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On Horatio and Setting the Time Back into Joint

The name “Horatio,” which stems from the Latin ‘hora’ for ‘hour,’ can be taken to mean ‘timekeeper’ (“Hora”). *Hamlet’s* Horatio, then, can be seen as exactly that: not only the prince’s companion and guide, his conscience, but also the timekeeper, keeping track of events throughout the story. Though some scholars have instead analyzed Horatio’s character based on another possible root of his name, ‘orate,’ time is too significant of a theme in *Hamlet* to dismiss its possible connection to Horatio (McDonald 51). Shakespeare, in presenting contradictory temporal evidence, makes time a major conflict for both Hamlet and the reader. Hamlet’s confusion paired with the reader’s own serve to emphasize the abstract nature of time, and because neither Shakespeare nor the title character provide adequate insight into the timeline, an external source—a timekeeper—must bridge the gaps, somehow. In this sense, Horatio plays a pivotal role; by being the one constant in the play, Horatio serves as a supporter, conscience, and source of reason, balancing Hamlet’s chaotic behavior with his steadfast presence. As the timekeeper, then, it follows that Horatio should be the one able to solve the problem with which Hamlet most struggles: the time, out of joint.

From the onset, Horatio plays various roles, the most prominent of which lays the foundation for his significance: he is Hamlet’s one true friend. Horatio’s relationship with the prince contrasts with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s not only in that he prioritizes Hamlet over his own advancement, but also in that he and the prince rarely share the empty banter seen in

exchanges with the two spies (Spaeth 42). Unlike Rozencrantz and Guildenstern, Horatio does not “make love to power,” valuing status over friendship; he truly cares about Hamlet (Engle 260). Horatio also offers Hamlet information without hesitation and, as a result, receives his innermost thoughts and plans (Spaeth 39, 44). As the prince’s confidant, then, Horatio knows more about his friend’s mental state, including the temporal disorientation caused by his grief and drive for vengeance, than any other character—arguably even more than Hamlet himself. Horatio’s reaction to Hamlet leaving to speak to the ghost in 1.4— “He waxes desperate with imagination” —indicates that after only a short time back in Elsinore, Horatio already recognizes his friend’s distress, seeing his mental deterioration long before Hamlet puts on his antic disposition (1.4.87). Likewise, Horatio’s skeptical response to Hamlet’s questions about the occasion for his return to Denmark suggest a quiet realization that Hamlet’s agitation indicates a greater issue with time. His lukewarm comment, “Indeed my lord, [your mother’s wedding] followed hard upon [your father’s funeral],” has a more neutral, reserved tone than his earlier lines, as though upon hearing hints of Hamlet’s disorientation Horatio chooses to agree with the prince rather than agitate him further (1.2.179). Horatio, who loves, trusts, and is trusted by Hamlet, is the only character who knows the real prince, privy to his issues and struggles even when Hamlet himself loses the mental faculty to acknowledge his confusion.

