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## The *HyperHamlet* project

Shakespeare is alive on stage, page, and screen, but also, if perhaps less conspicuously, in the language we speak. To risk a metaphor: Like the mycelium of a fungus his phrases permeate the soil of our discourse and occasionally appear like mushrooms on its surface, when we quote his works. But we may also—perhaps more frequently—use his phrases unknowingly because they have become idiomatic or proverbial. These phrases will shape, however subtly, the way we articulate our concerns; they offer us the words that we may otherwise lack, and by doing so delimit what we can conceptualize. Adapting the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s influential study *Metaphors we live by*, in which they show how certain metaphors “structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do” (4), one might speak of “passages we live by”.

The process also works the other way round: The presence of an expression in people’s minds will affect the way they understand it when they encounter it in the work from which it is drawn. A well-read person may not be able to avoid thinking of *Tristram Shandy* when encountering the name Yorick at *Hamlet* 5.1.152.

The material is rich, and there is no space here to touch on more than one example. It suggests how quotation draws on the authority of a canonical text and, at the same time, reaffirms it. But it also shows how a quotation may become a quasi-anonymous catch phrase. In 1.1.8 Francisco thanks Barnardo for relieving him of his guard duty with the words “For this relief much thanks”. These words, marked as a quotation by their archaism, today are jocularly used when urinating (Partridge 137) but few men will have *Hamlet* 1.1 in mind when pronouncing them—but it may be the other way round when hearing them pronounced at the very beginning of a *Hamlet* performance. The phrase is listed more than 20 times in *HyperHamlet*, and the list is obviously not (can never be) complete. The key to its popularity is probably the semantic openness of the word *relief*, which is listed with ten meanings in the *OED* (the *Hamlet* passage illustrating meaning no 7). It is first recorded as a quotation in 1799, in Frederick Reynolds’ comedy *Management*, where a theatrical

audience would have been expected to recognize the quotation. The second occurrence comes from Walter Scott's diary (1826), where, explicitly referring to the play, he misquotes the phrase (obviously from memory) after having left a melancholy spell behind. In the Victorian period the phrase for many seems to have lost its close association with *Hamlet*, as references in newspapers show. In Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) Bloom, having given himself what the Victorians called *hand-relief* reminds himself of the origin of the phrase "For this relief much thanks. In Hamlet, that is." At the same time, the phrase was also used in its Shakespearean sense in the chapter heading of an autobiographical account of trench warfare in WWI. Considered in its context, each item tells us something specific about the status of *Hamlet*.

*HyperHamlet* examines Shakespeare's presence in culture(s). It is special in that it does not only address intertextuality as a principle, but also as a practice. It documents how narratives, scenes, figures, phrases and ideas from the play have entered and inhabit the discourse of periods, genres and individuals, how quotations (as well as misquotations) and allusions have shaped the play's status as a classic, and how later references have fed back into the understanding of the play.

*HyperHamlet* is both an edition and a dictionary. The edition offers a text with notes that do not tell the reader where a passage has come from (as editions commonly do), but where they have gone. As a dictionary it offers various, also advanced search options and can be used, for example, to find out which passages an author or a particular period liked to quote. The data show, for example, that *Hamlet* has entered the English language mainly since the second half of the eighteenth century, and that it was mainly the ghost scenes in the first act and the Hamlet's monologues that left their mark. The data also document how idiomatic expressions like *a sea of troubles* (3.1.59) or *my mind's eye* (1.2.185) were ascribed a Shakespearean origin and became quotations.

The corpus of about 10'000 references (and counting) comes from four main sources: a systematic search of electronic databases like *Literature Online* and the *British National Corpus*, extant annotated editions and secondary literature, and the contributions of individual readers who have suggested pas-

sages. References have systematically been collected for English, but there are also hundreds of items from other languages, especially German.

*HyperHamlet* is based at the Department of English, University of Basel, Switzerland. As people keep quoting *Hamlet*, the project is open-ended. Its website, which makes it easy to suggest new examples for inclusion, is accessible at

[www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch](http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch).

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