

# Hamlet's Soliloquy: An Eighteenth-Century Genre

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## Abstract

Scholars of Shakespearean appropriation tend to take the bard as their point of departure, assuming that rewritings reference the Shakespearean original; intertextual citations, however, often are varied in their range of allusion. This study of eighteenth-century *Hamlet* parodies uses the *HyperHamlet* database to examine a large corpus of parodies of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. If we allow rewritings of Hamlet's soliloquy to transcend their status as samples of parasitic hackwork by reading them as a corpus, there emerges a pattern of recurrent features that makes them look like a genre. Shakespeare parodies make it possible to posit a process by which adaptations of a famous text become recognizable as tokens of a readily available pattern, with no particular reference to the Shakespearean original.

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*I offer you a Shakespeare sonnet, but it is no longer his — Tom Stoppard*

Short parodies of famous poems or verse passages are popular anthology items, but the collectors themselves often defend or even depreciate their specimens.<sup>1</sup> We may no longer feel Walter Hamilton's need to insist that "not the slightest disrespect is intended . . . to the immortal bard" (Hamilton 1885, 2:144) by such a collection; but even after Cultural Studies have provided a framework for serious research into the phenomenon of literary parody, scholars tend to focus on single pieces or representative selections (cf. Greenfield 2008, Müller 1997, Müller 1994, and Bate 1985). And even in selection, middlebrow Shakespearean rewritings make their investigators uneasy. Jonathan Bate took considerable trouble to find "Parodies of Shakespeare" in eighteenth-century magazine archives, but concluded that they ultimately represent "a mean and limited thing when set beside the magnanimity and breadth of the plays themselves" (Bate 1985, 89). Similarly, Sayre Greenfield rounds out a summary of eighteenth-century examples by observing that Shakespeare's meaning "lingers in the reader's mind only as a point of contrast to indicate how far the subject matter has *descended*" (Greenfield 2008, 241, emphasis added). Shakespeare parodies are worth collecting because of the originals' fame, but as a point of reference these originals simultaneously devalue their rewritings. Like cinematic and theatrical adaptations of

Shakespeare's plays, verse parodies are valued as tokens of the popularity and significance of his texts, but they are also expected to provide some kind of signification comparable to the originals, and on that count they inevitably disappoint.

Rather than setting up rewritings of Hamlet's soliloquy for failure by scanning them for Shakespeare's poetic presence and potency, I propose to take them seriously, in large numbers and on their own terms. These terms, I would like to claim, are often self-referential rather than Shakespearean. A contemporary paradigm is provided by Francis Alÿs's 2009 *Fabiola* installation, composed of 307 copies of a late-nineteenth-century *St. Fabiola*. Paintings, collages, drawings and pieces of embroidery found in attics, fleamarkets, and junk shops were catalogued and hung in the professional manner usually reserved for "masterpieces" and "originals." The result are several walls of similar female profiles with a red veil. Refraining from aesthetic value judgments on individual images, the installation raises significant questions about originality, reference, and genre, questions that also determine the following discussion of eighteenth-century texts.

The "installation" relevant to this article is a group of rewritings of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy: seventy-three poems (121 tokens, including reprints) dating from 1744 to 1841<sup>2</sup> which individually offer a range of unremarkable competence and occasional curio interest similar to the amateur *Fabiolas*.<sup>3</sup> And like the *Fabiolas*, they are mostly obscure or elusive, like a *Hamlet* quotation in the middle of a fat novel. Widening the collection beyond familiar anthology set pieces required the modern equivalent of a flea market hunt: searches in electronic full-text databases like *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, *Literature Online*, *Romantic Era Redefined*, and *British Periodicals*.

The great advantage of such databases is that they make it possible to capture texts that have never been reprinted, footnoted, or indexed and thus allow us to complement print resources such as anthologies and annotated editions with materials that have not come under the scrutiny of scholarly editors.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, tailor-made research media allow researchers to investigate these materials with the methods that corpus linguistics has made familiar. The *HyperHamlet* database, which inspired this article and houses all the relevant texts (accessible, with thousands of other *Hamlet* references, at <http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch>), is such a tool; data sets such as the poems discussed in the following can be searched and sorted for date, publication details, the way they mark (or do not mark) their derivation, and many other parameters. Such a parameter-oriented approach is essential for dealing appropriately with large numbers of unfamiliar texts: instead of imposing on individual texts preconceived (and contested) labels such as "adaptation" or

"parody," it enables researchers to look at emerging patterns with an open mind (cf. Hohl Trillini and Quassdorf 2010).

If we allow rewritings of "To be or not to be" to transcend their status as samples of parasitic hackwork by reading them as a corpus, there emerges a pattern of recurrent features that makes them look like a *genre*. They make more sense as realizations of an "architextual" pattern than as individual mediocre "hypertexts" (to use the term in Gérard Genette's sense) of a famous passage. Producing and enjoying them is then similar to enjoying any token of a genre with clearly determined formal rules, such as a sonnet, a villanelle, a version of Proust's questionnaire, or a Golden Age detective novel. With such genre (non-)fiction, readerly anticipations and expectations do not center upon how meaningfully a specimen relates to a master text such as *Hamlet* or *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. *Hamlet* may confer prestige, but its content and context become secondary to a template that also contains other features. This is typical of genres, which have "no moments of authority and points of origin except those which are retrospectively designated as origins and which, therefore, can be shown to derive from the series for which they are constituted as origin" (Culler 1976, 1394). In the following essay, I will show how *Hamlet*, the ostensible "point of origin" for dozens of parodies, is effaced, overlaid, and even ignored in favor of correlations and cross-references among generic tokens.