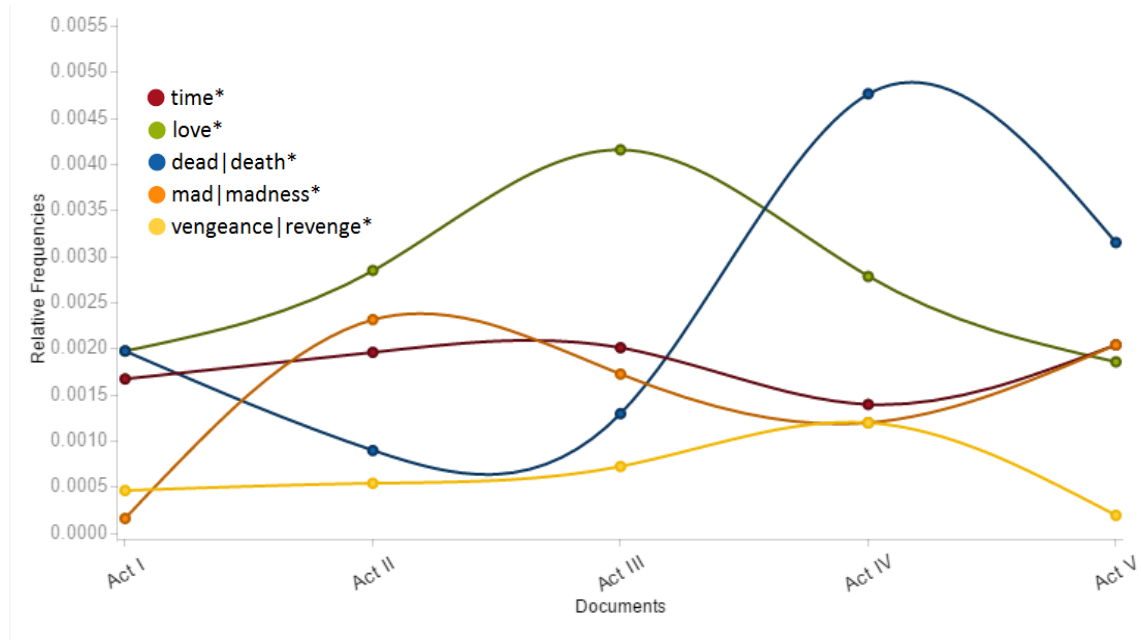
In knowing all of Hamlet’s thoughts, feelings, and motivations for revenge, Horatio takes on the role of the prince’s conscience, serving as his voice of reason. Disinterested in advancing in the court due to his studies at Wittenberg, Horatio serves as no one’s henchman—not even, as Engle points out, as Hamlet’s (259). Horatio seems to indiscriminately aim to resolve conflicts, be they between the guards and the ghost, Hamlet and Laertes, or Ophelia and the royal family. In not explicitly taking sides, saying little but “maintain[ing] a presence at all the significant

points,” Horatio establishes himself as a relatively neutral character, constant and impartial (Williams 2). Thus, Hamlet turns to Horatio for judgement, considering him to be the “perfect conscience” because of his detachment from politics and power struggles (Engle 260). Engle does, however, raise a significant point: Horatio’s disinterest in politics by no means indicates a disinterest in Hamlet himself. Rather, Horatio is incredibly invested in the prince on a personal and emotional level, even contemplating suicide upon seeing his friend poisoned, which suggests that the disinterest central to Horatio’s good judgement is invalid (Engle 262). Nonetheless, until this pivotal moment in 5.2 Horatio displays little of this emotional rashness, offering Hamlet cautious, quiet assistance but never personally prompting the prince to avenge his father (Williams 21). This logical stance—not dismissive of Hamlet’s plans but not overeager, either, likely with Hamlet’s best interests in mind—only disintegrates late in the play, as is evidenced in 5.2, when Horatio finally pleads that Hamlet abandon his feuds with Laertes and Claudius or, at the very least, postpone them (5.2.189-90). That Horatio’s personal relationship with Hamlet does not interfere with his judgement until the final scenes indicates that his detachment from Denmark’s political situation does, in fact, make him a relatively sound judge and voice of reason.

Horatio’s constant presence in others’ affairs and his knowledge of both Hamlet’s private feelings and the court’s inner workings place him in yet another role at the culmination of the play, at which he becomes the storyteller. As the sole survivor after 5.2, the duty of explaining the events leading up to the massacre falls on Horatio, who, being a character more constant in *Hamlet* than the prince himself, has gathered all of the information Fortinbras demands. Hamlet’s insistence that Horatio be the one to tell his story furthers the idea that only Horatio knew enough to connect the varied storylines into one explanation for the outside world, that

