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REVERBERATIONS FROM HAMLET'S SOLID FLESH

Robert E. Bjork

The editorial approach to *Hamlet* I. ii. 129 has generally favored solutions other than the purely literary and in large part understandably so. The problem appears to be simply whether we should follow the First and Second Quartos in reading "sallied flesh" or the Folio in reading "solid flesh" in the first line of Hamlet's initial soliloquy. Since the Second Quarto, normally the most trustworthy version of the play, has been seriously contaminated in the first act by the equally untrustworthy First Quarto, the problem seems still simpler.¹ The great majority of editors agree on the Folio version as the authoritative text and allow Hamlet to speak of his "too too solid flesh."

Strong voices cavill, of course, at the ostensible simplicity of the choice, among them J. Dover Wilson, Fredson Bowers, and Norman Nathan.² Following a suggestion made by the novelist George McDonald in 1885, Wilson argues that a:u misreadings, very common in Shakespeare, are especially common in *Hamlet*, and "sallied," therefore, is quite probably a misprint for "sullied,"³ a word that carries a thematic burden that neither "sallied" nor "solid" can bear. The image behind the "sullied—melt—thaw—dew" collocation, Wilson claims, "is not difficult to guess. Hamlet is thinking of snow begrimed with soot and dirt in time of thaw, and is wishing that his 'sullied flesh' might melt as snow does. For his blood is

¹ For a discussion of the three versions, see J. Dover Wilson, *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and the Problems of Its Transmission*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934); and Fredson Bowers, *On Editing Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Dramatists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

² Wilson, *The Manuscript of 'Hamlet'*, 2:307-15; Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet's 'Sullied' or 'Solid' Flesh: A Bibliographical Case-History," *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956):44-48; Norman Nathan, "'Sallied' May Mean 'Sullied,'" *Notes and Queries* 202 (1957):279-80.

³ Wilson, *The Manuscript of 'Hamlet'*, 2:307-8.

tainted, his very flesh corrupted, by what his mother has done, since he is bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh."⁴ The epithet anticipates the incest theme and so becomes one thread binding the play together. Wilson buttresses his argument by systematically undermining the felicity of the two other possibilities: no record exists for the verb "sally": being used transitively, and its sense of "assaulted," though applicable to Hamlet's flesh, is inappropriate in other contexts where it appears, notably in *Hamlet* II. i. 39, in *Love's Labour's Lost* V. ii. 351-52, and in Dekker and Chettle's *Patient Grissell* I. i. 12.⁵ On the other hand, "solid" is merely "a little ridiculous"⁶ in association with "melt" and "thaw," and, when uttered by a corpulent Burbage, would have occasioned guffaws from a lively Elizabethan audience.⁷ It, like "sallied," will not do.⁸

Wilson's spirited defense of his reading did not receive much support until the work of Fredson Bowers, who tried to advance the star-crossed resolution of the crux on the basis of linguistic and bibliographic evidence. Bowers demonstrates first that "sallied" is not a misprint for "sullied" at all, but rather a rare spelling of the word. He substantiates his claim by reference to the lines from *Patient Grissell*, to "the growing opinion of linguists,"⁹ and to the precise nature of the contamination in the Second Quarto, deciding that it is not so serious at I. ii. 129 to eliminate the Second Quarto from consideration. A discussion of the word "sallies" in *Hamlet* II. i. 39 supports his decision: "First, it is surely obvious that in dealing with such a rare word appearing twice in one play, we may not appeal to separate and divided error. It seems incredible that there is no connexion between *sallied* at I. ii. 129 and *sallies* at II. i. 39. Hence if *sallies* means *sullies*, as it

⁴ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in 'Hamlet'?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 42.

⁵ Wilson, *The Manuscript of 'Hamlet,'* 2:308.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:313.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:310.

⁸ For refutations of Wilson's arguments, see Bernard Grebanier, *The Heart of Hamlet* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), p. 324, n. 18; and Sidney Warhaft, "Hamlet's Solid Flesh Resolved," *English Literary History* 28 (1961):21-22, n. 4, both of whom assert that there is no reason for Hamlet to feel personally tainted by his mother's actions.