### The Formal Pattern

The first thing to consider in a corpus of texts based on the same model are those features that they have in common and that can be surmised to have stimulated reproduction. This is the "unique repertoire, from which [. . .] representatives [of a genre] select characteristics [. . .] either formal or substantive" (Fowler 1987, 55). In the case of "To be or not to be," one would expect the existential topic to be the basic "substantive" characteristic, but this is only rarely the case. The "highly metaphorical and abstract" passage "must have sounded ambiguous" even "to generations immediately succeeding Shakespeare's own" (Bugliani 1995, 11), and whether Hamlet is pondering the advisability of suicide, the life eternal, plans for murder, or other questions is still debated. The play's "habit of generalization" (Levin 1959, 11) rises to an almost mathematical level in this speech, and what does get across is indeed an abstract thing: the literally *esse*-ntial urgency of a two-faced dilemma. Hamlet's subject matter, whatever it may exactly be, is usually lost from sight. What rewritings preserve and play with is a blueprint for debating any either-or question, together with a number of surface features: a sequence of roughly thirty-three blank verses that starts off with the phrase "To be or not to be," or a variant thereof, and contains a number of other recognizable catchphrases and syntactical patterns.

The discursive blueprint, the structure of the argument, runs as follows. First, the contrasting potentials of "A" and "Not-A" are presented and paraphrased briefly. Death is the immediately preferable second option, "a consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd." In line 5, the catchy infinitives of the opening are used to re-phrase the "Non-A" option ("to die, to sleep"). In line 9, they return ("To die, to sleep, / To sleep, perchance to dream") and bring the text to a halt with the thought that the tempting "Not-A" (death) is disturbingly unpredictable: "there's the rub." The next eleven lines (12-22) discuss the pressures of "A" (life) that might nevertheless make "Not-A" desirable,<sup>5</sup> but fear of the unknown prevails (lines 23-27), and the conclusion laments the paralysis resulting from this stand-off.

A or Not-A
<i>To be or not to be? That is the question.</i>
A means
<i>to suffer the slings and arrows . . .</i>
Not-A means
<i>to take arms against a sea of troubles . . .</i>
Not-A is tempting.
<i>A consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd . . .</i>
But Not-A is unknown.
<i>To sleep: perchance to dream ay, there's the rub . . .</i>
A is terrible.
<i>For who would bear the whips and scorns of time . . .</i>
But Not-A is unknown.
<i>But that the dread of something after death . . . makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of . . .</i>
So it is impossible to decide.
<i>. . . and lose the name of action.</i>

Such is the stuff that parodies are made of; these "metaphysical opposition structures" encourage humorous rewriting (Müller 1994, 100) because their content is vulnerable to comic bathos and because they offer an adaptable, re-applicable model.

The most popular topic for re-application of the *Hamlet* structure is marriage; if reprints are included, the poems of the "To wed or not to wed" kind constitute almost a third of the corpus. The fifty-three others take up a wide variety of topics, ranging from leisure pursuits — such as "to swig" (1826),<sup>6</sup> "to feast" (1795), "to ride" (1792 and 1800), "to hunt" (1759 and 1798), and "to walk" (1760) — to political issues such as the poll tax, electioneering, farming laws, and Presbyterian ministers ("To conform or not to conform"). Certain topics were especially popular. The 1747 "to drink" text was reprinted immediately and again in 1768, while new versions appeared in 1800 and 1841. John Wolcot, writing as usual as "Peter Pindar" in 1786, worried about censure that impinges on the question "To eat or not to eat" and influences the decision whether "To print or not to print," which was addressed in different poems in 1758, 1793, and 1799.<sup>7</sup> None of these relate to Hamlet's dilemma, but rework a formal pattern, like tokens of other lyrical genres.

"To write" is the second most popular single verb after "to wed" (see below), appearing in texts from 1747, 1763, 1786, and 1810, which were all reprinted at least once. The earliest text is "A Parody on the Speech of To be, or not to be, in *Hamlet*,"<sup>8</sup> which was published in March 1747 and opens as follows:

To write or not to write! That is the Question!  
 Whether 'tis nobler with the Pen to scribble  
 The Flights and Fancies of outrageous Nonsense;  
 Or to lay down the Quill, or forbear to tire  
 The Patience of the world? To write! to scrawl!  
 And by that Scrawl to say we utter all  
 The Horrid Stuff and the thousand foolish Whimsies  
 Labouring in the Brain — tis a Deliverance  
 "Devoutly to be wish'd." (Anon. 1747, lines 1-9)

This is remarkable not only as an early description of therapeutic writing, but also for the inverted commas that signal an "uber-quote" within a text that is itself one long quotation. Further phrases so favored are "Ay, there's the Rub," what "may come," "must give us Pause," "There's the respect," and "For who could bear." These are not the only phrases conserved verbatim, but were those obviously considered most likely to invite recognition of the famous passage that is being adapted.

However, these signals also help to mask the fact that the discursive blueprint is *not* followed exactly. The conclusion runs:

[T]he itch of writing for the Stage . . . "puzzles the Will"  
 And makes us rather risque all Ridicule,  
 Than shun the Muses, and forbear to rhyme.  
 Ambition thus makes Asses of us all;  
 . . . And Petit-mâîtres, of great Skill in Dressing,  
 Ev'n from the fav'rite Mirror "turn away,"  
 To gain the name of Author. (Anon. 1747, lines 25-32)

The two phrases that are marked here originally introduce Hamlet's indecision: "the dread of something after death . . . / Puzzles the will" so that many plans "turn away (or awry) / And lose the name of action." But here, these phrases do not signal a self-criticism that might induce writer's block; the scribblers' determination does not turn "awry," but "away" from paralyzing introspection, and the Will writes.

