which can seal the protean letters for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is remembering his own father, as a seal imprinted on wax. It is unfortunate for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet is able to produce a "legal" precedent for their execution, for there are really two dangers in the giving of words. The first is that they will disappear, as so many of Hamlet's words do, as the memory of the elder Hamlet seems to do, as woman's brief love, and as Hamlet's words to Claudius which are given and then belong to no one. That is the realm of the spoken word. The other danger lies in the realm of the written word, for these words are fixed to a page and endowed with a permanence which can be most unfortunate. A fixing of meaning is a dangerous thing--a lesson that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn too late.
The legal or authoritative use of words is central to the complications in *Hamlet*.

It is clear that the law is important, and the law of the monarchy is certainly what rules Denmark. However, once again, there are constant frustrations to the attempts to establish order. Hamlet's manipulation of Claudius' orders and Laertes' attempts to take the law into his own hands are examples of how the nobility misuses authority. On the most common level, the gravedigger thinks that he is well-versed in law, and aptly points out the way laws shift for the nobility. Hamlet, upon seeing the skulls the gravedigger is tossing around, muses, "Why, may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?" (V.i.96-101). Once again, Hamlet longs (if only half-heartedly by this point) for order and permanence in a world which reminds him at every turn that the order is merely one guided by a Providence that returns us to "base uses."

If the audience at "the distracted Globe", that memory theatre, were not only in a discursive space involved in a process of interpretation, but also implored to remember the story of Hamlet, they, too, may have been drawing their breath in pain to tell this story. However, the very act of watching the drama presupposes that the story already has been set down, and that the history has already been formed. The audience may indeed be part of constructing the memory of *Hamlet*, but they cannot do it alone. Like Hamlet himself, they need the players in order to help, for they are the professional historians and memorizers of the day. Whenever history is told, it is always told from a particular viewpoint. Desires to organize memory conflict when more than one viewpoint is involved, but if the audience were to submit to the professional historians of the theatre, history would begin to be constructed as a totalizing whole within the great Globe itself.
The Players

It is the players who are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (II.ii.520). When Hamlet assures Polonius that it would be better to have a bad epitaph than the bad report of the players, it is evident that the players do have the power to preserve certain memories. Most strikingly, the memory of the players is more powerful than the ultimate written word—that carved on stone in memory of the dead. The first player's soliloquy is absolute evidence of the timeless ability of the players' memory. He has preserved the memory of Hecuba so entirely that he feels her passion. Here memory has succeeded at its finest, and has made the past alarmingly present and immediate. That the story of Hecuba is a legend, a fabrication, makes little difference, because what matters within the narration is the feeling of memory which is preserved, and it causes Hamlet to identify his own situation with that story. The player is evidence that drama is able to achieve what the spoken narrations cannot. Here the implication is that there really is a place in drama for personal identification. Hamlet's interpretation of the player's passion is a personal one, and the speech affects him deeply, in sharp contrast to Polonius, who cannot refrain from making inane comments. This identification with the players stems from a participation in the story which evokes the power of memory. Through its power to evoke personal identification and memory, the connection between one's own life and the events on stage, drama reaches its fullest potential. Hamlet uses the players for his audience in a similar way to Shakespeare's use of his own players for the audience at the Globe.

When Laertes sees Ophelia's behaviour in Act Four, he calls it "a document in madness" (IV.v.176). There is a certain authority—a deep reality to the performance she gives which seems to define madness. This event reflects Polonius' words about madness early in the play, when he says "for to define true madness,/ What is't but to be nothing

85 This relationship between words (poetry) and memory is reminiscent of Sidney's curse at the end of the Defense: "...yet thus much curse I must send you in the behalf of all poets...when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph" 56.
else but mad?" (II.ii.92-3). Madness defies the linguistic bounds which would define it. Indeed, when Ophelia is divided from herself and her reason, it is her language which is unable to communicate in a rational form. Madness is a failure of memory. This is not to say, however, that Ophelia's memory is bad in that she has forgotten everything. In fact, the problem is quite the opposite. Her problem is that she has remembered too well. Her talk is filled with "pray you mark" and "pray you love, remember" (IV.v.28,35,173-4). She gives rosemary for remembrance, and though her speeches do lack form, they are blatantly tied to her recent traumatic experiences over her relationship with Hamlet and the death of Polonius. In order to remember, it is also necessary to forget. The human brain is incapable of remembering everything, and to do so would indeed be madness. Hamlet wipes other things from the tables of his memory so that there is room for the memory of the ghost. However, it is when his memory is too completely full of the ghost's words that Hamlet may be said to verge on madness. On the other side of remembrance lies a madness in which one may forget because one loses the ordering principle of memory. Ophelia hasn't forgotten Polonius, but she has remembered him so thoroughly that she has forgotten herself. Although this madness does defy the logic of language by itself, it does not defy the medium which is able to communicate it. These dramatic instances of madness affirm the theatre's ability to go beyond written or spoken words and to give the theatre a privileged position as that which is able to give a solid sense of memory--history and continuity.