⁹ Bowers, "A Bibliographical Case-History," p. 44. In a note on linguists Bowers untactfully singles out Helge Kökeritz for criticism. Kökeritz responds with a lucid, cogent, and damning article on Bowers' hypothesis, concluding that "not a single one of his arguments and conclusions is phonologically and etymologically valid. They are nothing but unscrupulous conjectures." "This Sullied Solid Flesh," *Studia Neophilologica* 30 (1958):10. For other objections to Bowers' thesis, see *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 December 1956, p. 788; and Samuel A. Weiss, "'Solid', 'Sullied' and Mutability: A Study in Imagery," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10 (1959):219-20, who demonstrates the false logic behind the bibliographic argument.

surely does, *sallied* must mean *sullied*.¹⁰ The printing history of the play provides further evidence for Bowers' thesis, for different compositors were responsible for setting the separate sheets on which the two instances of the word "sally" appear. He finds the possibility of two men making the same error on the same word improbable and concludes his argument by dismissing the Folio reading "solid" in this way:

Hence since Polonius' *sallies* must have been written in the manuscript, it is mere fantasy to hold that *solid* was present in the manuscript for Hamlet's soliloquy but by one cause or another the compositor corrupted it to the rare form *sallied*, and this by the purest chance was repeated by a different compositor from his manuscript in another sheet. On the evidence of the appropriateness of the black on white image for *sully* and of the *thaw* and *melt* for flesh compared to snow; on the belief that Hamlet's feeling his flesh to be soiled by his mother's incestuous marriage is not a far-fetched idea; on the linguistic suggestion that *sally* is not a misprint for *sully* but a legitimate though rare form; on the evidence that the First Quarto actor remembered his part as reading *sallied*; and finally on the bibliographic evidence that the same word in its rare variant form was set by two different compositors in the same play and therefore the two appearances have no possible connexion with each other, one can now expose an error in criticism and by the application of the mechanical evidence of bibliography establish the text for an individual reading.¹¹

Taking up where Bowers left off and indirectly taking issue with one of Wilson's conclusions, Norman Nathan conjectures that "sallied" just might mean "sallied."¹² He posits that the word derives from a military term meaning roughly "to attack," and if it can be shown to be a suitable modifier for "flesh" and to make sense in the other uses of the word gathered by Bowers, it can be substantiated as the correct reading. To support the first of his objectives, Nathan points to the Elizabethan proclivity for coining words and ignoring grammatical distinctions. In *King Lear*, for example, Shakespeare writes of "the death-practis'd duke" (IV. vi. 284) or "plotted against" duke,¹³ a usage similar to that of "sallied flesh." To support his second objective, he merely asserts that "assaulted" is a plausible reading in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Patient Grissell*, and *Hamlet II. i. 39*. Furthermore, "sullies" is an implausible redundancy in *Hamlet II. i.*

¹⁰ Bowers, "A Bibliographical Case-History," p. 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹² Nathan, *NQ* 202 (1957):279-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

39, since Shakespeare uses the word "soiled" in the very next line: "You laying these slight sallies on my son,/ As 'twere a thing a little soil'd i' th' working."¹⁴ Nathan concludes his argument by admitting that his or anyone's treatment of the problem is largely a matter of opinion, but he stands firm on Hamlet's "sallied flesh."

Although the voices of Wilson, Bowers, and Nathan are strong and provocative, they form a minority, and the third possibility for the resolution of the crux enjoys by far the most scholarly support. The two most recent articles on the problem, for instance, one literary, the other semasiological, both defend the Folio reading.¹⁵ Samuel A. Weiss' "'Solid', 'Sullied' and Mutability: A Study in Imagery"¹⁶ demonstrates that "solid" comes from an image cluster repeated in some of Shakespeare's earlier works, most importantly *2 Henry IV* (III. i. 45 ff.), where Henry, in an emotional state similar to Hamlet's, wishes that he might see "the continent,/ Weary of solid firmness, melt itself/ Into the sea" (III. i. 47-49).¹⁷ The same image cluster informs the mutability theme in *Hamlet* and occurs throughout the play.¹⁸ Sidney Warhaft's "Hamlet's Solid Flesh Resolved,"¹⁹ on the other hand, shows that the phrase "solid flesh" accurately describes the melancholic condition besetting Hamlet at the play's opening. "That is," Warhaft states, "to the Elizabethan physiologist—and almost every educated man was that in 1600—solidity of the flesh must have indicated a particular unhealthy state of the body, a state which, to put it most generally, the blood was considered to contain a surfeit or surplus of the earth or lowest element, and even to tend itself to degenerate into heavy dregs or excrement."²⁰ When Hamlet, therefore, wishes that his "solid flesh" should "melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew," he merely rephrases the standard Renaissance prescription for ameliorating a state of melancholy.²¹

This brief survey of the critical debate over perhaps the most notorious crux in Shakespeare gives the impression that little if anything about it remains to be said. However, critics have hitherto overlooked one literary point, based on the interacting initial scenes of the play, which, though it may not solve the problem, may shed some faint light on why "solid"

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ In 1966, Ronald J. McCaig suggested that "soiled" may be the correct reading for "solid." The one paragraph note is too perfunctory to be considered here, however. See *Shakespeare Newsletter* 16 (Sept. 1966):32.