So while the overall shape of the famous passage is preserved and ostensibly honored by adaptation, it is also casually deconstructed, as its even more famous constituents are used against the meaning of the original context. Before the Stratford bicentenary enthroned the bard and long before casual quotations began to litter Romantic and Regency literature, we can observe first-hand the process that turned *Hamlet* into a "repository for favorite quotations" (Levin 1959, 11) and made it into "literature's greatest bazaar; everything available, all warranted and trademarked" (Kermode 2000, 125). Wholesale "adaptation" — whether cocky imitation, reverent rewriting, or affectionate parody — disintegrates into local "quotation" in a single early text.

If already in this early text, isolated *Hamlet* quotations have become self-ironic samples of the "foolish whimsies" whirling in the author's brain, the next text to start with "To write or not to write" ambitiously weighs "[t]he impatient longings of a tow'ring soul" and a "heart aspiring to immortal fame" against the battle with "the critic's rage" (Ashley 1763, lines 2-5). Aptly named, this proto-Romantic "The Poet's Soliloquy" makes no mention of Hamlet or Shakespeare. What may look like a declaration of artistic independence, however, turns out to be a generic feature. The pattern of substituting a speaker persona for Hamlet in the title had been introduced twenty years earlier in the oldest of all these poems, the 1744 "Batchelor's Soliloquy." This inspired a number of other "bachelor" titles until it was itself established enough to invite variation and establish itself as a generic blueprint, as we can see from titles such as the following:

· "The Soldier's Soliloquy. A Parody" (1779)

- "The Presbyterian Parson's Soliloquy; Or a Parody of Hamlet's celebrated Soliloquy" (1791)
- "Bonaparte's Soliloquy at Calais. A Parody" (1803)
- "Gleanings: Clean Linen, or The Housewife's Soliloquy. A Parody" (1803)
- "The Journeyman Tailor's Soliloquy" (1823)
- "The Spouter's Soliloquy" (1825)
- "Old Tunbelly's Soliloquy" (1831)

There were also variations such as "The Young Farmer: A Parody" (1802) or "Bonaparte Solus" (1805), and from the 1830s onward, persona titles become endemic.

Multiple referencing to other rewritings occurs also when the titles conserve Hamlet's name and even his topic. The 1810 "To write or not to write" appeared in the *Hibernia Magazine* as "A Parody on Hamlet's Soliloquy on Death." This is as full a Shakespearean reference as could be wished — but it is also the exact title of a poem that had been published in 1797 in *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* and pondered whether "to shave or not to shave," signed "Barbatus." Time and again, these poems copy not only *Hamlet*, but also each other, signaling awareness of a literary mode or genre predicated just as much on contemporary forms and issues as it is on Shakespeare. This is especially obvious in the numerous rewritings that have marriage as their topic.

### A Sub-Genre

Before the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, which made divorce available without a hugely expensive Act of Parliament, "To wed or not to wed" nearly rivalled "To be or not to be" for seriousness. The *Hamlet* parodies that take up this question reflect the marriage debate that was stoked by 1790s radicals and feminists and the doubts that continued, even though the Regency postwar period was expected to "make the world safe for conjugality" (Walker 2009, 71), through the late Victorian "marriage question" well into our time. In keeping with this situation, the 1744 "Batchelor's Soliloquy in Imitation of a celebrated speech of Hamlet" is not only the earliest, but also the most successful individual specimen.<sup>9</sup> It was reprinted thirteen times in various magazines, and its opening line copied in many more versions. The *HyperHamlet* database offers more than twenty examples dating from 1744 to 1984, including variants such as "To marry or not to marry" or "To pop or not to pop" the question (1888).

All of these texts seem aware of each other and of their shared topic, but work at one or several removes from the source of their shared structure. This is evident already in the titles, where generic terms precede the mention of the Shakespearean model, and the term "imitation" (rather

than "parody") frequently announces a competitive rather than derivative spirit. The adjective "celebrated" indicates a crowd of other admirers (and future rewriters), which reinforces the rewriting's validity as much as does the final source information "of Hamlet." As Peter Campbell says of the *Fabiola* installation: "The variations put you in the presence of a crowd — that of the makers" (Campbell 2009, 10). Shakespeare, implicit and indispensable, is admired by a writer who knows of many literate fellow admirers and writes with reference to them as much as to the Bard.

The first "Batchelor's Soliloquy" follows closely Shakespeare's structural template. It sets out the initial "A"- "Not-A" alternative as follows:

To wed or not to wed, that is the question.  
 Whether 'tis happier in the mind to stifle  
 The heats and tumults of outrageous passion,  
 Or with some prudent fair in solemn contract  
 Of matrimony join. (Anon. 1744, lines 1-5)

As in *Hamlet*, the unknown horrors of Not-A (marriage) remain vague, ills "we fancy greater" that might cause "dull remorse," while the present woes of the familiar bachelor life are detailed as "the scorn and jeers which batchelors / When aged feel, the pains and flattering fevers / Which each new face must give to roving fancy" (lines 15-17). Finally, "dreadful thoughts / Of curtain lectures, jealousies, and cares" prevail so that "the lover checks his passion, / And, miserable, dies a BATCHELOR" (lines 27-30). The impossibility of taking decisive action in favor of a fascinating, but uncertain state results in a regrettable life; death — another *Hamlet* echo — is the only release from either marriage or single unhappiness.

