The Ineffectual Antagonism of Wit:

A Study of Hamlet, The Lion in Winter, and Catch-22

by

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Abstract

Unique among other rhetoric devices, wit can appear both complex and banal at the same time. The clever language can express in few words thought equal to the weight of lengthy discourse, often with amusing effect. But despite the complexity of the device, wit only offers a momentary chuckle or clarification of events, easily forgotten in a larger context. This dichotomy of wit operates the plot and theme in many literary texts. Intelligent protagonists employ the device to remedy their problems, believing that the complexity of the response ensures its effectiveness. Yet because wit consists of only words, the device falls short of enacting change that action or direct discourse could more appropriately handle. This thesis examines the role of wit in *Hamlet*, *The Lion in Winter*, and *Catch-22* to determine how characters rely on wit to affront their problems, but succeed in only amplifying them.

In *Hamlet*, the Prince of Denmark's education at Wittenberg has conditioned him to value the complexity of clever language. The protagonist consequently employs the device to avenge his father's death, antagonizing his usurping uncle with a barrage of witty quips. The prince's language, however, fails to topple the villainous king, serving only to alert Claudius to the potential threat of his nephew. Although Hamlet eventually recognizes a more proper heroic role, the change comes too late to reverse the disastrous end of the play. The tragedy of Hamlet develops from his blind faith in the ability of caustic language.

Wit plays a similar role in *The Lion in Winter*. The antagonism that has brought King Henry and Queen Eleanor such success in politics manifests as wit their family discourse. As a result of the aggressive familial interaction, the two monarchs have alienated each other and corrupted their sons. Not realizing the device's limitations, the Plantagenets apply more wit to remedy the family discourse that wit has already ruined, exacerbating the distortion of the family. At the end of the play, Henry and Eleanor recognize their errors, reconciling themselves to the path that they have chosen. Wit has ruined the Plantagenets, leaving only a faint hope for continued existence.

Catch-22 offers the most complex relationship between wit and a protagonist. Yossarian relies on the narrator's wit to attack the personifications of his inane society while seeking personal refuge from the system. But because the narrator can only observe the events in the novel, the protagonist must take action to initiate change. The narrator withdraws his wit to adopt a more serious tone, forcing Yossarian to recognize the horrific aspects of his world. Realizing a more proper heroic role, Yossarian flees to Sweden in a symbolic stance that disrupts the logic of Catch-22. A direct action finally performs the work of ineffective language, bringing the novel's conflict to an end.

Contents

Chapter I – The Nature of Wit

Adam was but human – this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake, he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.

– Mark Twain
The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson

I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.

– Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest

Well-crafted wit such as the effervescent epigrams listed above has many unique and fascinating properties that bring conventions of rhetoric into question. In a small number of words, wit can express thought equal to the weight of meaning in a lengthy discourse. Although one may use the device in casual conversation to add vivacity to a dull setting, wit offers its most provocative performance in literature. This thesis will attempt to reveal the mechanism by which wit produces its potent effect through an analysis of its function in literary texts.

To begin a study of wit, we should first determine a specific definition for the concept. As one of the more slippery words in English, wit can easily coalesce with similar terms such as humor and the comic. Moreover, the word possesses several meanings that have exchanged primary use throughout history. For the noun wit, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers thirty-four entries, one of which particularly clarifies the word's sense in literature:

> That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness [...]; later always

with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way. (scrn. 3-4)

The entry notes that wit requires a unique and unusual juxtaposition of words, which contemporary understanding has recently complicated with the expectation of a consequent sensation of pleasure. Realizing that writers in the past did not necessarily intend wit for amusement will help us identify the mode of language in older texts and determine the similarity between wit of the past and the device in its contemporary use.

The *OED* offers another sense of the word that obliquely relates to the purpose of wit in literary texts but still elucidates the subject:

> A person of great mental ability; a learned, clever, or intellectual person; a man of talent or intellect; a genius. *arch.* or *Hist.* (scrn. 4)

Here the *OED* describes wit not as animate text but a learned individual. Although the entry identifies this sense of wit as archaic, we can feel the resonance of understanding the term as a person in its contemporary use. The association of witty words with a clever speaker demonstrates a cultural knowledge of the language's source. Wit does not emerge into textual reality from nowhere but from the contrivances of an individual. A witty line, therefore, proves one's intelligence in an amusing manner. Moreover, the complexity of the device reciprocally appeals to intellectuals, who recognize through experience the difficulty of crafting the language. As the various *OED* entries imply, Western culture perceives an inherent connection between clever language and the intelligent individual.

Although the *OED* clarifies many meanings of wit, it provides only an implicit explanation of how the device operates in literature and does not distinguish the term from similar concepts of humor and the comic. Perhaps a dictionary that focuses on literary terms

can offer greater understanding. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* describes wit against the background of several historical eras including modernity:

> Today, the meaning of *wit* is closest to the seventeenth century definition [when it began to suggest creativity or fancy], although we are likely to associate the term with **comedy** and laughter in addition to creativity. Wit is now most commonly thought of as clever expression – whether aggressive or harmless, that is, with or without derogatory intent toward someone or something in particular. We also tend to think of wit as being characterized by a mocking or **paradoxical** quality, evoking laughter through apt phrasing (**epigrammatic** writings are common vehicles for wit, for instance). Even today, however, wit retains the **medieval** sense of intelligence, insofar as it is viewed as an intellectual form of humor. (419)

This entry does not explore the functions of wit in any literary text, but nonetheless makes several significant assertions. Unlike the *OED*'s implicit comparison of intellectualism and wit, the glossary overtly demonstrates the connection between the two concepts, noting the term's origin in its broader use during the Middle Ages. Here also appears the notion that one can employ wit with "derogatory intent" or as a means of aggression. Wit can provide amusement to those who hear the language, but can also affront or humiliate the person who serves as the subject for a witty line. The value of wit as an intellectual feat, therefore, extends its validation into other areas. An assault of sharp language facilitates the same purpose of sharp weapons with less violent ends, providing a bloodless but piercing attack.

The glossary's description also demonstrates the relation of wit to the concepts of humor and comedy. Wit often accomplishes the effect of laughter that the humorous or the

comical also achieve. However, the entry does not elaborate the relationship among the three terms, nor differentiate wit from its two counterparts.

For a more detailed distinction between wit and similar terms, we should look to literary studies, in which language forms a more prominent base for discussion. Drawing on amusing language in several literary texts, especially the notable lines of Shakespeare's recurring character Falstaff, A. Haire Forster argues that wit stands apart as active language from related devices of the absurd: "The difference between wit and the comic is easy: wit is made, the comic is found. Wit is the arrow, the comic is the target" (3). Falstaff exhibits traits that subscribe to Forster's definitions of all three terms. The character ridicules Bardolph with witty quips for his large nose in *Henry IV, Part I* and assumes a passive, comic role to the witty designs of others in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Forster posits in his discussion of the three terms that the comic and humor have no difference in their contemporary meanings. * In wit, however, Forster recognizes several unique attributes among the other notions of amusement, offering the active device more prestige:

> But wit is a weapon as well as a toy; it is a weapon of unlimited range. With it the lowest can assail the highest; despotism can always be tempered with epigrams. It can be an effective weapon against injustice and incompetence in high places. (7)

Forster's perception of wit as a weapon recalls the antagonistic qualities of the device found in other definitions. Here, however, the subversive power of the language appears much more

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* Before the Renaissance, however, humor referred more to one's personality than the comic did, reflecting the medical concept of the four humors. One acted according to the proportion of four fluids within one's body. Too much blood led to a sanguine disposition, too much phlegm led to a phlegmatic person, too much yellow bile led to choleric disposition, and too much black bile led to a melancholy disposition. Forster describes how the relation of the humors to personality developed into a meaning of general behavior: "It is humor that makes the *immediate* inconvenience laughable by an appeal to universal or other considerations. It is the quality that keeps a balanced perspective under strain; it is therefore a form of philosophy. Both are means by which the mind escapes from a finite and troubled world" (14). Since this distinction between comic and humor has fallen from use, this text will use the terms synonymously.

effective, limiting the power of tyrants and rectifying injustices. The celebratory language of the passage demonstrates tremendous faith in wit, suggesting that the device can surmount any obstacle. Forster offers an aggrandizing depiction of wit, but more importantly distinguishes the device's effect from those of the comic and humor.

About one hundred forty years earlier, William Hazlitt similarly perceived wit as a device that projects humor and comedy on objects external to a speaker. Hazlitt, however, maintains that wit does not merely ascribe humor to otherwise unentertaining objects, but reveals the hidden absurdity within them:

> Humour is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy. (15)

The intellectual quality of wit becomes especially manifest in Hazlitt's description, indicating that the device reveals humor in objects that otherwise may go unnoticed. Hazlitt emphasizes the complex skill necessary for the active force of wit later in his lecture:

> Wit is, in fact, a voluntary act of the mind, or exercise of the invention, shewing the absurd and ludicrous consciously, whether in ourselves or another. Cross-readings, where the blunders are designed, are wit: but if any one were to light upon them through ignorance or accident, they would be merely ludicrous. (22)

According to Hazlitt, we may only judge a remark as witty if someone consciously and creatively demonstrates the amusing qualities of an object. A too obvious fancy belongs under the inferior classification of humorous. Hazlitt's requirement for wit to expose concealed amusement lends significant esteem to the device as an intellectual pursuit.

However, Hazlitt also qualifies his belief in wit's power with an addendum to his definition, noting that the effectiveness of the device has finite range:

> Wit hovers round the borders of the light and trifling, whether in matters of pleasure or pain; for as soon as it describes the serious seriously, it ceases to be wit, and passes into a different form. Wit is, in fact, the eloquence of indifference, or an ingenious and striking exposition of those evanescent and glancing impressions of objects which affect us more from surprise or contrast to the train of ordinary and literal preconceptions, than from anything in the objects themselves exciting our necessary sympathy or lasting hatred. (15)

Hazlitt claims that although wit has the unusual property of revealing concealed absurdity, the device fails to offer greater insight in matters of seriousness. Once wit crosses the boundaries of examining frivolity, the language either loses its classification as wit or falls short of unearthing hidden truths. Hazlitt asserts that wit "hovers" among the insignificant, a verb choice that suggests indirect and unstable movement, demonstrating the mere playfulness that he perceives in the device. The limitation of wit to matters of fancy distinctly contrasts with Forster's faith in the device as an instrument capable of political or social change. In Hazlitt's eyes, only the foolish would apply wit to dire situations that demand more consequential discourse or action. We will return to the notion of limiting the power of wit later.

The previous citations have established the general principles of wit, but have shed little light on the specific function of the device in literature. We should look more to literary studies that discuss the role of wit in texts to discern the relationship of the device to writing. In *Literary Wit*, Bruce Michelson discusses various pieces of scholarship to determine the effect of wit in literature, specifically inquiring not just into wit but literary wit, which he

believes offers greater insight and stronger appeal than its colloquial namesake. Michelson argues that literary wit contributes to the intensity of a literary work despite its apparent frivolity: "this kind of wit is thoroughly interesting in its own right, as a transformed way of seeing or telling rather than as relief from seriousness, or as digression, or as some other kind of dilution or subversion of intense response" (3). Michelson's perception of wit as a transcendent force that can find multiple layers of meaning in any context opposes Hazlitt's restriction of the device. Examining a variety of authors renowned for flippant language such as Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, Michelson argues that the economy and resonance of literary wit, especially in the form of epigram, undermines the value of lengthy discourse, providing claims that are difficult to refute:

> Consequential artists and literary authors who dish out epigrams can be especially troublesome, in part because their meteoric utterances may not keep their place as trivial amusements or "light" observations. Self-contained and damnably memorable, they escape into the streets beyond the theater or the reading room, possibly to foul up the predictable, exclusionary, and possibly irrelevant dialogues of a reasonably literate culture with itself. (35-6)

This passage, similar to Forster's in its praise of wit, demonstrates the device's peculiar ability to captivate an audience in very few words, which Michelson articulates by personifying wit as an unscrupulous force that skirts the streets, corrupting the thoughts of everyone it encounters. This metaphorical deviousness applies not to some unscrupulous end of wit but its capacity to supersede the conventional pursuit of certainty through a discourse of claims and examples. The amusement and succinctness of wit charge language with an uncanny truth, leaving its

audience with a sensation of profundity. If one can harness this power to attack an enemy, the intensity of the words that Michelson perceives must ensure an efficacious and deadly assault.