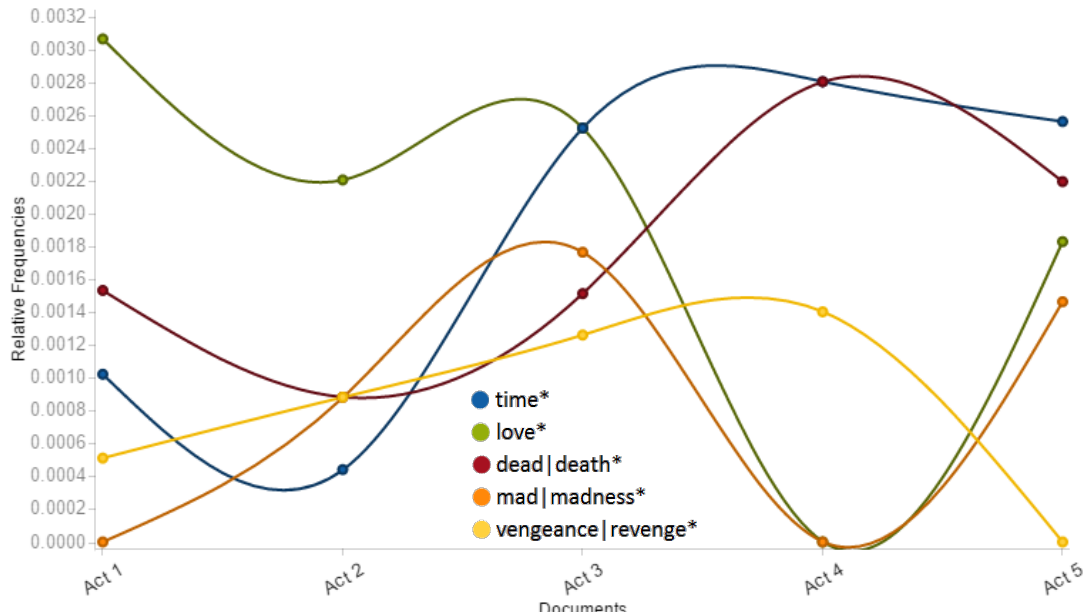
only Horatio could be trusted with this “narrative transference” (Williams 3). Ultimately, Horatio’s many roles—friend, confidant, judge, and storyteller—lead to the final part that he plays: the timekeeper. In his constancy, Horatio collects all the information surrounding the events of the play, keeping track of conflicts and relationships and, in his looking after Hamlet, the prince’s skewed sense of time. To further understand this role—and to see why Horatio should have been the one to alleviate Hamlet’s confusion—the role of time itself must be further analyzed.

Shakespeare’s work has long been considered as rich in temporal imagery. His plays and sonnets contain over a thousand separate uses of the word “time,” representing among those instances various definitions of the term and perceptions of time as simultaneously stable and fluid, passive and active (Fletcher 70). The poet often manipulates time for dramatic effect: whether by choosing the temporal setting to reflect the quality of a scene, letting time take its slow course to emphasize a certain event, using anachronism to underline the universality of a concept, or changing the length of an event to introduce new meaning, Shakespeare clearly considers time as a theatrical device (Keilen and Orgel 178). Shakespeare often abstracts time in his plays as a means of emphasizing plot points and character traits, and though this abstraction manifests in a less obvious manner in *Hamlet*, it is present. Along with some temporal discontinuities regarding succession and age on Shakespeare’s part, Hamlet himself acts as an unreliable narrator, providing various views of time that conflict with each other and with those of other characters. As Fletcher says, Shakespeare is “time-beguiled,” frequently experimenting with temporal themes into his works, and *Hamlet* is no exception (70).



Steele, Lily. "Theme Frequencies in *Hamlet*." Stefan Sinclair, Geoffrey Rockwell, and the Voyant Tools Team. Voyant. Voyant Tools, 2012, <https://voyant-tools.org>. Accessed 31 Oct. 2016.