This struck a chord: reprints followed in 1748, 1754, 1756, and 1757, and in 1758 the "Imitation" was, in its turn, first imitated. This second "Bachelor's Soliloquy," published in the Scots Magazine, does not acknowledge its predecessor, but uses the same title and opening line as well as a number of Shakespearean catchphrases. The mood is very different, however: here, it is not the single life that stifles passion, but marriage. The alternatives are

. . . to rove at large  
 From fair to fair, amid the wilds of passion;  
 Or plunge at once into a sea of marriage,  
 And quench our fires? (P—o 1758, lines 2-5).

Consequently, the main fear is not "dull remorse" but "A wife, — perchance a devil" (line 10).<sup>10</sup> Hamlet's familiar "ills we have" are replaced by a decidedly pleasant lifestyle, and the refusal to



venture into the unknown will not inconvenience the roguish, merry bachelor-speaker as much as it will the maid who will never get him: "And hence the face of many a willing maid / Is sickly'd o'er with the pale cast of languishment" (lines 31-32). Stopping short of marriage is not a paralyzed stand-off but a very active process: "And many a youth of no small pith and moment, / With this regard, spends all his days in whoring, / And damns the name of husband" (lines 33-35). As in the 1763 "To write or not to write," Hamlet's topic is abandoned, together with the structure of his argument and its mood: forestalling marriage here is not a despairing paralysis, but an enjoyable (if reprehensible) and stable state.<sup>11</sup>

The third bachelor soliloquy, in 1768, comes with yet another conclusion. George Philip Tousey's "The Batchelor's Deliberation: A Parody of the Soliloquy of *Hamlet*, (To be or Not to be) versified" concludes neutrally that the "Ills which all center in the name of Wife" can be avoided if "a single life we chuse, / By Prudence urg'd to shun the Marriage noose" (Tousey 1768, lines 28-30). Again, Hamlet is marginal: indecision is not a problem; the title furnishes the names and the "or not to" catchphrase, but gives the prime spot to the "Batchelor's soliloquy" tag. This reflects the fact that by 1768 at least six reprints of the first and second bachelor soliloquies had been published, as well as nine new parodies, including the first variation on the speaker persona, a "Poet's Soliloquy" (see above). Moreover, the opening line and the first rhyme are borrowed from a "Soliloquy in Imitation of Hamlet" published in 1749. This is not a version of "To be or not to be," but addresses Hamlet by name and exhorts him in heroic couplets to forgo his "rash resolves" and curb his desire for revenge through "salutary fear" in the name of "God, Nature, Reason" (Anon. 1749, lines 110-11).

By the 1780s, the bachelor variant was well established. The 1744 poem was republished six times during this decade, the 1758 version once in 1784, and the motif was finally stable enough to be recognized even in variations, ready to be used as a generic pattern where, by definition, every single realization varies.<sup>12</sup> So in 1783, the "willing maid" got her turn in "The Maid's Soliloquy." The *Hamlet* tag takes second place in the subtitle "in Imitation of a Speech in Hamlet," and the outcome, unlike in *Hamlet*, is a clear decision. Although men are "by nature fickle" (Anon. 1783, line 12), the "pitied" and laughable "state of stale virginity" (line 7) is worse than the "dread of something yet untried" (line 28), and so the girl decides to "venture marriage let what will befall" (line 32), gender and genre overriding the literary template.

The next item, which appeared in 1792 in the *Gentleman's Magazine* as "A Parody on *Hamlet*," was decidedly *against* marriage, the main concerns being a possibly unfaithful wife and the ensuing "jeers and taunts of men" (Philomeides 1792, line 15). This text not only scraps the

genre's inconclusive ending, but also inverts its argumentative structure. By analogy with *Hamlet*, it should run "marriage is tempting but unknown; bachelorhood is terrible, but marriage is unknown"; instead, the section "who would bear . . ." elaborates on the humiliations of a cuckolded husband, rather than the miseries of the single life. Nobody wants to put up with "[t]he insolence of an unfaithful wife, / And other ills the patient cuckold takes," especially considering that the sexual perks of marriage can be attained simply by paying for them. The poem ends after a mere twenty lines with an analogue to Hamlet's "When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin" and omits the final third of Hamlet's soliloquy, where doubts are cast on this shortcut: why should anybody marry "When he himself possession may procure / For half a crown!" (lines 20-21).

This sample of Regency rakishness was never reprinted, and the bachelor soliloquies that *were* published after 1805 abandon marriage with decorous regret. The 1808 "Bachelor's Soliloquy: A Parody on Hamlet" fears scoldings, obnoxious children, and above all, "vast expenditure," so that it is ultimately "economy [that] makes bach'lors of us" (Hawkins 1808, lines 24 and 28). The decision to remain single is a "serious thought" and a "melancholy resolution" (lines 29-30), but irrevocable: what is lost is not the capacity for "action," but "the name of husband" (line 33). In 1809, the soliloquy is spoken by an "Old Bachelor" who suffers from "The pangs of stifled love, the world's contempt," and so on (W. B. 1809, line 17), but concludes that he will remain a bachelor with Hamlet's own lines: "And makes us rather bear those ills we know / Than fly to others that we know not of" (lines 24-25). Because the final lines of Hamlet's soliloquy are cut, a decision can be implied, even though the wording comes very close to Hamlet's expression of indecision.

In the 1810s and 1820s, the bachelors' concerns become increasingly domestic. Not rakes but "pleasant and free hearted youth[s]" are kept from marrying by a dread of being "henpeck'd" (Twiss 1814, line 10), marrying a "scold" for a wife (Anon. 1824, line 9), and other "horrors," such as "[t]he cook's conceit, a curtain lecture, / The apothecary's visits, or the wrongs / A patient husband from his wife must take." (Kean 1824, lines 17-19). It is "the dread of sundry fits of gout / And other ills that need a womans care" that finally assures that "man's natural bacheloric hue / Is sickly'd o'er and kill'd" (lines 23-24, 29-30). The eighteenth-century rake has dwindled into a Victorian husband.