Since many authors believe that one who crafts wit wields tremendous influence, we should analyze the emotional circumstances in which one feels compelled to employ the device. Such a study would gravitate closer to psychology while remaining in the orbit of literary studies, so an authority in the social sciences with an affinity for literature should prove the most informative source. In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud constructs an extensive analysis of the social function of wit and how the device reveals subconscious desires, maintaining that wit allows for the expression of inhibited desires to defy social rules, which in turn results in a pleasurable sensation. If one wishes harm on another, the rules of society forbid the person to act physically on this desire, forcing him to seek a more acceptable means of attack. "Violent hostility, no longer tolerated by law, has been replaced by verbal invectives," says Freud (149). The economic and linguistic qualities of wit establish the immediate accessibility of the device as a means to act against society's rules. Freud argues: "From the beginning its [wit's] object is to remove inner inhibitions and thereby render productive those pleasure-sources which have become inaccessible" (199). Fears of breaking the social norm still hinder wit, but if one can experience enough pleasure in merely conceiving the language, the potential for more pleasure will surmount the fear of disapprobation, prompting enough courage to speak the words. Once uttered, wit psychologically satisfies the egocentric desire to act against the social norm as much as a physical action of defiance.

Freud's exploration illustrates several unique properties of wit, further enhancing its differentiation from humor and the comic. Freud recognizes that wit requires the formulation

of words and an object to discuss, unlike the other two categories of amusement. If wit did not consist of words, the device would not have sufficient accessibility to alleviate inhibitions quickly. Freud emphasizes that wit's unique ability to express thought economically contributes to the convenience of its use and the sharpness of its attack. Moreover, the desire to employ wit would not arise if an oppressive agent did not provoke a need for inhibitive release. While humor and the comic may certainly claim these attributes in certain instances, the classification of a statement as wit demands all of these characteristics.

While Freud's differentiation of wit from humor and the comic contributes to our understanding of the concept, his analysis most strikingly presents a less than laudatory portrayal of the device. Unlike Forster or Michelson, who imbue wit with a linguistic power of nearly infinite potential, Freud depicts the device as a choice secondary to action. Although Freud intends his analysis to extend to every individual and therefore not to disparage anyone in assessment, the perception of wit as a tool to circumvent inhibitions as opposed to direct confrontation seems a concession for emotional release, recalling Hazlitt's argument that wit cannot penetrate the serious. One uses wit as an assault when physical action appears too difficult to enact or presents too many undesirable consequences. If intellectuals participate most often in wit, this denigrating depiction of the device sheds an unfavorable light on their work in language. Wit, according to Freud, serves as a compensation for those who cannot speak in genuine discourse or cannot act to correct a problem.

Recognizing the questionable relationship between words and reality has certainly taken prominence in the postmodern era of literary criticism. Structuralists have argued that individual words attain meaning only as part of a network of interrelated signs, deriving their significance from differences among other words. Deconstructionists have posited that words

fail altogether to coalesce in meaning and that an assertion of unified discourse overlooks conflicting aims of discourse. In *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, Satya Mohanty criticizes postmodern literary scholars for too strictly focusing on words in their studies, urging them to develop theories that would directly contribute to the improvement of society. Many scholars in the last few decades have brought into question the often-heralded infinite power of the written word, opting instead for a modification of rhetoric or superior discourse.

This thesis will not present such sweeping claims that doubt the validity of language at every level, but analyze the failure of certain words in the context of fictional situations. More specifically, I intend to demonstrate how characters in certain literary texts unsuccessfully attempt to use wit to remedy the ills of their circumstances. Although their wit bears the same linguistic intensity that Forster and Michelson describe, the language fails to ameliorate the problems within the text because these circumstances demand physical action on behalf of the characters or at least more sincere discourse. This claim flies in the face of scholars who venerate wit, placing prosaic language above clever dialogue, but in each of the texts that I will examine the intensity of wit often proves merely ornamental.

To add more coherent shape to my investigation, I will establish a dichotomy in the nature of wit through which I will conduct my analysis. As noted in the various definitions of the word, whether explicitly or implicitly, wit has great appeal to intellectuals because of its complexity and authority. Clever individuals enjoy crafting wit because it verifies their intelligence to others and themselves, notwithstanding the pleasure it offers in the release of inhibitions. However, while the manipulation of words demonstrates admirable learnedness and skill, wit usually produces only a momentary clarification of events, easily forgotten in a larger text such as a novel or a play. Believing that the astuteness necessary for wit proves its

worth in any situation, characters often use the device to right injustices, alleviate social ills, or manage personal relationships. But since wit provides little effect outside of the moment in which it is spoken, the wrongs that the language should rectify remain or develop into worse problems. Wit may appear as an applicable tool to remedy ills, but in the end fails to develop change because it consists of frivolous language that cannot affect reality without stronger backing.

A short passage from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* will better illustrate the misconception of the power of wit that frequently appears in the fictional world. Although Pope refers to wit in the old sense of the word as intelligence, his description of the connection between wit and judgment nonetheless bears similarities to the previous arguments that I have cited that demonstrate the limited effects of the device:

> Some, to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse,
> Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
> For *Wit* and *Judgment* often are at strife,
> Tho' meant each other's Aid, like *Man* and *Wife*. (80-3)

Pope demonstrates that wit and judgment should ideally work together for mutual benefit, similar to the shared duties in a marriage union, but realizes that they often do not act accordingly. As evidence of intelligence, a person's wit should indicate that he would evaluate a situation justly, yet as the following texts will indicate, the device often indicates the failure of judgment.

What remains for this discussion is the close reading of several literary texts. I have selected three works of literature that explicitly demonstrate the inability of wit to alleviate dire circumstances: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter*, and

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Each of the protagonists in these texts erroneously believes that wit will improve difficult situations when it in fact exacerbates them. In *Hamlet*, the Wittenberg-educated prince attempts to avenge his father's murder not with sharp metal but with a less effective sharp tongue, not realizing that his cleverness will initiate his own tragedy. In *The Lion in Winter*, King Henry and Queen Eleanor use in familial discourse the same wit that brought them political success, alienating each other and their sons through their lack of genuine affection. In *Catch-22*, the text that offers the most complex relationship between a character and wit, the protagonist Yossarian draws on the narrator's language in his inefficacious search for asylum from the war while the machine of modernity continues its distortion of society. Characters in each of these texts demonstrate a faulty reliance on wit, amplifying the problems that they intend to mitigate.

Chapter II – *Hamlet* and Revenge in Wit

In a study of wit in literary texts, one would have difficultly not consulting Shakespeare, whose plays offer considerable wit in their portrayal of humanity, shaping modes of elevated consciousness in many characters. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Beatrice and Benedick vilify their past love affair in exchanges of witty insults, ironically revealing their fate as each other's true love. In *Measure for Measure*, Francisca reminds Isabella of her ascetic duties as a nun in witty, circular language, exemplifying Shakespeare's perception of the Catholic clergy's absurdity for participating in inane self-denial. Wit features just as prominently in Shakespeare's tragedies as it does in his comic plays. The fool in *King Lear* offers humorous commentary on his master's senility while Iago's quips in *Othello* flavor the villain's diabolical plotting.

Scholars have crafted numerous theories to explain the purpose of witty exchanges and interludes in Shakespeare's darker plays. Some speculate that wit provides temporary relief from the tension of tragedy or that passages of wit grant more credibility to horrific scenes that follow. These theories work if the play breaks away from the main plot to engage in witty discourse, but fail to lend greater understanding of *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare depends on wit almost constantly to drive the plot and enhance the characters.

The wit in *Hamlet* features so prominently that it contributes to the development of the tragedy. To understand how the device operates in the text, we must consider how the protagonist relates to the oppositional qualities of the language. As a Wittenberg-educated scholar, Hamlet highly regards the ingenuity necessary for wit, either failing to understand the limits of mere language or perceiving stronger forces that prevent him from real action. The prince first expresses his indignation for his mother's hasty remarriage in only a few lines of

hushed wit, feeling obligated to keep the peace, but later tries to avenge his father's death through the unhindered strength of his language. Hamlet's method of vengeance, however, succeeds only in alerting Claudius to the prince as a possible threat. The witty antagonism with which Hamlet addresses the ills of Denmark's royal family poses several characters against him, initiating his own tragedy. The prince only recognizes a more appropriate response when he sees the determination with which Fortinbras' army marches to Poland, but when Hamlet assumes a similar resolve, his belated change cannot stop the development of the play's disastrous end.

Thus, we can divide Hamlet's response into three distinct phases: the beginning of the play, when Hamlet uses sparse and quiet wit to criticize the alacrity with which the court discontinued mourning his father; the scenes after Hamlet meets his father's ghost, when Hamlet uses the full force of his wit to attack his enemies; and after Hamlet returns from England, when he abandons wit for a more fitting heroic response. This chapter will analyze each of these sections to determine the role of wit in fashioning the tragedy of the melancholy Dane.

Before Hamlet encounters his father's ghost, the prince feels frustrated from his mother's sexual relations with his uncle and the general lack of mourning in Denmark, but remains silent because he feels compelled to maintain order within the family and the kingdom. "It is not, nor it cannot come to good, / But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," he says (1.2.158-9). Hamlet's wit, therefore, appears sporadically and then only blunted. Shakespeare introduces Hamlet with a line that characterizes his cleverness, but qualifies the prince's wit to show his restraint. When Claudius refers to Hamlet in court as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son –," the prince responds "a little more than kin, and less than kind."

demonstrating his resentment toward his new family structure (1.2.64-5). Although Hamlet offers this wit as an aside to the audience, attacking Claudius indirectly, the line predicts that Hamlet will respond with similar wit throughout the play. Hamlet's skill with words becomes more pronounced shortly afterward, when Claudius asks his nephew why the clouds of mourning still hang over him. "Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun," puns Hamlet (1.2.67). Although Hamlet says this line directly to Claudius, he qualifies it with the deferential address of "my lord." At this point in the play, Hamlet resents the forgotten memory of his father, but restrains his witty inclination to maintain peace in the family.

However, after the ghost informs Hamlet of his uncle's crime, the prince unleashes the full force of his verbal assault. The prince's scholastic background encourages his value of wit, but determining why the prince forsakes enforcing his words with action remains difficult to understand. A variety of theories could explain Hamlet's aversion to bloody vengeance. Plotting regicide obviously endangers the prince's safety. Hamlet's failure to act could be a means of self-preservation. Moreover, Hamlet often speculates that a demon has merely assumed the guise of his father, plotting to damn the prince's soul by persuading him to commit a heinous crime. Hamlet considers such a possibility in soliloquy:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a dev'l, and the dev'l hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.578-83)

Although Hamlet appears uncertain of his uncertainty by contemplating that the ghost "may be" a demon and that it "perhaps" deceives him, the passage demonstrates that Hamlet's inaction at least partially derives from skepticism about his informant.

