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‘The Readiness is All’: Sacrifice and Act V of *Hamlet*

This paper suggests a more nuanced understanding of the apparent contradiction between ‘action’ and ‘non-action’ in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. My reading blends the historic-theological, the ontological and the aesthetic to suggest a new interpretation of Hamlet’s decision to act in V.ii., probing the distinctions between religion, critical theory, and literature. That is, I consider the Geneva Bible’s gloss of pivotal Biblical allusions in Act V, juxtaposed with Derrida’s reading of the Old Testament tale of Abraham and Isaac in *The Gift of Death*, to suggest that Hamlet’s understanding of death in V.ii is an engagement with the wholly other analogous to “sacrifice”. In this reading of Hamlet’s decision to enter the duel with Leartes as a commitment to sacrifice, we can see a way in which the text’s aesthetic representation of ontological uncertainties can be understood against a historical backdrop specific to Renaissance culture. Like Derrida’s reading of Abraham’s sacrifice, Hamlet’s decision marks a responsibility to the wholly other that evades the temporality of the present and exceeds representation in language. Derrida points out that even though this engagement with alterity cannot be represented in language, it still evokes a responsibility to action. Though its temporality exceeds the present moment, ‘readiness’ does not signal resignation. Thus, uncertainty is not opposed to —*but the condition of*—a resolution to act in the final scene of *Hamlet*. By putting this religious text, its specific place in early-modern culture, and this particular work of critical theory into orbit with Shakespeare’s play, I suggest a new way in which possibilities of ethics and justice emerge out of the uncertainties of the text.