Whether the outcome is singleness, whoring, or wedlock, the "To wed or not to wed" texts are so strongly dominated by their topical trajectory that attitudes to marriage override the Shakespearean structure. Their conclusions do not take their cue from Hamlet's indecision; instead, they provide definite answers to the "or not to" question and reduce intertextual reference to surface features of Hamlet's soliloquy, such as the opening, the meter, and the catchphrases that were becoming familiar quotations in isolation. A letter to the editor of the *Loyal Reformer's Gazette*, complaining about the "exorbitant fee of *Two Guineas*" for having marriage banns called,

refers to "that 'sea of troubles' — Matrimony" ("A Declared Bachelor" 1831, 301), and in a poem from 1809 called "To Marry or Not to Marry," the female speaker happily uses the implied freedom of choice to envision yet another outcome to the everlasting question:

Ye ladies then who think that wives  
 Can greater pleasures carry,  
 Than they, who single pass their lives,  
 Oh! pray make haste and marry!  
 But if that's true, which I've just said,  
 I think this truth will follow  
 That, could you sink the phrase "Old Maid,"  
 By Jove! you'd beat "Wives" hollow. (Anon. 1809, lines 79-86)

Phrases — whether "to be or not to be," "old maid" or "bachelor's soliloquy" — are indeed unsinkable.

Phrases also lead independent lives. The very first reprint of the 1744 "Batchelor's Soliloquy" occurs in the second edition (1748) of a peculiar pamphlet called *The Bachelor's Recantation*. First published in 1731, the *Recantation* maintains that the "Contempt of Matrimony in either Sex is big with the greatest Evils" (Single 1748, iii) and adds five items of supporting evidence in an appendix, including "A Young Lady's Recantation of Her Resolution to turn Nun" and "The Doctor confuted: Or, NO Cure for Love." The 1748 edition adds a different "Maid's Soliloquy" (of which more later) and the 1744 "Batchelor's Soliloquy," the latter not even indirectly advertised as Shakespearean. This may, of course, signify a familiarity with *Hamlet* that can dispense with any kind of pointer, but it also indicates the priority of the topic. This priority is also chronological: the 1731 edition of *The Bachelor's Recantation* predates the very first rewriting of "To be or not to be" by thirteen years and demonstrates a concern for the most eye-catching title in the table of contents: readers flicking through a magazine number or a miscellany of jokes, "amusements," and set pieces were expected to turn pages for the Bachelor rather than the Bard. In fact, the 1744 and 1758 bachelor poems saw twenty reprints in the period under discussion, whereas only half of the fifty non-bachelor ones were reprinted even once. The occurrence of "Hamlet" or "Shakespeare" in the title bears no correlation to frequency of reprinting; the bachelor soliloquies take their formal cue from *Hamlet*, but owe what success they had to their topic as much as to an association with the Bard.

This prevalence of genre over Shakespearean reference is also evident in an anonymous poem on "Female Celibacy," which was advertised in 1813 as being by "the Author of the 'Bachelor's Soliloquy.'" Interestingly enough, "the" soliloquy is *not* one of the seven versions of "To wed

or not to wed" that had appeared by 1813, but a completely unrelated text that has nothing at all to do with *Hamlet* or with decision-making. The eight stanzas of "The Soliloquy of a Bachelor, on the Anniversary of his Birthday" lament an anniversary that is "With no kind gratulations blest" (Jackson 1812, line 7). Although he felt the "hallow'd flame" (line 41) in his youth, his singleton's misery is now so intense that old age and poverty are powerless to move him and death is simply welcome: "Have I no tie to keep me here? / Not one. — Why then, without a tear, / *I yield the worm its prey*" (lines 78-80, emphasis in original). In this way, death, Hamlet's great subject, returns by the back door, as it were: not as the topic of an extended reflection, but as an afterthought. So the obscure J. Jackson's claim to fame is a title borrowed from a group of poems on marriage with a bachelor persona, some of which happen to incorporate the surface structure of Hamlet's soliloquy.

The bachelor soliloquies, whether Hamletian or not, were not the only literary battlefield on which the marriage debate was fought. Their heyday coincides with the flowering of the courtship novel, from Samuel Richardson in the 1740s through Burney, Edgeworth, Austen, and the Silver Spoon novelists of the 1830s. The resolutely bachelor poems provide a masculine counterpart to the literary heroines in search of the right husband. In 1809, the evangelical educationalist Hannah More published a gender-flipped courtship novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, which elaborates on the perspective of a bachelor who ends up happily married. By analogy to the plotline of rakes and laughing-stocks who are disqualified from marrying the questing heroines in Austen's and Burney's novels, pious Coelebs rejects a number of potential brides before finding Miss Right, but also provides a counter-plot to the bachelor poem. The refreshing combination of two popular motifs made the book into an immediate bestseller.

This success brought yet another literary template into the referential network of soliloquy parodies. Long before the twelve impressions of Coelebs's first year were out, an anonymous poet capitalized on its popularity in March 1809 with a "Coelebs' Soliloquy." Its narrator decides against marriage, remaining literally *coelebs*:

But that the dread of *these oppressive ills*,  
 (And oft some others of still darker shade  
 Which modesty conceals) disturbs the soul;  
 And makes one rather choose some monkish haunt,  
 Than fly to noise, confusion, and a wife?  
 Thus marriage does deter my tow'ring soul [. . .]  
 And all in air dissolve! (Menander 1809, lines 23-33; emphasis in original)

Even if this Coelebs sounds repressed rather than rakish, his conclusion represents the triumph of the bachelor motif over the courtship novel; the use of More's pious tone to deploy reasons for remaining single makes the subversion of her ideal of Christian marriage all the more effective.