Recognizing Hamlet's perception of the ghost as responsible for the prince's failure to honor his father with retributive justice, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the prince actually fulfills his duty to Old Hamlet's memory by incorporating the apparition into himself. Emphasizing the connection of *Hamlet* to other pieces of medieval and Renaissance art and literature, Greenblatt demonstrates the vivid depiction of Purgatory's tortures in a variety of sources, juxtaposing it with equally violent polemics against the Catholic conception. Protestant critics in Shakespeare's time condemned the notion of Purgatory as merely a poetic satisfaction of desire for atonement after death, a hopeful alternative for deviant souls instead of eternal banishment. Greenblatt maintains that after Reformation authorities ripped the belief in Purgatory from religious dogma, Protestants experienced a withdrawal from hope for their deceased ancestors that satiated itself in the representation of damned beings on stage, a purpose to which the ghost in *Hamlet* subscribes. Greenblatt writes, "The space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage where old Hamlet's Ghost is doomed for a certain term to walk the night" (257).

Greenblatt argues that since the ghost represents a craving to alleviate the pain of fellow men in the afterlife, the prince satisfies his duty to Old Hamlet by merely remembering him. In both its speaking scenes, the ghost frequently utters the imperative "remember me," as if its suffering derives not from its horrible death but the fear of being forgotten. While the influence of the ghost seems to fade as the play progresses, just as memories of our departed loved ones fade, Hamlet actually absorbs the memory of his father into himself. Phrases at the

end of the play such as "I am dead" liken Hamlet to his spectral father and his final words "the rest is silence" suggest the amelioration of pain (5.2.315 and 340). "In the context of the play as a whole, the reiterated expression 'I am dead' has an odd resonance: these are the words that are most appropriately spoken by a ghost. It is as if the spirit of Hamlet's father has not disappeared; it has been incorporated by his son," asserts Greenblatt (229). Hamlet restrains himselffrom enacting real vengeance because neither he nor the ghost truly demands it. Therefore, in terms of Greenblatt's argument, the prince employs wit as a means for rectifying Denmark's problems because he feels no obligation for bloody action.

Hamlet especially demonstrates his witty assault against Claudius's legitimacy when he speaks to the king after murdering Polonius. In a tangential and convoluted explanation of how a dead king's remains can find their way into a beggar's stomach, Hamlet ridicules Claudius's authority through an implicit comparison between his uncle and the hypothetical king who must serve a vagabond:

> KING. Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?
>
> HAMLET. At supper.
>
> KING. At supper? where?
>
> HAMLET. Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots; your fat king and lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table – that's the end.
>
> KING. Alas, alas!
>
> HAMLET. A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING. What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET. Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.3.16-30)

Hamlet emphasizes the association between the real and hypothetical king with frequent and unnecessary use of the second person in his dialogue. "Your fat king" and "to show you how a king" draw Claudius into the speculation to ensure that the comparison does not escape him. The contracted speech of "e'en" and "'a," characteristic of characters in a lower station, adds to the convolution of Hamlet's wit, augmenting the king's confusion. Furthermore, the image of "politic" worms eating a righteous man recalls Claudius's politic usurpation of the crown from a righteous king. In his allusion to Claudius's crime, Hamlet attempts to frighten the king by flaunting knowledge of his dire act.

In addition to using verbal wit to attack Claudius, Hamlet also contrives witty schemes to bring the king to justice. These plans have such prominence in the play yet seemingly have so little justification that T. S. Eliot famously argued that they derive from Shakespeare's failure to establish events in the play that correlate with its general mood. Eliot writes: "The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*" (48). While Hamlet's actions may seem to fail as a product of the emotion in the play, they do exemplify wit as a mode of finding justice. The prince places the same value in these plans as he does in his wit because of their similar complexity. Hamlet feigns madness as a clever means of preventing others from discovering his knowledge of Claudius's villainy. The prince also stages a play revealing Claudius's crime to verify the king's guilt, and perhaps to incite the monarch in public. Hamlet believes he can find vengeance in these plans as in his language because both require admirable skill.

However, although some of these actions verify Claudius's guilt, they bring Hamlet no closer to enacting actual justice.

Hamlet so heavily relies on wit to attack Claudius throughout the play that actors often interpret dialogue not inherently witty as such. Many versions of *Hamlet* depict the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy as a literal contemplation of suicide, but Kenneth Branagh as the prince, in a 1997 film version of the play, appears to realize that his enemies are eavesdropping and intends his speech to threaten them. Branagh stares into the mirror behind which Claudius and Polonius hide, tapping his dagger on the glass to indicate the menace he plans. This Hamlet considers the nature of death not for himself but for his foes. By extending wit to where none exists, actors can emphasize the cleverness of Hamlet, but the perception of wit in language not inherently witty brings revenge no closer than overtly witty language.

Hamlet applies his method of attack not only to the king but also to his followers, realizing that the threat of Claudius's retribution lurks everywhere, even in his friends at the court. When Polonius investigates the cause of Hamlet's insanity, the prince leads the courtier down a path of convolution and ridicule to exaggerate his feigned mental deterioration:

> POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord?
>
> HAMLET. Words, words, words.
>
> POLONIUS. What is the matter, my lord?
>
> HAMLET. Between who?
>
> POLONIUS. I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.
>
> HAMLET. Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak

hams; all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honestly to have it thus set down, for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward. (2.2.190-202)

Hamlet derides Polonius by deliberately misunderstanding his questions and implicitly describing him as a decaying old man. Attributes disgusting to the point of comic effect – "eyes purging thick amber," "a plentiful lack of wit," and "most weak hams" – contribute to the unflattering depiction. The hard consonant sounds within the phrases emphasize the vileness of the image. Hamlet's witty lunacy keeps Polonius at a distance, yet offers no significant contribution to Hamlet's goal of finding justice.

Hamlet engages in similar nonsensical wit when he speaks with his fellow students Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The prince engages in parleys with them in many passages of the play, but extends the acridity of his wit to threaten his schoolmates in the scene following the murder of Polonius:

HAMLET. To be demanded of a spunge, what replication should be made by the son of a king?

ROSENCRANTZ. Take you me for a spunge, my lord?

HAMLET. Ay, sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape an apple, in the corner of his jaw, first mouth'd, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have glean'd, it is but squeezing you, and, spunge, you shall be dry again.

ROSENCRANTZ. I understand you not, my lord.

HAMLET. I am glad of it, a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.

ROSENCRANTZ. My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King.

HAMLET. The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing –

GUILDENSTERN. A thing, my lord?

HAMLET. Of nothing, bring me to him. (4.2.12-29)

Hamlet first chides Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for blindly following Claudius, warning them that once their use has ended he will eliminate them. The comparison of Hamlet's schoolmates to an inert sponge enhances the ridicule, especially by placing the metaphoric vehicle in the King's mouth for his mandibles to maul. When Rosencrantz expresses his confusion, Hamlet further derides him for having such "a foolish ear" that he cannot understand "knavish speech." Hamlet then ridicules the mastermind behind his schoolmates by referring to him diminutively as "a thing," and worse, "of nothing." The oxymoron refers to Psalm 144:4: "Man is like a thing of nought, his time passeth away like a shadow," insulting the king and predicting his demise. Hamlet speaks to his schoolmates in seemingly senseless wit to negate his guilt for killing Polonius and to prevent them from knowing his true plan, but in the end, Hamlet's wit here provides no more means to vengeance than similar language in other passages.

Hamlet's witty dialogue with male characters has no consistent theme other than intricately convoluted language, but when Hamlet addresses the female agents of Claudius, his wit specifically ridicules their chastity. Disgusted with his mother's betrayal of his father's memory, Hamlet attacks all women for failing to resist sexual impulses. In a time when a woman held her chastity chief among her virtues, Hamlet's remonstrance is especially caustic.

Hamlet especially demonstrates his resentment for his mother's immorality when he meets with her in her closet:

QUEEN. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

HAMLET. Mother, you have my father much offended.

QUEEN. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

HAMLET. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. [...]

QUEEN. Have you forgot me?

HAMLET. No, by the rood, not so:

You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife. (3.4.9-15)

Hamlet's inversion of his mother's speech illustrates his perception that he and his mother have responded to Old Hamlet's death with opposite reactions. As wife and son, both have a relation to the same patriarchal core, yet Hamlet believes that he cherishes this center while Gertrude has forgotten it.

Hamlet extends this notion of treacherous sexuality not only to Gertrude but to his love, Ophelia. In a stance of moral superiority, the prince accuses Ophelia of transgressing from her chastity, a strange chastisement because if she has lost her virginity, evidence in the play suggests that Hamlet would take the blame.* Within the intricacies of his wit, Hamlet makes subtle sexual advances toward Ophelia just before the play-within-a-play:

HAMLET. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

---

* For example, Ophelia sings in her madness of prematurely visiting a lover's bed, presumably Hamlet's:

Young men will do't if they come to't,
By Cock, they are to blame.
Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,
You promis'd me to wed."
(He answers)
"So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,
And thou hadst not come to my bed." (4.5.60-6)

OPHELIA. No, my lord.

HAMLET. I mean, my head upon your lap?

OPHELIA. Ay, my lord.

HAMLET. Do you think I meant country matters?

OPHELIA. I think nothing, my lord.

HAMLET. That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

OPHELIA. What is, my lord?

HAMLET. Nothing. (3.2.105-14)

Hamlet suggests a sexual solicitation, implying that Ophelia would readily accept, punning on the Elizabethan euphemism "nothing" to mean a woman's genitals. Ophelia, however, faithful to her subservient position, responds to Hamlet's caustic wit with demure naiveté.

Hamlet even chides Ophelia's supposed promiscuity when he speaks of her to other characters. In his convoluted dialogue with Polonius, Hamlet uses wit to hint that the courtier should more closely monitor Ophelia to ensure that she adheres to her chastity:

HAMLET. For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion –

Have you a daughter?

POLONIUS. I have, my lord.

HAMLET. Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to't. (2.2.181-5)

Hamlet associates woman's lust to a rotting dog, emphasizing the sexuality of the comparison by using the adjective "kissing" to describe the animal. With a double entendre on "sun," implying himself as the son of the true king, Hamlet also suggests that he has managed a sexual relationship with Ophelia because of Polonius' blindness. Hamlet suggests that he knows

Ophelia has deviated from her morals because he carries the responsibility. The prince attacks Ophelia's chastity throughout the play, yet no evidence of her deviancy manifests except for ambiguous hints of relations with Hamlet.

By assaulting the appearance of fidelity in female characters, Hamlet demonstrates that he has not entirely, if at all, moved on from the injustice of his mother's premature remarriage. Although most would consider murder the viler act, knowledge of his father's death has not taken primacy as Hamlet's main motive for justice. The prince instead takes the supernatural encounter as permission to assault the sexual deviation over which he remained silent, grieving for his mother's sexuality to the extent that he sees it in every woman. Hamlet's focus on the lesser crime and his inability to remember the greater one could explain why he selects wit as means for vengeance instead of violence. Bitter language seems a more appropriate method of admonishing deviant females.

Hamlet confronts the ills in Denmark directly in this part of the play only after he mistakenly kills Polonius in the queen's closet. Polonius' death so jars the prince that he can no longer use the mentality required for wit, prompting him to express his indignation in lofty, direct language:

> Such an act [his mother's remarriage]
>
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
>
> Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
>
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love
>
> And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
>
> As false as dicers' oaths. O, such a deed
>
> As from the body contraction plucks

The very soul, and sweet religion makes

A rhapsody of words. (3.4.40-8)

Hamlet offers a romantic lamentation in his abstinence from wit, speaking in formal iambic pentameter and a long, syntactically complex sentence. The personification of abstract values such as modesty, virtue, and love as beautiful women advances a technique that Wordsworth and Keats will use extensively centuries after Shakespeare. Hamlet adds to the hyperbole of his speech with inflated adjectives such as "fair," "very," and "sweet" and refers to the chaos of sin with the elevated metaphor of "rhapsody." The prince finally abstains from wit to achieve meaningful, heartfelt discourse. However, he continues to focus on his mother's sexuality as the principal cause of his grief and again fails to supplement his words with effective actions. The physicality of murdering Polonius initiates a movement away from wit, but does not succeed in bringing a full transformation to more tangible vengeance.