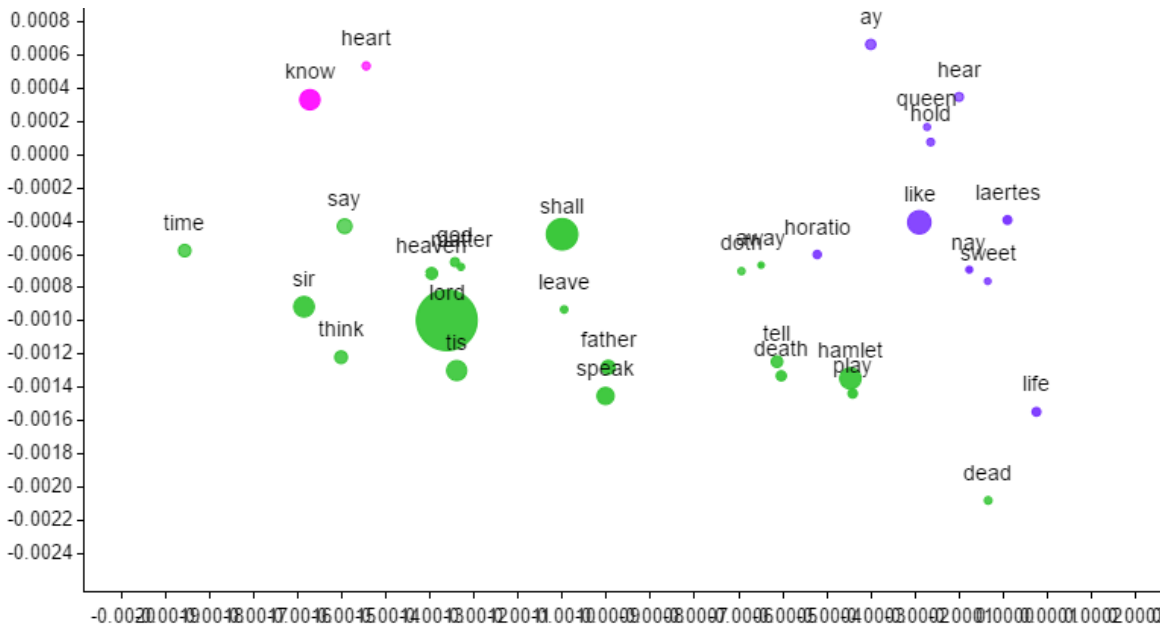
By datamining *Hamlet*, new light can be shed on Shakespeare's use of time in the play. To prove time's thematic significance throughout the play, I compared the frequency of the term with words that represent four of *Hamlet*'s major themes. For the purposes of this word-based method of interpretation, the four themes are love, death, madness, and revenge, as they are some of the major concepts most easily put into words. Though upon first inspection time may appear to hold significance during only part of the play, comparing the frequency of the term "time" with those of the other four themes makes clear its true importance. Despite some fluctuation, time is actually the most consistent and average of the five themes, beginning and ending the play with a roughly median frequency compared to the other four. This alone indicates time's significance as a major theme. Though perhaps used less frequently than other terms, variants of "time" appear 54 times throughout the play—often enough to place it at the heart of the play's major themes, and consistently enough to make it the most stable of them all.



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Because Hamlet is the character most evidently affected by time, a separate comparison can be drawn between the frequencies of time and the other themes in only Hamlet's lines. In striking contrast with the frequencies in the play as a whole, Hamlet's "time" frequency steeply increases between the second and third acts and remains high through the end of the play. At the same time as this increase in the frequency of Hamlet's use of "time," it may be noted, the "madness" frequency increases. This implies that time's thematic significance hinges, at least for Hamlet himself, on his mental state made volatile by grief. This correspondence strengthens the underlying theme of temporal disorientation; as Hamlet's madness grows more significant, so does his fixation on and confusion about time. Another meaningful aspect of Hamlet's perception of time is shown in the strong correlation between the frequencies of "time" and "death" in his lines. That Hamlet's discussion of time corresponds so closely with such a negative theme as death furthers the idea that time serves as a constant stressor to Hamlet. The other frequency comparisons emphasize this mental and emotional stress, showing that Hamlet's

preoccupation with time interferes not only with his mind but also with his goals. As the “time” frequency stabilizes and settles above the other four themes near the end of the play, the “revenge” frequency drops to zero, emphasizing Hamlet’s complete loss of foresight and control over his actions, despite once being driven so fiercely by vengeance.