Coelebs's indecision may echo the inconclusiveness of Hamlet's original speech, but the overtly Shakespearean signals are, once again, generic. John Frow has noted that "cycles and series tend in turn to become genres" (Frow 2006, 139), and "Coelebs' Soliloquy" appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* as the second in a mini-series of "Imitations of Shakespeare." This not only points back to the first of these imitations (of "Now is the winter of our discontent . . .," published two months earlier), but also evokes the far more sustained series "Parodies of Shakespeare," which was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* between June 1793 and December 1802.<sup>13</sup> Its hybridity incorporates the tradition of "bachelor statements" with the "Hamlet soliloquies" that had emerged from "Imitations of Shakespeare." Unlike botanical hybrids, however, bachelor soliloquies were extremely fertile, spawning ever more variants and combinations. Beyond topical and generic cross-references, this profusion was further enriched by what now remains to be discussed: the additional literary models that were incorporated into some parodies and increased the competition for Shakespeare's rhetorical and thematic framework.

### Whose Soliloquy?

I have already mentioned an example of literary cross-reference: the title of "Coelebs' Soliloquy" refers to a book as much as to a fashionable topic, and it is not the only one. The 1763 "Poet's Soliloquy," which has been mentioned above, is modeled closely on *Hamlet*, as the first lines show:

To write! — or not to write! — that is the question  
 Whether 'tis better in the mind to suffer  
 The impatient longings of a tow'ring soul  
 A heart aspiring to immortal fame;  
 Or to take pen against the critic's rage,  
 And by opposing end them? — To write! — to please.  
 No more — and by that please to say we end  
 The heart-ach, and the thousand natural fears . . . (Ashley 1763, lines 1-8)

With the exception of the third and fourth lines, which stand in for "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," the changes are minimal; Hamlet's syntax and mood are carefully conserved.

However, this extremely close rewriting has a completely un-*Hamletian* subtitle: "The Poet's Soliloquy, a Parody of Cato's celebrated Soliloquy."

Things turn out to be even more complicated. The suicidal musings of the hero in Addison's *Cato* are, of course, themselves inspired by Hamlet's speech; but Addison not only uses the theme of suicide, but also includes a number of phrases from Shakespeare. "The wide, th'unbounded prospect" for the immortality of the soul recalls Hamlet's "undiscovered country"; "[t]his must end them" echoes "and by opposing end them"; and Cato's final *decision* to kill himself is couched in terms that remind us of Hamlet's *doubts*, as Cato becomes "[i]ndifferent in his choice to sleep or die." None of this is evident in the "Poet's Soliloquy" — but fifty years after the first performance of *Cato*, Addison's tragedy was still popular enough to have its title replace *Hamlet* in the title of a rewriting of "To be or not to be." In fact, searches for "celebrated speech" in the ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online) database turn up far more hits connected with *Cato* than with Shakespeare.

Cato's soliloquy contains not only references to *Hamlet* (which must of course go unacknowledged in a play set in the Roman world), but also, explicitly, to Plato. The stage direction runs: "Cato, *solus*, sitting in a thoughtful posture: in his hand Plato's book on the Immortality of the soul. A drawn sword on the table by him," and explicitly debates Plato's promises as set out in *Phaedo* (cf. Kelsall 1966, 159). The book harks back to a bit of stage business hinted at in the First Quarto of *Hamlet*, where Claudius, hiding to spy on Hamlet, announces the prince's entrance by saying: "See where he comes poring upon a book." The content of Hamlet's book has been the subject of much speculation; *Cato* indicates one of the historically possible sources. The "Maid's Soliloquy" in the appendix to the *Bachelor's Recantation* picks up both references. Its full title is "The Maid's Soliloquy: Act V, scene I of Cato Imitated," and the girl is introduced by a kind of stage direction as entering "*alone, with Milton in her Hand, open at this celebrated Passage.*" (Single 1748, 22): "Hail, wedded Love, mysterious law, true source / Of human offspring, sole propriety / In Paradise of all things common else!" (*Paradise Lost* 4:750-52). Unlike many *Hamlet* rewritings, the following text respects the gist of the intertextual "source": the maid finally decides to "wed — my liberty is gone forever, / But Happiness from Time itself secur'd" (Single 1748, 23).

It is strange enough that Hamlet's open-ended soliloquy on death should have become a popular template for decisions for or against matrimony, but to elaborate on this issue through a reworking of a passage that ends with the suicide of the speaker stresses even more strongly just how multidirectional these intertextual games are.<sup>14</sup> Cato's soliloquy, in its turn, invades versions of Hamlet's in the shape of the stage direction "*solus*," which brings a generic element of drama

back into poems adapted from a stage soliloquy. It occurs with political personae such as Bonaparte (1805, "To invade or not to invade") or Lord North (1770, "Potter's last dispatches lying upon the table before him. To war, or not to war?").