Hamlet continues to attack Claudius with wit until he encounters Fortinbras' troops on their march to Poland. The prince marvels at the determination with which the army advances, realizing that to achieve vengeance he must similarly assume a more active response fueled by emotion:

How stand I then,

That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,

Excitements of my reason and my blood,

And let all sleep, while to my shame I see

The imminent death of twenty thousand men,

That for a fantasy and trick of fame

Go to their graves like beds, [...]

O, from this time forth,

My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (4.4.56-66)

Placing himself as the subject behind what has "let all sleep," Hamlet recognizes the inefficacy of his witty parleys with other characters. Furthermore, the prince departs from the standard iamb with the spondaic "this time forth," emphasizing that he will truly supplement this vow with meaningful action, unlike the previous promises upon which he failed to act. Hamlet's soliloquy marks a significant change in his plan for finding justice.

When Hamlet returns from England, he noticeably abstains from the wit he previously used to assault his enemies. Hamlet confronts Laertes before the duel with genuine sympathy, acknowledging responsibility for his loss. "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong," says Hamlet (5.2.208), departing from the former witty evasiveness that concealed his true thoughts. Hamlet's apology to Laertes exemplifies the prince's acceptance of a more proper heroic role.

However, wit does not entirely disappear from this part of the play. In fact, some of the play's most famous witty passages occur in the final act, enhanced by the generally dark atmosphere. For instance, although Hamlet certainly demonstrates his new bloody approach to vengeance during his duel with Laertes, the prince teases the attendant Osric with witty banter just before the match:

OSRIC. I know you are not ignorant –

HAMLET. I would you did, sir, yet, in faith, if you did, it would not much approve me.

Well, sir?

OSRIC. You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is –

HAMLET. I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence, but to know a man well were to know himself.

OSRIC. I mean, sir, for his weapon, but in the imputation laid on him by them, in his meed he's unfellow'd.

HAMLET. What's his weapon?

OSRIC. That's two of his weapons – but well. (5.2.127-37)

Hamlet's twisting of Osric's language, even before the attendant can finish his sentences, recalls the earlier wit that Hamlet had used to baffle his enemies. But instead of using wit as an act of hostility, Hamlet employs clever language here in playfulness, merely poking fun at Osric for his admiration of Laertes. Moreover, since Osric comes from a lower station than Hamlet, ridiculing the attendant does not carry the same audacity as deriding the king. Hamlet may mock Osric, but the prince's language does not share the same gravity of wit in earlier scenes.

A similar interlude occurs when Hamlet speaks with the crass and riddling gravedigger. Unlike any other dialogue in the play, here Hamlet takes an inferior stance to another's witty convolution:

HAMLET. Whose grave's this sirrah?

FIRST CLOWN. Mine, sir. [...]

HAMLET. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

FIRST CLOWN. You lie out on't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours; for my part, I do not lie in't, yet it is mine.

HAMLET. Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

FIRST CLOWN. 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again from me to you.

HAMLET. What man dost thou dig it for?

FIRST CLOWN. For no man, sir.

HAMLET. What woman then?

FIRST CLOWN. For none neither.

HAMLET. Who is to be buried in't?

FIRST CLOWN. One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead. (5.1.110-27)

Although Hamlet tries to assert his dominance by addressing the clown with the derogatory "sirrah" and punning on his meaning of "liest," the gravedigger reverses Hamlet's scholastic dominance with facetious responses and a pun on the prince's use of "quick." The mockery of Hamlet's words so infuriates the prince that he abandons his cleverness for a series of basic questions, which the gravedigger subverts in witty answers. The prince later expresses his disgust for the clown's insolence in a witty comment that affirms his cleverness for himself: "The age is grown so pick'd that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe" (5.1.130-2). Nevertheless, Hamlet never bests the gravedigger in their witty dialogue. For a character who has no name and speaks almost entirely using state-of-being verbs, the clown possesses significant verbal skill.

Reconciling this passage with this phase of the play presents several problems. Not only does the dialogue occur in a part of the play mostly devoid of wit, but the passage also has the peculiarity of inverting Hamlet's usual linguistic dominance over other characters. Robert Wilcher argues that the reversal of Hamlet's role confirms that the prince has forsaken his ineffective means of vengeance for a position more appropriate for a hero: "The very mode of

the duologue reinforces the growing sense of restored order and sanity in the world of *Hamlet* as the Prince drops his aberrant role as jester and assumes his proper comic and social relationship as straight-man to the familiar rustic clown" (99). Hamlet's frustration with the clown's wit and his assertion of aristocratic authority indicates that the prince realizes the inefficacy of mere language, opting for a more practical method of finding justice.

Wilcher, however, also finds evidence in this scene that contradicts the appearance of Hamlet's change. While speaking with Hamlet, the gravedigger discovers Yorick's skull and offers it to the prince, who grieves for the end of the jester's jollity as he looks upon the remains. "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to the set the table on a roar?" asks Hamlet (5.1.176-8). Wilcher interprets this lament as a comic apostrophe to a dead object, proof that Hamlet retains some of his former wittiness and that his complete transformation has yet to occur: "Hamlet's lapses into the fool role [...] reveal that Hamlet has not yet found the complete stability that will only come when he moves from the fool's helpless detachment to the action of the 'sweet prince' and 'soldier'" (100).

This claim could contradict that Hamlet indeed changes after seeing Fortinbras' army, but fails to provide a catalyst for the prince's violent actions at that end of the play. Hamlet must experience an epiphany at some point in the play that alters his method of achieving vengeance. Moreover, one does not necessarily need to interpret Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull as comic. Branagh, in his portrayal of Hamlet, usually opts for greater flippancy in the prince, but here recalls the memory of Yorick with genuine sadness. If Hamlet addresses the skull sincerely, the language supports his earlier transformation, exemplifying the prince's new focus on death. Wilcher's belief that Hamlet's complete change has yet to occur falls short of

providing an alternative point of realization and recognizing a genuine interpretation of the address to Yorick's skull.

Regardless of whenever Hamlet assumes a more dynamic posture, the prince changes too late to avoid a disastrous, bloody end. Hamlet's witty schemes and suggestions alert Claudius that the prince could threaten his position, prompting the king to contrive arrangements for his ward's end. Through his antics, Hamlet also leads other characters down paths that threaten his safety. Hamlet drives Ophelia toward insanity and then death, which, with the murder of Polonius, incites Laertes' desire for revenge. Hamlet's inclination for wit not only prolongs the act of justice, but worsens the ills in Denmark to such an extent that only death can provide an absolution.

Only Horatio survives the carnage at the end of the play. Since typically only virtuous characters remain after the purging of sin in a tragedy, Shakespeare suggests that Horatio's method of coping with the ills of Denmark proves more substantial than Hamlet's. Like the prince, Horatio studies at Wittenberg, which has conditioned him with a similarly enhanced faculty for language. Shakespeare introduces Horatio with a witty line, as the author does with Hamlet, when Barnardo presumably responds to strange noise during his watch with the inquiry, "What, is Horatio there?" The student answers facetiously, "A piece of him" (1.1.18-9). If Hamlet's introduction with a witty line predicts his response throughout the rest of the play, then Horatio's initial words should act similarly. However, Horatio demonstrates a response drastically different from the prince's ineffective wit, assuming a more pragmatic reaction to events in the play. Just as Laertes' demand for immediate, bloody vengeance characterizes him as a foil to Hamlet, Horatio similarly enhances the depiction of Hamlet's position through a contrast of behavior. While Hamlet still laments over his mother's

sexuality, Horatio seems aware of greater ills in Denmark, especially in his contemplation during the first scene. "In the gross and scope of mine opinion, / This [appearance of a ghost] bodes some strange eruption to our state," he says (1.1.68-9). When Horatio meets the apparition, he shares Hamlet's suspicion of its true nature, but considers that it may know the root of Denmark's disturbing atmosphere. "If thou art privy to thy country's fate, / Which happily foreknowing may avoid, / O speak!" says Horatio (1.1.133-5). The imperative with which he addresses the ghost and the isolation of the final line demonstrate Horatio's feeling of urgency.

Horatio's more reasonable responses also qualify Hamlet's wit through much of the play, emphasizing the portrayal of its ineffectiveness. When Claudius storms out after viewing his own act of murder in the play-within-a-play, Hamlet celebrates the craft of his deed with Horatio, who does not share the prince's jubilation:

> HAMLET. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?
>
> HORATIO. Very well, my lord.
>
> HAMLET. Upon the talk of the pois'ning?
>
> HORATIO. I did very well note him. (3.2.271-5)

Horatio uses short sentences, repeating the banal phrase "very well" to indicate his understanding but also his lack of excitement. Horatio has the same capacity for wit as Hamlet, but restrains himself when that language provides no benefit. Since Horatio recognizes the need for a practical approach to resolving Denmark's ills, even if he comes from too low a station to enact change, the scholar serves as a model character to contrast with

Hamlet, escaping death at the end of the play because through his greater awareness he takes no part in the family quarrel.

Hamlet's failure to initiate vengeance for his father's death derives from the value of his language. The prince does not understand that wit consists of mere words and cannot replace the physical act of vengeance. Although Hamlet realizes his folly toward the end of the play, his epiphany comes too late to reverse the tragedy in progress. Hamlet's faith in the exercise of wit instigates his doom.

Chapter III – *The Lion in Winter* and Wit's Deterioration of the Family

Among the many faults that John Simon identifies in the 1999 production of *The Lion in Winter* is the overly elaborate dialogue that emphasizes the play's artificiality. "Dialogue should be witty; so every line is, or tries to be, an epigram," he observes (104). Simon justifiably asserts that the substance of James Goldman's play often consists merely of clever language, which perhaps in part precludes the play from aspiring to any higher literary complexity. The play's wit nonetheless shares a common function with uses of the device in other texts, offering a complex response to grave circumstances, yet failing to ameliorate them.

King Henry and Queen Eleanor employ witty antagonism in their family affairs because similar cleverness has brought them success as political leaders. Through their marriage and political intrigues, the two monarchs have constructed one of the largest states since Charlemagne's and numerous times have prevented rivals from picking it apart. However, after applying this cleverness as wit in their interaction with each other and their children, the characters only succeed in the mutilation of their love and the corruption of their sons. The play begins after witty antagonism has already warped the family, featuring instead the attempt to remedy the corruption through the futile application of additional clever language. Although Henry and Eleanor several times in the play demonstrate a longing for more genuine affection, their conditioning as politicians prevents them from interacting sincerely. The dichotomy of wit applies in *The Lion in Winter* just as it does in *Hamlet*: wit that proves effective in situations requiring intellect cannot find the same success in family affairs. This chapter will analyze how Henry and Eleanor's ineffective mitigation of domestic problems through wit exacerbates the ruin of their family.

Though examining a non-canonical play after having looked at perhaps the most canonical may seem somewhat disorienting, *Hamlet* and *The Lion in Winter* share many common traits that invite a similar exploration of wit. At the most superficial level, both plays retrospectively explore the medieval era, although Goldman writes from the distant vantage point of the Twentieth Century and Shakespeare crafts a work significantly closer to fiction than history. Both *Hamlet* and *The Lion in Winter* also draw on characteristics of classical plays. Shakespeare follows the structural and emotional traditions of tragedy, while Goldman meets Aristotle's requirement for unity of time, place, and action by setting his play entirely at Chinon's fictional Christmas court of 1183 (Longtin 251-2). Shakespeare and Goldman also establish similar conflicts in their plays, forcing protagonists with erroneous preconceptions to confront dire domestic problems. The works additionally both feature well-developed language as an important aesthetic component. In an interview, Goldman said that he attempted to incorporate in his plays the skillful language that he saw in British masters such as Shakespeare: "I've always enjoyed English writers. I sort of write in an English way. Not because I mean to be English. But because they care about the language and the sound and the rhythm of words" (qtd. in Longtin 240). Each of these attributes establishes a common structure for both plays, allowing them to demonstrate similarly the faulty judgment of relying on wit to rectify serious problems.