¹⁶ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10 (1959):219-27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁸ He notes, for example, that "an image of *solidity* appears in our cluster [III. iv. 48-51] with the theme of dissolution," *ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁹ *ELH* 28 (1961):21-30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

serves a better dramatic purpose than "sallied" or "sullied." To establish this point, it is necessary to recapitulate the action of the first scene.

The play begins at Elsinore in an atmosphere of foreboding as Bernardo steps onto the platform of the castle to relieve Francisco at his watch, then speaks with Horatio and Marcellus about the apparition he and Marcellus have twice seen. In the midst of their discussion, the "dreaded sight" (l. 25) of King Hamlet's ghost appears; they question it and, apparently offended, it stalks away, re-entering eighty-seven lines later. On the second entrance, Horatio determines to "cross it, though it blast me" (l. 127), and Marcellus, seeing the illusion will not stay asks, "Shall I strike at it with my partisan?" (l. 140). Having done so, to no effect, Marcellus observes that "it is, as the air, invulnerable, / and our vain blows [are] malicious mockery" (ll. 145-46). The scene ends with the three men agreeing to impart "what we have seen tonight / Unto young Hamlet" (ll. 169-70).

The play's first scene presents a disjointed world, ominous, dark, and without apparent unity, a world where an apparition "usurp'st this time of night" (l. 46), as the spiritual impinges upon the physical order. The disjunction of the spiritual world in I. i. becomes the disjunction of the natural world in I. ii., where the initial events are equally curious, inexplicable, and foreboding. In his opening words, Claudius establishes a dramatic link between the play's first two scenes, as he discusses his brother's death:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
 The memory be green, and that it us befitted
 To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
 To be contracted in one brow of woe,
 Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
 That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
 Together with remembrance of ourselves.
 Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
 Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state,
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
 With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
 Taken to wife. (I. ii. 1-14)

Claudius implies that the king's tragic death would naturally occasion grief, yet he forces "discretion" to defeat natural impulse. The willful disruption of the established order in nature extends into the social order as well, for Claudius severs happiness from the ritual observance of love and sorrow from the ritual observance of death. In the morbid union between him and the queen, he weighs "mirth in funeral" equally with "dirge in marriage" (l. 12). Claudius ends mourning and begins marriage with calm

deliberation, his grief and joy thus appearing balanced, rational, and decorous, but essentially unfeeling and cold.

As scene two progresses our perception of Claudius intensifies, while Hamlet emerges as his converse: excessive in grief, melancholic, perhaps self-centered and immature. The strange behavior of both men has its dramatic impetus in scene one. And the connection between the scenes affects the actions and words in the second, including Hamlet's soliloquy. We are intended to perceive that Claudius' tempered grief and Hamlet's surfeit of grief have relevance to the ghost.

Hamlet's opening lines—"O that this too too solid flesh would melt,/ Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!"—function within the dramatic scheme in two ways. First, Shakespeare employs *hysteron proteron* here to make a rhetorical point.²² The verb sequence "melt—thaw—resolve" is not in normal, logical order ("thawing" necessarily precedes "melting") and therefore calls attention to itself. The skewed sequence reflects the skewed, disordered world we have seen developed in the first scene and so becomes another link between scenes one and two. Second, the word "solid" provides a contrast—inadvertent for Hamlet—between his solid, vulnerable body and the invulnerable nature of his father's ghost, as the king gradually intrudes into his son's "prophetic soul" (I. v. 40). Hamlet's anguish over the king's death and his mother's "frailty" makes him wish for a release that can be had through "self-slaughter" or a metaphorical dissolution of his "solid," temporal body "into a dew," vapor—air—that will no longer have to endure the "stale, flat and unprofitable / . . . uses of this world" (II. 133-34). If we remember Marcellus' words after striking at the ghost in scene one ("it is, as the air, invulnerable"),²³ the word "solid" becomes one more thread enriching the play's texture, allowing Hamlet a subconscious, ironic intimation of his father's presence before he conjures it more vividly in I. ii. 179-89. In those lines, Hamlet's discussion of the incestuous marriage becomes so painful that the image of his father breaks fully into his consciousness. Horatio's revelation of the king's recent appearances immediately follows.

Hamlet: Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral bak'd meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!
My father, methinks I see my father.

Horatio: Where, my lord?

²² *Hysteron proteron*, a kind of *hyperbaton*, is a transposition of words to upset their natural order and achieve a rhetorical effect. See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 58.

²³ Compare this observation with Claudius' concerning the "woundless air" in III. v. 44.

Hamlet: In my mind's eye, Horatio . . .
Horatio: My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

If we accept the premise that opening scenes are important in Shakespeare and that the first two animate one another in *Hamlet* as outlined here, then "solid" can be seen to form part of a technique contributing to an overall dramatic effect. From a literary viewpoint, "solid" facilitates both the contrast between the vulnerable and the invulnerable and the interlinking of the play's opening scenes in a way that "sallied" and "sullied" do not.

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