In 1751, "Socrates on Death: Translated from Plato's Apology in Shakespeare's Manner" viewed "The Question" in Socrates' philosophical manner, as a logical issue rather than as an elusive decision:

To be or not to be; that is the Question!  
 Death either robs this Clod of feeling Earth of Sense;  
 or there is something after Death,  
 Some undiscover'd Country, to whose Coast  
 Th'unburthen'd Soul, without Obstruction fails.  
 But if no Wreck of Sense survive the Grave;  
 If Death be Sleep; a Sleep where Dreams ne'er fright  
 No Thoughts disturb us, 'tis a Consummation  
 Devoutly to be wish'd, to die! to sleep! (Anon. 1752, lines 1-8)

The poem ends with a happy anticipation of "rich Discourse" to be conducted with innumerable illustrious dead, which "shall feed my famish'd Soul With many a sweet Repast" (648). An introductory note aims to "vindicate the Attempt of translating [Socrates' speech] in Shakespeare's Stile" by the "Similitude which this Passage bears to the celebrated Speech in Hamlet" (648). Its high reputation is evidenced by a number of references in the "Antients," from Cicero's *Tusculanae* to Addison. The "translation" was published twice in December 1751 and once again three months later in the *Ladies Magazine*.<sup>15</sup>

The last example of such multiple references to be discussed here was published in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1841 as part of a sequence of "Summer Garlands," anthology snippets that probably made up for the summer dearth of original writing. In the company of a Carlyle quotation (B. B. F. 1841, 75), a French song with translation (77), a "Complaint after the manner of Shelley" (78-79), and a poem with the Lear tag "Poor Tom!" as its title and a Latin motto, neither of them referenced (78), the piece needed no title to signal its derivation. It is merely the opening phrase "To wed or not to wed" that appears in inverted commas. This refers, of course, to the hundred-year-old bachelor tradition, but turns Hamlet's subsequent paraphrase of his dilemma into a quoting tag. Shakespeare is made to quote his own "question":

"To wed or not to wed" — to bear the thousand griefs the single know.  
 And with life's ills unaided battle wage,

Or end them by a little ring — and so  
 Escape the heart-ache . . . (B. B. F. 1841, lines 1-6)

Further down, intertextual references call on philosophers and feminist campaigners; "Malthus and Martineau!" are accused of casting a "potent spell" (line 57) that is blamed for "[s]icklying the hopes of husband-hunting belle" (line 59) "with the pale cast of thought" (line 58). Their voices indeed cast a spell on the poem: it is Thomas Malthus and Harriet Martineau, with their insistence on "the consequence, the certain curse / of children tugging at an empty purse" (lines 63-64), who remind the speaker that marriage means to "go we know not where" (line 65). The gender-neutral "we" is a new twist in the bachelor soliloquy story.

### A Genre

Written in a period that saw the rise of "bardolatrous" reverence, both casual and purposeful Shakespeare quotation (cf. De Bruyn 2008, Rumbold 2007, and Price 2000), and the flourishing of Shakespearean parody, travesty, and burlesque (cf. Bate 1985, Wells 1977, and Jacobs 1976), the rewritings of Hamlet's great soliloquy are remarkable for the distance they keep from their original. Taking their cue from formal and linguistic surface features, they ignore the larger context of the passage, its central topic, and even its argumentative structure. Instead, additional literary references, cross-borrowed patterns such as "The X's Soliloquy" and serial contexts such as the "Dramatic Parodies," signal a generic rather than allusive process. Authors and editors make explicit that they are exhibiting samples of a pattern that many others have worked with, as when another poem is advertised as being by "the author of The bachelor's Soliloquy." The recognition of both isolated catchphrases and of external generic contexts is obviously rated as at least as interesting as knowledge of "Shakespeare" or "Hamlet": these names are often missing from the titles, which favor generic terms like "soliloquy," "parody," or "imitation."

Alistair Fowler refuses to consider literary adaptations of one single famous text as a genre because "[e]laborations of an original have the latter as their context, rather than each other. Their relations are radial, not circumferential" (Fowler 1987, 127). In the case of the eighteenth-century *Hamlet* soliloquies, this implies that "elaborations" *do* represent a genre because they refer not radially to Shakespeare's play as their thematic center, but circumferentially to other realizations of the soliloquy/bachelor parody genres. The famous phrases are pleasantly memorable but decontextualized, with the most famous ones marked by inverted commas — not as *Hamlet* extracts, but as particularly popular elements in a familiar quoting game. Similarly, the "or not to" structure is preserved as a catchphrase, but Hamlet's proverbial indecision, which it encapsulates so



pithily, is lost in favor of a catchy conclusion that sums up a topical argument with a comic speaker persona (another generic element crowding out an all-too-familiar name in the source). Taking up Leah Price's insight that the Shakespeare quotations may function "less as an intersubjective transaction between author and reader than as an interpersonal relation between one reader and another" (Price 2000, 80), I would like to claim that eighteenth-century "soliloquists" understand reading and rewriting as a transaction between one rewriter and many others. The "circumferential" references become part of a poetics that "relates a literary work to a whole series of other works, treating them not as sources but as constituents of a genre" (Culler 1976, 1394). As Richard Bauman puts it, we find an "intertextual relationship with prior texts" (Bauman 2004, 4) in the plural rather than with a single text.

This vanishing effect has an instructive parallel in the *Fabiola* installation: Jean-Jacques Henner's original, the painting that inspired hundreds of copies, is lost. It is a merely implicit presence that we can at best try to extrapolate in our imagination. In the case of *Hamlet*, the original (or at least the version of it that is mostly used as a template) is of course available; but its rewritings lead a life of their own that distances them thoroughly from the original context. This is disconcerting to the students of parody whom I have quoted at the outset, but it is a process that is profoundly typical of Shakespeare reception. Take the case of those Shakespeare phrases that have become common linguistic currency:<sup>16</sup> once a quotation has become an idiom, shedding author, context, and even quotation marks, it may make very little difference whether we say "he kicked the bucket," "he cashed in his chips," or "he shuffled off his mortal coil." What characterizes all of these sentences is the speaker taking refuge in a stock phrase to evade the blunt phrase "he died."