Yet *The Lion in Winter* diverges from *Hamlet* in its depiction of not just a single protagonist who uses wit but multiple characters who clash in witty dialogue. Moreover, while the indirect nature of wit initiates the tragedy in *Hamlet*, the aggression behind the device brings about the undoing of the protagonists in *The Lion in Winter*. The political antagonism that has conditioned Henry and Eleanor as monarchs translates as wit in family discourse,

effecting their alienation from each other and the distortion of their children. In his interview, Goldman presents his conception that people often employ earlier routes to success in other inappropriate areas of life:

> The minute you start organizing experience, you are going to see it in a particular way. There are causal nexuses between events. Even if there aren't, we insist upon seeing them because life becomes chaotic if we don't. What happens, it seems to me, is that we spend our existences attempting to organize all the phenomenological stuff that happens to us and we are constantly mistaken so that there is no way to read the future. [...] And yet, we must behave as if we know what we are doing when we don't. (qtd. in Longtin 242)

Goldman incorporates this notion of faulty preconceptions in Henry and Eleanor's treatment of family affairs.

We can better understand the reasons why the Plantagenets rely on antagonistic wit by looking at the history of their political triumphs. Henry describes the magnitude of his success to Alais while informing her of his plans for the crown: "I've built an empire and I've got to know it's going to last. I've put together England and I've added to it half of France. I am the greatest power in a thousand years" (7)*. Eleanor similarly reminds Richard of the history of her success to encourage the ambition of her son:

> Henry was eighteen when we met and I was Queen of France. He came down from the North to Paris with a mind like Aristotle's and a form like mortal sin. We shattered the Commandments on the spot. I spent three months annulling Louis and in spring, in May not far from here, we married. Young Count Henry and his Countess. But in

* Since the Penguin edition of the text offers no line numbers, the citations here refer to page numbers instead.

three years' time, I was his Queen and he was King of England. Done at twenty-one. (31-2)

In addition to demonstrating Eleanor's political success, this passage also exemplifies the queen's use of wit to manipulate her family. In her description of her past, Eleanor's clever language illustrates the drive with which she achieved her successes, urging Richard to act with similar ambition. Eleanor aggrandizes Henry's attractiveness in his youth with the provocative similes of "with a mind like Aristotle's and a form like mortal sin." To illustrate her intense desire to marry Henry, the queen also reveals that she spent only three months exchanging spouses. Regardless of her alacrity in divorce, hardly any woman in the Middle Ages could separate from her husband against his consent, demonstrating Eleanor's prowess in negotiating with religious officials. In addition to the content of her words, the short, declarative sentences of the passage that degenerate into sentence fragments project the ease and determination with which Eleanor managed these triumphs. The witty satisfaction with which the queen describes her success makes her argument more convincing at the expense of cultivating a disingenuous relationship with her son.

The wit among the Plantagenets becomes most heated in the dialogue between Henry and Eleanor. The king and queen demonstrate hostility even in scenes in which they intend friendly expression, especially unleashing their wit when they first meet after their separation:

ELEANOR. [*To her sons*] My, what a greedy little trinity you are: king, king, king. Two of you must learn to live with disappointment.

HENRY. (*Entering, with* ALAIS) Ah – but which two?

ELEANOR. Let's deny them all and live forever.

HENRY. Tusk to tusk through all eternity. How was your crossing? Did the channel part for you?

ELEANOR. It went flat when I told it to; I didn't think to ask for more. How dear of you to let me out of jail. (12)

While one might expect the reunion of husband and wife to consist of at least some amicable salutations, the pervasiveness of wit in this greeting reflects the hostility beneath Henry and Eleanor's love. Henry's facetious vision of battling with his wife forever "tusk to tusk" reveals the foundation of antagonism in their marriage. Projecting a similar bitterness, Eleanor ironically notes Henry's generosity in liberating her from prison with "How dear of you to let me out of jail." This passage also indicates Henry and Eleanor's perception of each other as formidable opponents. Henry speculates that his wife could part the sea after Eleanor imagines them casually opting to forgo death, inflating their abilities in ridiculous conjecture. Despite this hostility, some traces of affability linger within these lines. Henry and Eleanor would not spiritedly play on each other's wit if they did not feel some friendly connection between them. This greeting between Henry and Eleanor illustrates the antagonism of their relationship, but also hints at the remaining affection that binds them together.

The witty hostility of Henry and Eleanor's initial meeting foreshadows similar interaction throughout the play. This aggression develops more strongly when the monarchs and their sons begin working to unravel each other's plans. Henry informs Eleanor in successive jabs of caustic wit that he plans to annul their marriage, prompting Eleanor to declare her strategy for deterring him in an equally witty retort:

HENRY. Well, wish me luck. I'm off.

ELEANOR. To Rome?

HENRY. That's where they keep the Pope.

ELEANOR. You don't dare go.

HENRY. Say that again at noon, you'll say it to my horse's ass. Lamb, I'll be rid of you by Easter: you can count your reign in days.

ELEANOR. You go to Rome, we'll rise against you.

HENRY. Who will?

ELEANOR. Richard, Geoffrey, John, and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

HENRY. The day those stout hearts band together is the day that pigs get wings.

ELEANOR. There'll be pork in the treetops come the morning. Don't you see? You've given them a common cause: new sons. You leave the country and you've lost it. (89-90)

In the initial part of this passage, Henry demonstrates his superiority in wit with his assumption that he has out-maneuvered his queen. Eleanor incredulously questions her husband whether he indeed will flee to Rome, to which Henry responds with an obvious answer that he goes because the pope resides there, ridiculing his wife for her implied ignorance. Henry additionally belittles the queen by obscenely projecting an image of Eleanor shouting her objections the next day to his "horse's ass." The king's speculation that Eleanor's term as queen will last so briefly that she can count it "in days" intensifies the delight in his threat of leaving her. Henry also uses "lamb" as an ironic term of endearment, speculating that he and his wife will soon have no need for pet names. Despite Henry's initial witty dominance over Eleanor, the queen claims the final retort, twisting her husband's cliché of pigs gaining wings to demonstrate his error in judgment. Henry and Eleanor viciously attack each other in this passage, but their language also shows their desire for affection. Henry wants more loyal sons

while Eleanor desires to keep the remains of her bond with her husband. A desire for affability struggles to emerge from underneath the wit of this distorted relationship.

The king and queen apply the same wit that perverts their dialogue with each other to the interaction with their sons, similarly demonstrating how the hostility of politics has conditioned their familial discourse. Eleanor's twisted management of her children becomes particularly apparent in her attempt to renew friendly relations with Richard:

> ELEANOR. You are a dull boy.
>
> RICHARD. Am I?
>
> ELEANOR. Dull as plainsong: la, la, la, forever on one note. I gave the Church up out of boredom. I can do as much for you.
>
> RICHARD. You'll never give me up; not while I hold the Aquitaine.
>
> ELEANOR. You think I'm motivated by a love of real estate?
>
> RICHARD. I think you want it back. You're so deceitful you can't ask for water when you're thirsty. We could tangle spiders in the webs you weave.
>
> ELEANOR. If I'm so devious, why don't you go? Don't stand there quivering in limbo. Love me, little lamb, or leave me.
>
> RICHARD. (*Not moving*) Leave you, madam? With pure joy.
>
> ELEANOR. Departure is a simple act. You put the left foot down and then the right. (23)

Eleanor assaults Richard in a succession of witty remarks to regain his love, viciously attempting to gain affection. She compares her son to "plainsong," a monophonic Gregorian chant, uttering the identical notes to emphasize Richard's narrow-mindedness and constant resistance to her. Eleanor also calls attention to Richard's appearance of ambivalence with the

belittling metaphor of him "quivering in limbo" and her instruction of how to walk, contributing to the ridicule with which she tries to persuade him. Additionally, the queen feigns indifference with indications of how she grew tired with the Church and has no desire for land, warning Richard that he should renew his love before her interest fades.

Although Eleanor assaults Richard with a succession of remarks, the prince, having apparently learned Eleanor's technique from previous discussions, rebukes his mother with his own quips. The hyperbole of "You're so deceitful you can't ask for water when you're thirsty" demonstrates Richard's suspicion of his mother's motives. The prince also plays on the adage of liars weaving convoluted webs with "We could tangle spiders in the webs you weave," emphasizing his incredulity. The antagonism and suspicion of this dialogue demonstrates how the distortion of Eleanor's discourse fails to provide any reconciliation with her family.

The hostility of the family discourse leads each Plantagenet toward desolation. Henry alienates his wife and each of his sons, who plot to seize the crown even before he dies. When their latest treason is revealed, Henry vilifies his children in his speculation of posterity's record of him: "King Henry had no sons. He had three whiskered things but disowned them. You're not mine. We're not connected" (71). Henry's repeated denials demonstrate his intense abhorrence for his progeny. The corruption of the Plantagenets leads Eleanor to similar despair: Henry has imprisoned her at Salisbury Tower, closing her off from the world and man that she loves. The queen notes her frustration in a particularly famous line of the play: "For these ten years you've lived with everything I've lost and loved another woman through it all. [...] I could peel you like a pear and God himself would call it justice" (88).

In addition to ruining Henry and Eleanor's love, the witty interaction of the family has twisted the personalities of the Plantagenet sons. Goldman attributes Richard's homosexuality

to the lack of affection from his father, which the prince decries in a cathartic scene: "You never called for me. You never said my name. I would have walked or crawled. I'd have done anything" (68). The repetition of sentences with the same meaning reflects the simplicity with which he would have responded. The family antagonism has similarly contorted Geoffrey as an emotionless individual constantly calculating means to gain power. Henry reviles the development of his middle son by metaphorically describing him as a machine: "Geoffrey: there's a masterpiece. He isn't flesh: he's a device; he's wheels and gears" (84). A hostile upbringing has similarly bred corruption in John, whose comparative lack of intelligence adds to his resentment of his family. Although at the beginning of the play, Henry believes that John truly loves him, the fraudulence of the youngest son becomes manifest to the king when Geoffrey reveals John's conspiracy with Philip of France. Geoffrey snidely remarks that John may love Henry, but only as "a glutton loves his lunch" (69).

Although political conditioning confines Henry and Eleanor to their hostile interaction, they intermittently demonstrate an existentialist regret for their errors and a desire to alleviate them. In his characterizations of Henry and Eleanor, Russell Lucien Longtin emphasizes that the king and queen's yearning for affection provides considerable contradiction in their personalities. For Henry, Longtin notes: "Henry's ruthlessness and forcefulness are clearly balanced in *The Lion in Winter* by his strong capacity for love and his deep sense of family" (268). Longtin sees a similar contradiction in Eleanor: "Her dark and serious nature are balanced by her endurance, her sense of order, her sense of justice, and her capacity for love" (283). Note that in both descriptions Longtin indicates that Henry and Eleanor have only a "capacity" for love, suggesting that their sensitivity often falls behind their aggression.