Madness is associated with unordered language, as Polonius' "craft" is associated with his playing with language. What is to be organized in the theatrical memory, then? How is memory achieved? As Hamlet does, certain things must be "set down" in order to be organized and remembered. Thus, the real organization by memory results in history. The function of memory is to interiorize, and hence personalize, that which is to be remembered. The full assimilation of a word or event means that it becomes part of you. This impact of memory on the theatre is twofold. First, it fulfills an audience's need for
an ordering of the past. Second, it provides a way by which the audience may become part of a community which places a particular emphasis on historical enactment. Whatever confusions in the ordering structure occur within Hamlet, there are also constant impulses toward re-establishing it. This breakdown in order is seen particularly in language within the play, and the re-establishment of order is repeatedly connected to the memorative power of the drama itself.

The dangers of remembering and forgetting are equally evident in Hamlet. However, the suggestion given above, that drama itself is the best method for remembering and historicizing, certainly holds a resonance in the play. It is through language that memory is able to preserve people, and the resulting implication (at least in the Renaissance) is that written language does a better job of historicizing (preserving) than spoken language. Perhaps drama, however, which does fit thoughts and remembrances, the words to the action, and res and verba in the process of signification and action, is indeed the best at being the abstract and brief chronicles of the times. The burden of memory after the play ends really does fall on the audience. They may tell the story of Hamlet, too, for Hamlet's lines to the audience on stage, "You that look pale and tremble at this chance,/ That are but mutes or audiences to this act" (V.ii.339-40), are equally a reference to the audience off the stage. The multiple meta-theatrical moments in Hamlet, as in so many of Shakespeare's plays, function by removing the audience one step from the action. This device, I would argue, serves primarily to induce self-reflection and memory in the audience. They must not, like Ophelia, be so caught up in the action and life of the play that they forget themselves. Stock refers to this principle (based on Ricoeur), "...writing transfixes language at the semantic level, since what is preserved is not the event but the said of what is spoken. There is an 'intentional exteriorization' of both event and meaning, which now appear as a unit."86 It is through drama that meaning and event can be combined, in a constant state of the interpretive act.

86Stock, Listening 102.
In this sense, drama is able to solve the problem of the use of words mentioned above, for neither do the words disappear, nor are they completely fixed as in a written text. They must constantly be re-interpreted as they are remembered. The audience of Hamlet, like Claudius, must think of the play "[t]ogether with remembrance of [them]selves" (I.ii.7). Staying at least partially removed from the play enables one to make decisions which can incorporate the play into history and memory.

**Tradition and Modernity in the Community**

How we choose to construct and interpret the past, and tell it as history, involves fashioning an identity in the midst of an assumed temporal continuity. Stock's final chapter in *Listening for the Text* deals with attitudes toward modernity. He posits that tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive, but mutually interdependent. A textual "use" of the past can either reaffirm the past under the name of tradition, or define itself in contrast to the past, in the name of modernity. What this involves, of course, is self-definition in relation to a received past. A sense of history in a textual community often involves an assertion of difference or modernity compared to what has happened before. However, the assertion of modernity is not possible without a sense of one's own history, and the desire to use that history in order to create a sense of future. Here again we see the temporal importance of memory, which brings the past to the present, and is able to project into the future. In Shakespeare's plays we may see signs of questioning the past, or of affirming it, but we needn't thus have to choose one or the other of these options. The theatre, as a textual community, was involved in a process of defining itself in relation to its past, and creating its own sense of a past which could establish the place of the stage, in terms of both temporal and spatial continuity. The final step, once this definition becomes relatively clear, is to historicize it, and to produce a history which can be remembered. This history involves not only the self-definition of the individual, but also his inclusion as part of a community of theatregoers which also has its own history.
The play named after him is the answer to Hamlet's plea to be remembered. However, the historicization which occurred in this textual community insured that Hamlet's words would not be lost after the last production of the play. Although Shakespeare's plays were written in order to be performed, and not read, the gathering of the plays into quartos insured that they would have a life beyond that of Shakespeare. There was something suggested within *Hamlet* that the audience wanted to remember. It is by the process of recording and publishing these quartos that the final stage of this textual community was achieved. Although theatregoing is a transitory experience, fixing the words of *Hamlet* to a page insures that there is some constant, that there is a common part of the history of this community which can be remembered and shared. The greatest irony lies in the fact that *Hamlet*, above all other plays, was honored with a seemingly eternal memory. The setting down of Shakespeare's plays and the growing popularity of the Renaissance theatre assured that soon it would become an institution. Before the institutionalization, however, still in the interstices between it and the introduction of a written script, there lies the textual community. After the education of this group comes the historicization, the sense of giving the group a past and an identity so that they may belong to part of a temporal and spatial continuity known as history. For, to quote Hugh of St. Victor, "The whole usefulness of education consists only in the memory of it."87

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87 Quoted from Carruthers 82.
Conclusion

The theatre defined itself in relation to the past, positing itself as a "modern" institution, even if it were involved in interpretive processes which may have been very old indeed. Including the audience in its historical identity, the theatre began to form a solidified community. The audience, enclosed comfortably in this interpretive space, became the integral component of this community, and hence they could define themselves in relation to it. The capitalist focus on the importance of the consumer involved what was for the theatre a central challenge--the company had to continually produce new texts and find new ways to engage the audience. Meanwhile, the audience had found a place where their participation was not only sought, but needed, and it was a pleasure to be at the centre of a community while still maintaining a sense of individuality.