Over decades and centuries, the process of lexicalization has turned authored quotations into idioms, anonymous linguistic items whose origin have become opaque. Shakespeare parodies make it possible to posit an analogous process of gentrification<sup>17</sup> that turns adaptations of a famous text into tokens of a generally available pattern, with no original context to consider. Apart from the increasing irrelevance of the original, two processes also have continued creativity in common. Although fixity of expression defines idioms as much as an "original text" mines our idea of a literary work, we all play around with idiomatic phrases, subjecting them to irreverent processes of permutation, extension, omission, or lexical substitution (Langlotz 2006) and enjoying the difference to a familiar pattern without necessarily bothering about its historical meaning. Similarly, "To be or not to be" continues to function as a pattern for new texts. The *HyperHamlet* database contains roughly 150 specimens dating from 1744 to 2007, and the internet is full of more and more recent examples.

Such productivity at the expense of Shakespearean signification tends to irritate. As Gary Taylor writes: "Shakespeareans, almost by definition, never look at negative evidence: evidence of the absence of Shakespeare, where one might expect his presence" (Taylor 1999, 198), and when they are confronted with such evidence, they complain. Marjorie Garber finds "the disappearance of confident and knowledgeable Shakespeare quotation [. . .] not especially useful to chronicle" because she mourns the "more direct engagement with [. . .] the character and plots of [Shakespeare's] plays" (Garber 2004, 35) in those who use his phrases. In 1821, Charles Lamb complained that tearing Hamlet's soliloquy "so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play" made it "a perfect dead member" (Lamb 1876, 192). But the "engagement" that Garber mourns was never compulsory; and calling the soliloquy dead in the early nineteenth century misses the fact that it had already risen again as a genre in the 1740s. "[P]arts of [Shakespeare's] plays had passed into popular consciousness and, for many, were not 'literature' in an elevated, elitist sense" (Bate 1986, 196), not only in the 1780s and 1790s, but about forty years earlier. A largely undiscovered territory of decades of "Banal Shakespeare" (Rumbold 2007), of casual quotations and middlebrow rewritings, promises rich returns to the traveller.

### Notes

1. My thanks are due to Balz Engler, Ladina Bezzola Lambert, and to two anonymous readers at *Borrowers and Lenders*, who all contributed extremely valuable comments to drafts of this article.
2. This cut-off date ensures full coverage of the "the golden age of verse parody" (Bate 1985, 75), which also saw the emergence of full-scale travesties of Shakespeare plays and a huge upsurge in casual references and quotations, be it in Gothic fiction, Scott's novels and courtship narratives, Byron's poems, Hazlitt's essays, Burke's speeches, or the political caricatures and satires of the period.
3. The most notable single find was an autobiographical version in Hester Lynch Piozzi's commonplace book.
4. In the *HyperHamlet* database, for example, passages retrieved from electronic databases (and not mentioned in published research anywhere else) account for roughly half the 3,000-plus *Hamlet* quotations recorded for the period 1740-1840.
5. This extended description is the place where rewritings deviate most frequently from the original.
6. The title is worth reporting: "A Touch of the Sublime and Beautiful: Translated from Hamlet's Soliloquy!" It appeared in the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* in May 1826.

7. The political implications and backgrounds of these and other Shakespearean parodies are discussed in Bate 1985 and Greenfield 2008.
8. This title is identical to that of a "To drink or not to drink" poem that was published in the same month in a different magazine.
9. Sayre Greenfield gives a 1752 poem as "the first parody" (Greenfield 2008, 239), but there are at least eight earlier specimens.
10. In a witty twist, the honeymoon is inserted before the "undiscovered country" of marriage: "But that the dread of something after honey-moon, / (That gaily-fleeting period, whose sweet joys / Few loves, alas! survive) puzzles the will / And bids us rather linger in the path, / The well-known, simple path of single life" (P—o 1758, lines 24-28).
11. Eight reprints bear witness to the attraction of this scenario, even if some of them toned down the risqué final lines to "spends all his days in wh—g, / And d—s the name of husband" (Anon. 1784) or even "spends all his days [a]-wenching" (1775 and 1795).
12. Coincidentally or not, the first silly joke on the first line appeared just one year before "Maid's Soliloquy"; in 1783, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg mimicked a sheep's bleat in order to mock a colleague's misguided ideas about the pronunciation of a Hebrew vowel: "To bäh or not to bäh, that is the Question" (Lichtenberg 1949, 139).
13. The author, "Master Shallow," is the Reverend Thomas Ford, who also laced his sermons with Shakespeare quotations. The series ran to more than fifty pieces, five of which (Nos. 6, 21, 32, 39, and 42) riff on "To be or not to be."
14. The title "The Maid's Soliloquy," for example, is taken from a text that has nothing to do with *Hamlet*, but reappears in a 1783 version of "To be or not to be" (discussed above), constituting another not purely Shakespearean antecedent.
15. This last specimen omits the exact bibliographical references to Plato's text, evidently considered to be of no use to the fairer sex.
16. The phrase "To be or not to be" is so much taken for granted that it is not even put in quotation marks in the 1747 "To write or not to write," which treats several especially quotable phrases in that way.
17. I borrow the term from Rick Altman, who coined it in *Film / Genre* to describe a process in Hollywood marketing where words like "Western" slide "from adjective to noun" (Altman 1999, 52) as they develop from descriptions of individual films to genre terms.

## Online Resources

Alys, Francis. 2012. *Francis Alys: Fabiola*. Dia Art Foundation, Mexico City. Available online at: <http://www.diacenter.org/exhibitions/main/2> [cited 29 March 2012].

*HyperHamlet: The Cultural History of Shakespeare's Play in Quotations*. 2006. <http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch> [cited 12 April 2012].

### Permissions

Alys, Francis. 2009. *Fabiola*. Available online: <http://blog.robbycooper.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/fabiola2.jpg> 8 July [cited 6 December].

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