Henry and Eleanor confess their sensitivity for more genuine interaction at several points in the play. Both characters conceivably could only feign sincerity as part of their complex schemes of manipulation, but these releases occur at moments of such despair that their truthfulness seems valid. John leaves Eleanor after a tumultuous scene ending with his vow of revenge, forcing the queen to ponder why she cannot affect her children other than in violent discourse: "Scenes, I can't touch my sons except in scenes" (30). The refrain of "scenes" reveals that Eleanor recognizes the instances in which her family acts despicably aggressive. Later, when Eleanor gleefully discovers a means to best Henry, she becomes disgusted with her own delight:

> I haven't lost, it isn't over. Oh, I've got the old man this time. The damn fool thinks he loves John, he believes it. That's where the knife goes in. Knives, knives... it was a fine thought, wasn't it? Oh, Henry we have done a big thing badly. (57)

The repetitious statements of victory, which often merge into one sentence with grammatical error, indicate Eleanor's delight in triumph. However, after using the adage of "where the knife goes in," the queen remembers Richard's assault on John with a knife earlier in the scene. The weapon for Eleanor becomes a metonym for the deterioration of her family, plunging her excitement into revulsion.

Unlike Eleanor, Henry never explicitly demonstrates disgust for the discourse of his family, but does express sensitivity to higher deeds than political squabble:

> Since Louis died, while Philip grew, I've had no France to fight. And in that lull, I've found how good it is to write a law or make a tax more fair or sit in judgment to decide which peasant gets a cow. There is, I tell you, nothing more important in the world. (20)

Henry derides his peacetime work with his snide description of "which peasant gets a cow," demonstrating his surprise that such a banal action could prove rewarding. Despite his sarcasm, the king's aspiration for higher political deeds suggests that he feels a similar desire for reformation in his own family.

The Plantagenet sons also demonstrate a yearning for genuine discourse throughout the play, often remonstrating with their parents for their lack of affection. Even Geoffrey, the most dispassionate of the three sons, questions his mother about his upbringing:

> GEOFFREY. I remember my third birthday. Not just pictures of the garden or the gifts, but who did what to whom and how it felt. My memory reaches back that far and never once can I remember anything from you or Father warmer than indifference. Why is that?
>
> ELEANOR. I don't know.
>
> GEOFFREY. That was not an easy question for me and I don't deserve an easy answer.
>
> ELEANOR. There are times I think we love none of our children.
>
> GEOFFREY. Still too easy, don't you think?
>
> ELEANOR. I'm weary and you want a simple answer and I haven't one. (53)

Geoffrey's memory indicates that the family has interacted in antagonistic discourse for many years. Moreover, his insistence on a reason for the family hostility indicates his desire for affection despite his constant plotting. Eleanor, however, can offer no explanation for her coldness. Political conditioning has become so ingrained within her that she does not understand why she acts with such hostility. The antagonistic nature of each of the characters represses their yearning for genuine discourse. Although none of them explicitly affirms a

desire to unify their family, their sensitivity demonstrates a longing for togetherness, driving the conflict of the play.

Politics, however, has conditioned the characters to such an extent that they consider any attempt at friendliness as plotting. When either Henry or Eleanor tries to offer heartfelt speech, the other construes the sincerity as a mask for manipulation. Before Eleanor attempts to marry Richard to Alais, the queen asks for affection, which Henry perceives as a ruse:

ELEANOR. You give your falcons more affection than I get.

HENRY. My falcons treat me better.

ELEANOR. Handle me with iron gloves, then. (43-4)

Refused by Henry, Eleanor attempts revenge by contriving Richard's immediate marriage with Alais. The request for love exacerbates the hostility within the family, leaving no alternative discourse to strengthen its ties.

With the constant manipulation throughout the play casting doubt on the friendly dialogue between Henry and Eleanor, affection can only find a constant audience in two characters: Alais and John. Seeking refuge from the family squabble, Henry and Eleanor interact with Alais and John in unusually sincere dialogue. In one instance, Eleanor finds Alais in Henry's chamber, initiating a conversation that culminates in emotional release:

ALAIS. (*Throwing herself into* ELEANOR*'s arms*) *Maman, oh, Maman.*

ELEANOR. (*Singing softly*)

The Christmas wine will make you warm –

Don't shiver, child.

ALAIS. I'm not.

ELEANOR. The Christmas logs will glow.

There's Christmas cheer and comfort here –

Is that you crying?

ALAIS. *Non, Maman.*

ELEANOR. Hold close and never let me go. (77-8)

Eleanor's singing and Alais's use of French suggest childhood interaction, making a symbolic effort to return to the past before the desolation of the family. A similar scene occurs when Henry feigns the disinheritance of John. To comfort John in his grief, Eleanor professes her guilt for not providing him the affection that a mother should:

ELEANOR. For whatever I have done to you, forgive me.

JOHN. What could you have done? You were never close enough.

ELEANOR. When you were little, you were torn from me: blame Henry.

JOHN. I was torn from you by midwives and I haven't seen you since.

ELEANOR. Then blame me if it helps. (27)

Amid the aggression of the rest of the family, Alais and John strangely receive heartfelt dialogue.

Alais and John's capacity to attract affection derives from their relative political unimportance and positions as outsiders. A Plantagenet only by adoption, Alais has no ambition other than keeping Henry. The French princess explicitly notes her status as object in the family power struggle: "Kings, queens, knights everywhere you look and I'm the only pawn. I haven't got a thing to lose" (26). John's dim wits lend him similar powerlessness, offering him no skills that pose a threat to Richard's military prowess or Geoffrey's shrewdness. John at one point laments his ineptitude, which he believes separates him from his family: "You know what I am? I'm the family nothing. Geoffrey's smart and Richard's brave

and I'm not anything" (27). Perceiving Alais and John as insignificant dangers, Henry and Eleanor can momentarily relinquish their antagonism in genuine interaction with them. This discourse, however, occurs too infrequently and with too politically unimportant characters to help Henry and Eleanor strengthen the ties of their family.

Despite their intermittent releases of affection, Henry and Eleanor cannot stop the development of their family's desolation. Faced with having no loving heir for his empire, Henry decides to abandon his wife and sons and father a new family with Alais, presenting him with the necessity of eliminating his unwanted children to prevent their insurrection. In a speech before he swings the executioner's blade, Henry demonstrates his internal struggle, invoking his position as supreme legal authority to justify murder:

> I, Henry, by the Grace of God King of the English, Lord of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, Count of Anjou, Brittany, Poitou and Normandy, Maine, Gascony and Aquitaine, do sentence you to death. Done this Christmas Day in Chinon in God's year eleven eighty-three. (*He moves to* RICHARD*sword raised. He swings the sword through the air and brings it crashing to the cellar floor. Into the silence he speaks, softly and thoughtfully*) Surely that's not what I intended. Children... Children are... They're all we have. (*Spent, shattered, unable to look at anyone or anything, he waves them from the room*) Go on. I'm done, I'm done. I'm finished with you. (107)

Henry tries to convince himself of the justice in executing his sons with an extended description of his achievements and a formal decree of death. His familial sensitivity, however, prevents him from enacting the final act of hostility. Henry's difficulty in uttering the importance of his children reflects the struggle of his sensitivity in winning over his hostile

nature. When Henry faces the immediate destruction of his family, his desire for love surmounts his political conditioning.

As Henry realizes, however, even though he stopped himself from murdering his children, his past aggression has left him with nothing. The refrain of "I'm done" refers both to giving his sons their leave and the end of his struggle. Unable to restore their family or completely dissociate themselves from it, Henry and Eleanor accept the errors of their past, deciding to cherish the remnants of their affection:

> HENRY. We're in the cellar and you're going back to prison and my life is wasted and we've lost each other and you're smiling.
>
> ELEANOR. It's the way I register despair. There's everything in life but hope.
>
> HENRY. We have each other and for all I know that's what hope is. (109-10)

The conflict of reconciling the family ends with Henry and Eleanor's realization of its decrepitude and the inability to effect any change. Henry's paratactic sentence acknowledges each of his failures without gradually building his despair by each item, culminating in the recognition of a faint hope in his wife's smile. The only satisfaction at the end of the struggle comes from the peace of acceptance.

Through his portrayal of wit's ruin of the Plantagenets, Goldman offers an ironic presentation of the device's limitations. While few people are capable of the witty aggression that has served Henry and Eleanor well in politics, the behavior fails in family relations, a discourse in which everyone participates regardless of their intelligence and usually with more success. Wit may intimidate defiant vassals and antagonistic monarchs, but cannot remedy the universal problem of family management.

Moreover, the alienation of the Plantagenets becomes more poignant when we look at the play in its historical context. After the fortuitous deaths of Henry and competing heirs, the crown passes to John, whose inept management of the kingdom allows Philip of France to steal away much of Henry and Eleanor's territorial expansion.* In the play, Philip appears to recognize his eventual victory: "I don't have to fight to win. Take all you want – this county, that one. You won't keep it long" (65). Since medieval government is based on hereditary succession, Henry and Eleanor's success in politics means nothing because their failure with their family will eventually destroy their professional work. Although Goldman subtitles some editons of his work, "A Comedy in Two Acts," realizing the dismal fate of the Plantagenets makes the play seem more like tragedy, a series of errors in judgment that will lead to a cleansing of sin after the play ceases to describe action.

The political aggression in which Henry and Eleanor have met such success manifests itself in their family discourse as antagonistic wit. The monarchs prevail in politics with this hostility, but the discourse of wit provides ruin for their family affairs. Although Henry and Eleanor demonstrate a willingness for genuine interaction, they cannot stop the progress of their family's desolation, leading to Henry's threat of annihilating his sons. When the sensitivity to higher discourse finally supersedes their hostility, Henry and Eleanor recognize their errors and resign themselves to their paths. Their family has deteriorated because of its frequent reliance on wit, leaving only a glimmer of hope in preserving the remaining bonds of their affection.

* Most of my knowledge of this historical period comes from Amy Kelly's *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*. It's a good piece of scholarship, but it's almost fifty years old now, so I'm sure more recent publications would offer a more accurate investigation of the Plantagenets.

Chapter IV – *Catch-22* and Evasion Through Wit

Plays offer writers a matchless opportunity to explore the nature of wit because the texts entirely consist of spoken dialogue, encouraging the creation of characters who can drive plot through words alone. As we have seen in *Hamlet* and *The Lion in Winter*, the course of action may not follow what the characters intend with their words, but nonetheless dramatic movement develops from their verbal interaction.

The opportunity for plays to examine the role of wit, however, does not exclude other kinds of texts from investigating the device. Some of the most provocative performances of wit unfold in novels and poetry. Renaissance poets and early novelists crafted works with remarkably clever language that still receive attention from scholars today. The wit in these texts, however, differs from similar language in plays because it conforms to the discourse of a single authorial voice. Since most novels and poems feature a central narrator who focuses the philosophy of a work, the explorative aspects of wit must correlate to his thoughts. Like the rest of the language within a work, wit from the narrator must direct the perspective and development of the contemplation or story. Even witty dialogue from characters within a text is filtered through the interpretation of the authorial voice.

This understanding of wit places a significant burden on the speaker to manage the device in conjunction with the characters, plot, and theme of a text. Additionally, the centrality of the speaker imposes a more passive role on the characters, who act as objects for the narrator to comment upon in witty language. This relationship of an active speaker to dependent characters especially manifests itself in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

In the novel, Heller demonstrates distortion of modern society through his depiction of bureaucratic corruption during the Second World War. The Air Corps base on the island of

Pianosa serves as the core setting of the novel through which other failings of society become manifest. Similar to *Hamlet* and *The Lion in Winter*, *Catch-22* features wit that displaces action or direct discourse, serving as an ineffectual remedy for the senselessness of the modern world. But unlike the two plays, in which the protagonists use their own clever language to confront their problems, Heller's novel depicts a protagonist who relies on the narrator's wit to ameliorate his circumstances. Wit in this text has a greater distance from the action, emphasizing its indirect nature. Although Yossarian demonstrates sensitivity to the inhumanity that surrounds him, he avoids danger by hiding in the hospital or the beds of acquiescent women while the narrator makes his witty assaults. Yossarian, however, cannot find veritable safety from the inane law of Catch-22 by mere evasion because he acts in the same manner as the nonsense that threatens him. Yossarian's failure to respond appropriately continues until the speaker adopts a more somber tone, exposing the true horrific nature of modernity. Only at this point does Yossarian recognize a proper heroic role and flees to Sweden as a symbolic means to combat the menace of his world. This chapter will analyze Yossarian's reliance on the narrator's wit and the consequent realization of its uselessness that prompts a more fitting desertion.