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Datamining not only proves time’s significance, it also provides evidence for the subjectivity of time. Using principal component analysis of all of the play’s lines, I determined that two of the terms most associated with time are “know” and “think,” the two words’ points nearly equidistant from “time” in a scatterplot of the data. This grouping shows the conflicting, contradictory attitudes toward and perceptions of time in Hamlet. The fundamental confusion regarding time is even clearer when considering the clusters into which the terms are sorted. Though “know” is closely associated with time, reflecting some characters’ concrete, fact-based attitudes, “think” is the one in the same cluster as “time,” indicating a stronger relationship

between those terms and ideas. Time depends not only on known facts and figures, but also on what is thought: personal concepts of time, however far from the truth. Most notably, Hamlet himself displays a skewed, distinctly subjective perception of time. During Hamlet's first soliloquy, amid a stream-of-consciousness criticism of his mother, he reveals his scattered, constantly changing perception of the passage of time since his father's death (1.2.138-53). DeCarlo, who argues that Hamlet is "acutely aware of the nature and passage of time" in nearly every scene of the play, overlooks these instances during which Hamlet contradicts himself and others (1). Hamlet merely thinks that he is aware of the passage of time, while Horatio's and other characters' reactions to his contradictions indicate that his concept of time is more personal than objective.

It becomes increasingly evident that Hamlet values his thoughts—muddled though they may be—far more than he does facts when it comes to his personal perception of time. As a result, his unreliable narration and misleading actions force the reader to infer about the play's timeline based on other characters' comments. For example, in Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia in 3.2, Hamlet incorrectly states that his father has been dead for less than a day and, upon being corrected, produces yet another false period of time, showing a complete disregard for the truth (3.2.117-21). This exchange is a clear extension of the ramblings in his 1.2 soliloquy, and is all the more telling of Hamlet's disoriented mental state in that now, he openly denies what others claim (and of what they know, judging by the matter-of-fact manner in which Ophelia corrects him) in favor of what he thinks, regardless of his clearly unreliable sense of time. Similarly, in 5.1 the First Clown reveals that Hamlet is thirty years old, something that Hamlet never references and that makes little sense when considering his university status and often sophomoric behavior (5.1.146). This question of Hamlet's age also draws attention back to

Shakespeare's abstraction of time. The poet presents only a few pieces of temporal evidence regarding Hamlet's age—his studies at Wittenberg and that his uncle succeeded the throne instead of him, suggesting some degree of youth, and later the gravedigger's comment indicating that Hamlet is a grown man (Cohen 179). Such examples of characters contradicting existing notions of time based on Hamlet's lines proves that what the reader thinks about time may not align with the truth. Not only does Hamlet's confusion indicate his own deteriorating, disoriented mental state, it also makes time a confusing theme overall.

A final instance in which the context surrounding the word "time" highlights the instability crucial to the theme occurs in Hamlet's line describing Denmark's current political situation, wherein he exclaims that "the time is out of joint" (1.5.188). This line, read with the knowledge of Hamlet's confused sense of time, takes on a profound second meaning: time—especially for Hamlet as his mental state deteriorates—is an inherently inconstant, convoluted concept, as disjointed as a bone knocked out of its socket. With this significance in mind, and with the evidence supporting time as an inherently confused concept, another question must be asked: why is the time out of joint? Or, more specifically: beyond the grief of a mourning son, what exactly underlies Hamlet's refusal to acknowledge fact and reason when faced with the concept of time?