It is difficult to make the leap from the position of words within *Hamlet* to the position of Renaissance theatre in relation to interpretive practice. Indeed, in many ways it is a larger leap than the hermeneutic leap of which I have been speaking. What is the benefit of speaking of Renaissance theatre as a specifically textual community? It is very important to note that Stock's breaking point from the more generalized notion of a textual community is that his concept is specifically designed to explain groups which form on the margins, set apart from the ruling institutions. Thus, this concept of a textual community intersects nicely with much work in New Historicism concerning the marginalization of Renaissance theatre. However, rather than focusing, as most such projects do, exclusively on the social and political implications of the position of the theatre, this approach allows us to focus also upon the literary implications of the community of the theatre. Stock admits that the real advantage of looking at certain groups as textual communities lies in the fact that it
...allows that the most important influences in forming the ideas that make a group cohere are those that take place among the group's members during the processes of conversion, initiation, and confirmation. These are the rituals of self-definition. Such experiences can be replicated, as they were wherever Paul spoke. But each group must undergo the rite of passage on its own."

Interestingly, for the theatre, the process of "conversion" becomes playgoing itself.

The introduction of a script in the theatre provides the basis for the play, and playgoers watch the play, and thus see before them an interplay of words, which is more often than not also about words. The audience members are drawn into a hermeneutic drama, and become participants in the action that unfolds before them. Through this process, the audience becomes educated by these professional interpreters. As they participate in the action, they learn how to construct their own meanings, and how to perform the interpretive act, which directs their actions when they leave the theatre. And although the theatregoers return home after each play, if they are able to remember what they have learned, they may participate further in the process of self-definition by relating the stories which they witnessed, and return to continue as a part of the theatrical community. The audience becomes absolutely crucial when the plea for memory is put forth, for the memory of *Hamlet*, for instance, depends not only upon the company which will act his story, but upon the audience who will listen and continue to listen to this story.

As I implied in the last chapter, however, the state of the textual community as described in 1601 could not last. Textual communities are necessarily transient stages, for they must either collapse, or gain enough following to become an institution. Thus, no longer on the margins and no longer in the precarious position of defining themselves by their difference from everything around them, the institution evolves into other concerns. Concentrating on a time, however, when the community was still forming and still defining itself can yield a particularly fruitful study, for suddenly what becomes more

88 Stock, *Listening* 158.
clear, or more apparent, is the manner in which the members of the community viewed the texts around which they formed, and achieved the interpretations which lent them coherence.

One of the first things a student of Shakespeare learns is that the woods, heath, or wilderness in the plays are important places, where characters go out, and undergo a transformation in a world set apart from the normal social order from which these characters come (most often, the court). Through this experience in a place set apart from the rest of their existence, the characters learn something that enables them to return and become an integral part of society. Work such as Mullaney's reminds us, too, that the Elizabethan theatre was also set apart from its society, on the margins, and out of the jurisdiction of the city. If we extend this parallel of the wilderness within Shakespeare's plays to the process of theatregoing, we can begin to see the theatre as a place where people can go, away from the normal strictures of society, where they can learn something, and then return to their society somehow changed.

I would further extend this metaphor to include a specific consideration towards the literary characteristics of the theatre. In this sense, going to the theatre involves a hermeneutical journey which is characterized not so much by what is read, but by what is in the margins. Gellrich points out that the margins of medieval manuscripts contain the evidence of the methods used to interpret the manuscripts.89 Similarly, the audience members are the integral part of the theatrical community, the ones who receive the text as drama, and contribute to an understanding of it which is, at its core, a marginal understanding of what specific events mean.

Throughout this thesis I have alluded to many dualities related to words--oral and written, used or abused, producing or frustrating meaning and order. Within the social organization of the theatre, we noted a certain tension between distance and participation,

individual and communal identity, and tradition and modernity. In between these linguistic and interpretational extremes, Renaissance drama opened up a world of possibilities for its consumers, thereby through the plays enacting the processes which precipitated a community based on words and their dramatic enactment.

I believe it is important to note that the analysis of Elizabethan or Jacobean theatre as a textual community could include a study of any number of plays by Shakespeare or his contemporaries. The history plays in particular yield an impressive potential for the examination of how national identity is formed through the community of the theatre. I have concentrated on Hamlet in particular in order to look at the specifically literary in the composition of a community. This angle, with its starting point at the textual community developed by Stock, has far reaching implications not just for literacy, but for literary playgoing in the Renaissance. We tend to enter the play as Hamlet enters in II.ii—reading a book. However, we may exit, like Hamlet, knowing that "the play's the thing."
Bibliography