To understand Yossarian's reluctance to stand against his society, we must first recognize the narrator's use of wit to assault the insane system. The clever language of the narrator provides the only resistance to the logic of Catch-22 for more than half of the novel. Wit functions primarily to describe the senselessness with which the Americans are fighting the Second World War. One early sentence particularly illustrates the narrator's disdain: "All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind, least of all the boys who were

laying down their young lives" (19). The awkward circularity of starting and ending with the same notion of dying soldiers reflects the absurdity of the sacrifice. The narrator emphasizes the loss through his reminder of the soldiers' youth, referring to them as "boys" and using a superfluous adjective in "young lives." The passive construction of "had been told" suggests that the cultural morality of this sacrifice comes from nowhere and serves an unknown purpose. Although the language in this sentence hints at the morbid aspects of war, its witty construction approaches the horror playfully, using irony to devalue patriotism indirectly.

The narrator attacks not only the insanity of war, but also almost every other twisted aspect of modernity such as religion, McCarthyism, and medicine. The description of Major Major's father derides the growing dependency of agriculture on the government by inverting clichés that traditionally describe the hard work of farmers:

> The more alfalfa he did not grow, the more money the government gave him, and he spent every penny he didn't earn on new land to increase the amount of alfalfa he did not produce. Major Major's father worked without rest at not growing alfalfa. On long winter evenings he would remain indoors and did not mend harness, and he sprang out of bed at the crack of noon every day just to make certain that the chores would not be done. (104)

The simple, paratactic sentences impart an ironic wholesomeness to the character's torpidity. While most of the verbs for which Major Major's father is the subject have a negative before them, the narrator describes the reward from the government with a positive verb, emphasizing the injustice of the system. Moreover, the twisting of common phrases of praise for agricultural workers recalls the ideal of difficult labor from which Major Major's father abstains, augmenting the denigrating depiction of his character.

A passage of similar wit also censures the overwhelming pervasiveness of Milo Minderbinder's capitalism. As in the previous selection, the narrator's portrayal of Milo inverts traditional aphorisms of heroism to ridicule the character's marketing savvy:

> He had flown fearlessly into danger and criticism by selling petroleum and ball bearings to Germany at good prices in order to make a good profit and help maintain a balance of power between the contending forces. His nerve under fire was graceful and infinite. With a devotion to purpose above and beyond the call of duty, he had then raised the price of food in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him in order to eat. (456-7)

To illustrate modernity's erroneous praise for Milo's tyrannical capitalism, the narrator refers to selling at "good prices" to make "good profit," using the double meaning of the word "good" to indicate both a large amount and a noble pursuit. So many phrases are connected in single sentences that they almost run-on incoherently, reflecting the overwhelming and unstoppable power of Milo's marketing skills. The narrator criticizes Major Major's father and Milo in these passages, but, as in his description of war, the witty playfulness never goes beyond whimsicality to illustrate the detriment of the characters on society.

Although the narrator relies heavily on wit, he also frequently resorts to other devices of the absurd in his satire. If, as Forster and Hazlitt indicate in their definitions,* wit reveals hidden deficiencies while humor shows blatant absurdity, the narrator resorts to a combination of wit and humor in his assault. The unpretentious style of the narrator's wit veers toward humor regardless of comparison. Two passages that ridicule Colonel Cathcart for manipulating the war to advance through the ranks illustrate the speaker's different levels of amusing language. The first comes from the narrator's direct description of Cathcart, while the

* See Chapter I, pp. 10-12.

second is taken from a dialogue in which the chaplain and colonel discuss the establishment of prayer meetings before missions:

> He [Cathcart] was someone in the know who was always striving pathetically to find out what was going on. He was a blustering, intrepid bully who brooded inconsolably over the terrible ineradicable impressions he knew he kept making on people of prominence who were scarcely aware that he was even alive. (233-4)

> The chaplain felt his face flush. 'I'm sorry, sir. I just assumed you would want the enlisted men to be present, since they would be going along on the same mission.'
>
> 'Well, I don't. They've got a God and a chaplain of their own, haven't they?' [asked Cathcart.]
>
> 'No, sir.'
>
> 'What are you talking about? You mean they pray to the same God we do?'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'And He *listens*?'
>
> 'I think so, sir.'
>
> 'Well, I'll be damned,' remarked the colonel, and he snorted to himself in quizzical amusement. (240-1)

In the first passage, the narrator projects absurdity on Cathcart through the intricate manipulation of language. The contradictions of being both perceptive and oblivious and both authoritarian and obsequious situate him between two opposite poles of idiocy, illustrating the personal tension of Cathcart and enhancing the denigrating depiction of his character. The narrator loads his description of the first characteristics with adjectives, making the later

contradictions more unexpected. The second passage, in contrast, demonstrates the colonel's absurdity without much effort from the narrator, who merely recounts the dialogue. The humorous depiction of Cathcart's naiveté, however, illustrates as much ineptitude as the more skillful language. Wit and humor equally demonstrate the foolishness of the colonel. Despite the more active approach of wit, however, the depiction of Cathcart's absurdity does not deter him from his pursuit of power that endangers the lives of his subordinates.

Wit pervades *Catch-22* to such an extent that it resonates in the structure of the novel. The narrator leaps from one episode to another with no consideration for continuity or chronology. When the novel begins with Yossarian in the hospital, most of the important action has already taken place. Arranging each event chronologically, one would find the narration even defies conventions of cause and effect (Merrill 140). For example, the narrator indicates that Snowden is still alive during the mission to Bologna, yet Yossarian exhibits paranoia in this scene characteristic of his behavior after Snowden's death. Even the chapter titles that supposedly indicate a focus of discussion often fail to identify the subject matter correctly. The irregular structure resembles the unusual plays of language in wit and serves the same function.

Despite the complexity and amusement of the narrator's wit, the language can only comment on the dysfunction of modernity, failing to initiate any change. The beginning of the novel symbolically captures the ineffectiveness of wit within the text:

> It was love at first sight.
>
> The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.
>
> Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of jaundice. (7)

The initial lines contain a fragment of quizzical wit, playing on the cliché of falling in love at first sight. Yet without explaining this introduction, the narrator digresses to the main story, withholding the reason behind Yossarian's adoration for several pages. This beginning foreshadows that futility of wit in the rest of the novel. Wit yields to the substance of narration, providing amusing observations that prove as senseless as the system that the device assaults.

Because the narrator can only demonstrate the errors of the modern world without correcting them, a character within the text must act against the system to effect change. However, Heller assigns the duty of combating the law of Catch-22 to a protagonist whose interest in self-preservation leads him to evade the problems through immature actions. More than any other character in the novel, Yossarian recognizes the dangers of his society. "They're trying to kill me," Yossarian confides to Clevinger, who only rebukes his friend's paranoia (20). Yet the errant captain only responds to the threat in short-term and ineffective means of avoiding his missions. In a futile effort to cancel the mission to Bologna, Yossarian moves the bomb line on the intelligence tent map and arranges for Corporal Snark to pour laundry soap in the squadron's dinner (149 and 155). Yossarian's ability to fake a liver ailment and to see everything twice allows him to escape to the hospital frequently. The errant captain also often finds solace in the arms of sensuous women, particularly those of the coy Luciana or the voluptuous Nurse Duckett. In one instance, Yossarian sleeps with a squat maid in Snowden's bed (203). Although Snowden is still alive at the time, the act disregards the young gunner's horrific death of which the reader has already been informed. Yossarian's evasion of his duties as a protagonist is unfortunate because the reader looks to him to ameliorate the injustices of their shared society. However, because the surrounding wit identifying more

serious problems lends its whimsicality to Yossarian's evasiveness, the protagonist's actions seem less significant in comparison, allowing the reader to empathize with him.

Arguably Yossarian is aware of the narrator's wit and feels that he only needs to protect himself until the device conquers the system. Claiming that a character knows about the fictional constructs of his world certainly presents problems, but the complacency with which Yossarian avoids his enemies suggests that he recognizes an alternative force acting for him. Yossarian demonstrates his satisfaction in evasiveness by delighting in Milo's cuisine: "None of the officers in the squadron had ever eaten so well as they ate regularly in Milo's mess hall, and Yossarian wondered awhile if it wasn't perhaps all worth it. But then he burped and remembered that they were trying to kill him, and he sprinted out of the mess hall wildly" (25). Although Yossarian's indifference to the war is brief, his comfort indicates his lack of exertion to rectify his problems. A burp, perhaps reminiscent of the flak that surrounds him during his missions, reminds Yossarian that his chief concern is survival.

Throughout the greater part of the novel, Yossarian generally perceives no problem in his evasiveness, but on rare occasions senses a deficiency in his actions. This awareness becomes most apparent after Yossarian destroys the communication system in his plane to avoid flying to Bologna. Expecting to enjoy an afternoon at the beach, Yossarian instead finds himself in a disgusting environment suggestive of death's inevitability:

> Along the ground suddenly, on both sides of the path, he saw dozens of new mushrooms the rain had spawned poking their nodular fingers up through the clammy earth like lifeless stalks of flesh, sprouting in such necrotic profusion everywhere he looked that they seemed to be proliferating right before his eyes. There were thousands of them swarming as far back into the underbrush as he could see, and they appeared to

> swell in size and multiply in number as he spied them. He hurried away from them with a shiver of eerie alarm and did not slacken his pace until the soil crumbled to dry land beneath his feet and they had been left behind. (178)

The narrator refers to the growth of the fungus as "necrotic" and describes them as "lifeless stalks of flesh," phrases that recall the inescapable fate of humanity. After the word "mushrooms" appears once to describe the vegetation, the narrator uses the pronouns "they" and "them," suggesting that the growth represents a force too terrible to describe directly. Additionally, the first sentence consists of many modifiers that gradually build the horror of the growth, enhancing the sense of death's unstoppable approach.

Although death awaits the whole of humanity, the presentation of the scene suggests that the fate applies only to Yossarian. Unlike most other events in novel, which occur in objective space, this scene occurs entirely within the protagonist's perspective. Yossarian sees the growth immediately after he abandons his flight mission, suggesting that the dire end comes from the path that he has chosen. Despite the warning within his own psyche, Yossarian responds with the same evasiveness of his earlier actions, fleeing until he reaches the safety of arid land. Yossarian at some level recognizes the error of relying on the narrator's wit in place of substantial action, but in the end returns to skirting his military duties and the wit continues.

While Yossarian remains reluctant to provide meaningful action, other characters in the novel respond more appropriately in microcosmic situations. The actions of these characters serve as foils to Yossarian's evasiveness and foreshadow his eventual recognition of a heroic role. The first incident illustrates the superiority of direct discourse over the ineffectiveness of the narrator's wit as a tool for change. When Captain Black establishes his Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade, forcing the squadron to participate in endless activities to prove their patriotism,

Major – de Coverley immediately disassembles the project by commanding the mess hall officers, "Gimme eat," and refusing to sign a loyalty oath. Gary W. Davis identifies the major's order as a direct means to surmount the discontinuities of language that shape the irrational behavior of other institutions in *Catch-22*. "Major de Coverley neither argues with Black's system nor tries to outwit it. He simply denies its authority," Davis asserts (73). The major's abstinence from the kind of convoluted discourse that corrupts society allows for the victory over the system. "The Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade came to an end," says the narrator succinctly (146). The lack of any details involving the project's deconstruction emphasizes the effectiveness of the direct command.