For Hamlet, time passing means accepting his father's murder. To fully immerse himself once again in the present means to move on from his father's death, allowing Claudius the place of the king and Hamlet's place as rightful successor (Schwanitz 47). Hamlet clearly cannot do this, however; his mother's comments in 1.2 and his resulting soliloquy indicate that Hamlet feels his father has not yet been properly mourned, and he cannot move on without filling the hole left by the murder—namely, by avenging his father. In vowing to remember his father in the

pivotal 1.5 exchange, Hamlet solidifies his role as a “representative of the past,” promising to uphold the memory of the late king at all costs (Schwanitz 49). This fixation on the past, in turn, results in one of Hamlet’s greatest issues: he resists the linearity of time (Davies and Funke 21). In his comparison of *Hamlet* and *Memento*, Mallin argues that the main characters of the two stories face the same issue: their distorted memories prevent both the characters and the readers from understanding the exact timelines of each narrative (301). Though Mallin suggests that Hamlet, unlike *Memento*’s protagonist, fails to change time, I disagree. Hamlet, too, “wrinkles the present to keep the past proximate,” condensing the events of the months following his father’s death in a desperate attempt to retain the memory of his father (299). However painful it is for Hamlet to remember his father, the raw emotion fuels his desire for revenge, and so he keeps those memories at the front of his mind, letting them overshadow the present and the linear passage of time. This theme of regression—of past over present, memory over future—permeates Hamlet’s interactions with the other characters, most significantly his parents and Ophelia (Hunt 381). Hamlet’s preoccupation with the familial relationships blurred by Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius indicate an obsession, too, with the boundaries between past, present, and future (Schwanitz 48-49). By bemoaning his mother’s relationship with his uncle, comparing Claudius to his father and calling his parents “aunt-mother” and “uncle-father,” Hamlet refuses to acknowledge their new roles as legitimate, wishing instead to revert to their old titles and to the past (2.2.309-10).

If Hamlet’s temporal disorientation—his tendency to rely on his confused, subjective judgement of time rather than on facts—makes time a conflict, then why does nobody resolve that conflict? No character makes any lasting attempt to set the time back into joint, despite Hamlet’s clear agitation. Hamlet himself is too preoccupied with the past and with his plots

against Claudius to fix his own issue; though he could have accepted his father's death, moving on from the past and toward a better future by continuing to court Ophelia and eventually taking the throne, the past remains too significant for Hamlet to ignore (Schwanitz 50). Though Ophelia makes a weak attempt to properly situate Hamlet in the present in their 3.2 conversation, she puts in no further effort when Hamlet ignores the facts she offers (3.2.117-21). Horatio, then, should be the logical answer to this dilemma: he helps Hamlet in all other areas, providing moral support, a conscience, friendship, and love. But even Horatio has no way to fix this problem. From his first conversation with Hamlet in 1.2, when he accepts Hamlet's skewed sense of time and supports him rather than convincing him of the truth, Horatio fails as the timekeeper (1.2.179).

According to Warley, to interpret *Hamlet*, to truly understand and judge the prince—and, consequentially, his inability to comprehend a timeline beyond his own subjective one—means to fill Horatio's role (1024). Horatio, Hamlet's one constant, is the only character who could possibly understand Hamlet's temporal disorientation and its cause. In recognizing Hamlet's skewed sense of time and taking on the roles of the timekeeper and storyteller, Horatio should thus be the one to ease Hamlet's and the reader's confusion, reversing the effects of Hamlet's mental deterioration and Shakespeare's contradictory use of time. Despite being the obvious choice to solve this temporal dilemma, however, Horatio cannot reverse the reversal of time. Horatio's dedication to the prince and well-intentioned support serve instead to condemn Hamlet; by never correcting the prince's nonlinear view of time or his obsession with the past, Horatio ensures that Hamlet's time remains out of joint.

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