A similar incident occurs when Yossarian informs the prostitute with whom Nately has fallen in love that her boyfriend was killed during the mission at La Spezia. Nately's beloved whore responds by attempting to stab Yossarian to death with a potato peeler. When her attempt to murder him fails, she attempts several times later in a series of ambushes. "What on earth did she want with *him*?" Yossarian wonders, illustrating his failure to comprehend the motivation for action (492). Killing Yossarian would not restore Nately, but the act is the kind of symbolic gesture that the novel holds in esteem. The assault of Nately's whore on Yossarian may not have the effectiveness of Major – de Coverley's command, but the two acts both serve as appropriate responses to the senselessness of modernity.

Yossarian only adopts a similar attitude when he can no longer rely on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator begins to strip away the wit from his observations, forcing Yossarian to assume a more proper heroic role. The narrator, however, does not entirely remove this wit at a single point in the novel, but

intermittently abstains from wit until the device vanishes from the text. The chaplain's realization of Nately's death exemplifies the exchanges between wit and more direct discourse:

> Nately was dead: the boy had been killed. A whimpering sound rose in the chaplain's throat, and his jaw began to quiver. His eyes filled with tears, and he was crying. He started on tiptoe to mourn beside him and share his wordless grief. At that moment a hand grabbed him roughly around the arm and a brusque voice demanded,
>
> 'Chaplain Shipman?' (469)

The frequent use of state-of-being verbs, the repetition of clauses with identical meaning, and the short, paratactic sentences establish simple language that contributes to the genuine depiction of grief. Abruptly following this candor, however, is a humorous scene in which an interrogation committee accuses the chaplain of stealing a plum tomato from Colonel Cathcart. I am not certain why the narrator only relinquishes his wit after intermittent renewals, or even why a narrator, who conventionally only observes the plot, would care to abstain from cleverness in any manner. Perhaps while the omniscient narrator seems only to recount events impartially, he actually has more interest in the story than he explicitly mentions. The narrator could withdraw his wit as an act of compassion for the society that he describes, hoping to instigate change by forcing the protagonist to see the horrific aspects of his world. Whatever the reason, an alteration in the narrator's style is necessary for the novel to progress.

The narrator's abstinence from wit pervades most prominently in the delineation of Yossarian's wanderings through the streets of Rome. Heller aptly names the chapter of this description "The Eternal City," recalling the city's importance in fashioning Western civilization to enhance the disdain for its modern decrepitude. As in the depiction of the

chaplain's grief for Nately, the simplicity of the sentences emphasizes the passage's directness and marks a distinct departure from the earlier wit:

> There were no lights in any of the windows. The deserted sidewalk rose steeply and continuously for several blocks. He could see the glare of a broad avenue at the top of the long cobblestone incline. The police station was almost at the bottom; the yellow bulbs at the entrance sizzled in the dampness like wet torches. (510)

The bleak imagery metaphorically evokes the inhumanity of the modern world. The only light that Yossarian sees is reflected on the road and in the bulbs in front of the police station, weakened by the rain. The ailing state of society appears more disturbing here than in other passages.

The narrator eschews wit to such an extent that when an opportunity to employ the device arises, he acknowledges the possible perception of wit in the situation and dismisses it. A gang of policemen hurls a screaming, struggling civilian into an ambulance, escorting him to an unknown destination. No one comes to the civilian's aid despite his shouts of "Police! Help! Police!" While the narrator notes the ambiguity of the words, he refrains from applying wit to draw out their absurdity:

> There was a humorless irony in the ludicrous panic of the man screaming for help to the police while policemen were all around him. Yossarian smiled wryly at the futile and ridiculous cry for aid, then saw with a start that the words were ambiguous, realized with alarm that they were not, perhaps, intended as a call for police but as a warning from the grave by a doomed friend to everyone who was *not* a policeman with a club and a gun and a mob of other policeman with clubs and guns to back him up. (515)

Admittedly the end of this passage features a refrain that recalls the earlier wit of the narrator, but on the whole the language moves away from the device by denying the humor of the event. The narrator immediately refers to the "humorless irony" of the situation, directing the reader not to find amusement in the civilian's words but to feel pity for his suffering. Calling the civilian "a doomed friend" puts him at the same level as the reader, suggesting that his fate could be ours.

The horrific description of the streets of Rome shocks Yossarian as much as the reader. If Yossarian was not aware of the narrator's earlier wit, he certainly realizes its absence now. The protagonist initially desires to respond to the ghastly environment as he did under the pretense of the narrator's wit. The above passage notes Yossarian's wry smile at the civilian's misfortune, demonstrating the errant captain's reluctance to accept the truth of its horror. Several pages before Yossarian's wanderings through Rome, the initial relinquishing of wit seems to increase Yossarian's desire for the promiscuity that he enjoyed during his earlier evasiveness: "How he yearned for both girls [Luciana and Nurse Duckett]! He looked for them in vain. He was so deeply in love with them" (435). However, after Yossarian experiences the appalling sights of the Eternal City, he becomes rightfully troubled, realizing the error of hiding from his problems in the arms of women: "The girls were all gone. The countess and her daughter-in-law were no longer good enough; he had grown too old for fun, he no longer had the time. Luciana was gone, dead, probably; if not yet, then soon enough" (517). Yossarian's resistance to realizing his society's true state slowly begins to wear down after his meanderings in the Roman streets.

Although Yossarian starts to comprehend more fully the injustices of modernity in Rome, he does not recognize an appropriate action of protest until the end of the novel.

Yossarian's slow regain of consciousness after an attack from Nately's whore parallels his gradual recognition of a proper heroic action. As Yossarian fades in and out of consciousness in his hospital bed, a variety a figures exchange places at his bedside, including Colonel Korn, Aarfy, the chaplain, and a strange man who informs Yossarian that his "pal" has been captured. This interchanging of Yossarian's companions resolves with the permanent stay of the chaplain. Since the chaplain holds a position of moral guidance for the squadron and is one of the few characters in the novel who acts with moral concern, the permanence of the character represents Yossarian's recognition of a morally appropriate path.

After learning about Orr's miraculous escape to Sweden, Yossarian decides to act against the inhumanity of the modern world by also deserting to the neutral country. Although Yossarian almost certainly will not reach his destination, his direct action symbolically works against modernity. Yossarian declares the virtues of his flight just before he leaves: "I'm not running from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (558). Unlike relying on the narrator's wit, Yossarian's desertion heroically assumes the consequences and burdens of resistance. With the protagonist's recognition of a proper remedy to his circumstances, the conflict has met its resolution and the novel ends. Unlike *Hamlet*, which ends with the tragic death of the protagonist and his family, or *The Lion in Winter*, which ends with Henry and Eleanor accepting their family's devastation, *Catch-22* ends with a promise of complete moral and social redemption.

Robert Merrill similarly argues that Yossarian's flight to Sweden provides a long-awaited moral stand in the novel that disrupts the logic of Catch-22. After resisting in futile gestures that conform to the senselessness of society, Yossarian finally acts with moral

purpose. "When he deserts, Yossarian finally does something that will affect the system: he ceases to serve it," Merrill asserts (149). Merrill further maintains that the erratic and repetitive structure of *Catch-22* contributes to the need for Yossarian's desertion. While initially the incidents in the novel seem amusing, they become more genuinely horrific as the narrator refrains from illustrating their absurdity. The gradual lessening of amusement chides the reader for enjoying the past events and encourages a demand for appropriate action. Merrill argues: "This is why one of the funniest of all novels is finally not very funny at all, for Heller arrests the reader's laughter and exposes the complacent beliefs he has shared with Yossarian" (150). In this sense, the narrator's initial wit provides an ineffectual placebo for not only the protagonist but the reader. Yossarian carries us along in his earlier beliefs, at first allowing us to accept his evasiveness. However, we also make a reversal similar to Yossarian's when he realizes a proper heroism at the end of the novel.

In *Catch-22*, Yossarian depends on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies, evading his duties as a protagonist with actions as equally asinine as the society in which he lives. The narrator's wit, however, can only comment upon the errors of modernity, failing to provide any means to alleviate them. Yossarian must recognize a proper heroic action to deliver a meaningful assault. When the narrator finally changes his tone, Yossarian realizes the horrific aspects of his world, encouraging him to take appropriate action against it. Deserting to Sweden, Yossarian takes a symbolic stance that undermines the senselessness of modernity.

Conclusion

Despite its ability to reveal absurdity, wit fails to rectify any of the problems in each of the texts that we have examined. Hamlet's witty parleys against his enemies only alert Claudius to the prince as a potential threat, initiating the tragedy of the protagonist. Henry and Eleanor apply their political aggressiveness as wit in family discourse, alienating each other and corrupting their sons. For Yossarian, wit takes the front against the insanity of the modern world while the errant captain evades his responsibilities in the beds of hospitals and sensuous women. In all three cases, the indirectness and banality of wit prevent the device from enacting positive change, proving more integral to the mode of language than the amusement and complexity that lend it such attractiveness.

The wit in these texts resonates with such cleverness that it not only appeals to fictional characters but also to the audience who experiences the device's performance. Because the texts initially present wit as a delightful means of retribution, the characters who use the clever language carry the reader along in their erroneous conception of its effectiveness. The failure of wit that later unfolds consequently educates both the fictional participants of the texts and their audience. Merrill's observation that the ending of *Catch-22* "arrests" the laughter of readers to expose their ill judgment applies to each of the texts that we have examined* (150). While the audience may enjoy or even be awed by the performance of wit, the failure of the clever language strips away this appreciation to provide a lesson in the device's finite abilities.

Through their wit, the protagonists of these texts also demonstrate an aggrandized perception of themselves in comparison to their fellow characters. Since employing wit requires significant skill with language, characters with a kind of Raskolnikov complex believe

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* See Chapter IV, pp. 68-69.

that using the device indicates their superiority over others with inadequate linguistic dexterity. A Wittenberg education or success in politics has inflated the ego of the protagonists, leading them to think that their complex response to their situations is admirable. Yet the failure that results from the characters' decisions inverts their perception of themselves, revealing that their superior response falls behind simpler solutions. Whether avenging a death, reconciling a family, or confronting a senseless society, wit proves an ironically deficient response in comparison to more direct actions.

As G. E. Lessing notes, the effort to prove one's superiority through wit detaches its user from the rest of humanity. Lessing compares the witty lament of a suffering king to the ordinary expressions of a suffering peasant woman, presenting the king's wit as an intellectual facade to the emotion that he shares with his lesser counterpart. The king receives no more pity and feels no more emotion than the woman despite his complex response. Lessing observes the king's wit as a denial of the passions that the monarch shares with humanity:

> One mustn't try to find the excuse for the witty expression of pain and sorrow in the fact that the person who uttered them was superior, well-educated, intelligent, and witty as well, *for the passions make all men again equal* [...] The peasant woman's thought is one a queen might just well have had, just as what the king said on that occasion could, and no doubt would, have been said by a peasant. (qtd. in Kierkegaard 95)

Wit masks the common emotions of not only Lessing's king but also the characters in the texts that we have examined. Their intention to demonstrate superiority becomes a gesture of separation from their humanity, exacerbating their problems.

Admittedly the evidence in the texts and the conclusions that I have drawn from them present a more negative assessment of wit than the favorable evaluations of scholars in the first

chapter. Michelson and Forster's admiration for wit finds no support in the literary texts that I have examined. Yet the failure of wit in these instances should not entirely rob the device of its enigmatic power. Wit still consists of unusual language that evokes a peculiar response in those who use and hear it. Further investigation, perhaps not in literature but in other humanities or the social sciences, could find evidence that would conflict with my depiction of wit's ineffectiveness. Such a favorable evaluation could offer a choice in the perception of the device or establish types of wit at different modes of rhetorical usefulness. Readers in their own encounters would simply have to determine for themselves which wit is which.

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