

# Hamlet: Rational and Emotional Units of Meaning in Four Soliloquies

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## Introduction

The idea for this paper came out of an interaction between two academics working in the separate fields of Mathematics and Drama Studies at Durban University of Technology. Our aim was to try and use a system dynamic analysis to chart the emotional and intellectual conflict within Hamlet's character, as revealed in his four principal soliloquies. To do this the first step was to attempt to quantify the extent of emotional and intellectual facets to parts of his speech. This paper gives what we think is the interesting result of this attempt.

There are numerous long speeches that Hamlet makes throughout the play to other characters, yet here he is to a large extent acting a role, aware of himself as an actor; it is only in his soliloquies, where he is alone on stage, that he is able to give full expression to his private thoughts. It is a commonplace of *Hamlet* criticism that there is a divide in Hamlet's character between "thought" and "action", a division of which he is himself aware (Pearce 63). However, in the soliloquies themselves, Hamlet is essentially involved in thought rather than action and the polarity he experiences is instead between rational thought and emotional outbursts, which find expression in short utterances like "Oh God!" or "Ha!" In contrast, his more rational thinking is usually phrased in the form of a question. Another feature of Hamlet's use of language is his tendency to repeat himself, which was first noted by A.C. Bradley (149). This tendency is particularly evident in his first soliloquy ("O that this too too solid flesh would melt..."; 1.2.129-59), where the circularity of his thought tends to reveal an obsessive and highly emotional quality. In contrast, in his last soliloquy ("How all occasions do inform against me..."; 4.4.32-66), his thought has become more linear and is less inclined to revolve on itself.

## Developing a new methodology

In order to analyse Hamlet's soliloquies, a system was devised for rating the different levels of reason and emotion evident within individual units of meaning in the soliloquies on a scale from -4 to +4, representing the extremes of reason and emotion. As a basic guide, it was necessary to provide a working definition for each of the categories:

- 4 philosophical statements
- 3 astute observations, reflections, questions
- 2 observations and descriptions
- 1 simple rational statements
- 0
- +1 self-pity, disgust
- +2 anger, exclamations
- +3 violence
- +4 confusion, delusion

The scale was devised out of a close reading of the soliloquies and, while it may be applicable to other Shakespearian characters, it is geared towards an analysis of Hamlet. For example, the first category in the emotional range, "self-pity, disgust", is an emotion characteristic of Hamlet rather than, say, Macbeth. If one was generalising the use of the scale for other characters, one

would have to find an equivalent emotion on this level, which would apply to other characters. Similarly, if one were to apply the scale to Othello's soliloquies, one would have to indicate the emotion of jealousy on the scale, an emotion which is not characteristic of Hamlet.

While we are suggesting that these scales represent a measure of increasing emotional or intellectual import, we realise that the actual numbers cannot represent quantity. They represent an ordinal scale rather than an interval scale of the measure. Thus, the absolute of 4 has more emphasis on our scale than 1, but is not necessarily four times greater.

The soliloquies referred to are: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt..." (1.2.129-59); "Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I..." (2.2.501-58); "To be, or not to be..." (3.1.56-89); and "How all occasions do inform against me..." (4.4.32-66).<sup>1</sup> In the first soliloquy, Hamlet's thinking tends towards an emotional rather than a rational extreme. He repeats himself a great deal and exclaims on a number of occasions. At this point in the play, he is not able to think logically about his predicament and his conclusion is that he needs to remain silent: "for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159). In his next soliloquy, his outbursts become even more violent, yet one is also aware of a critical mind at work – posing questions about himself in relation to his predicament, as he compares himself to the Player. In the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet's thought becomes even more reflective and philosophical. In his final soliloquy, Hamlet is once again in a highly rational, reflective mode. He is no longer circular or repetitive in his thinking and one notices his ability to pursue thoughts in a linear sequence, reaching a conclusion. The units of meaning are much longer syntactic structures.

The soliloquies were analysed using the scale and each unit of meaning was allocated a value on the scale. It should be noted that the use of this scale did not denote that the rational response of Hamlet (allocated to the minus numbers) was in any way less than the emotional response. It was simply convenient to distinguish between the two elements, rational and emotional, by using negative and positive numbers.

Adding the absolute values for sequential scores of unbroken sequences of emotional and intellectual units through the four soliloquies provides a measure of any intensifying of these emotions. One of the authors rated the different levels of emotion and reason in the soliloquies and his results are shown in Figure 1. He is designated as Reader A.

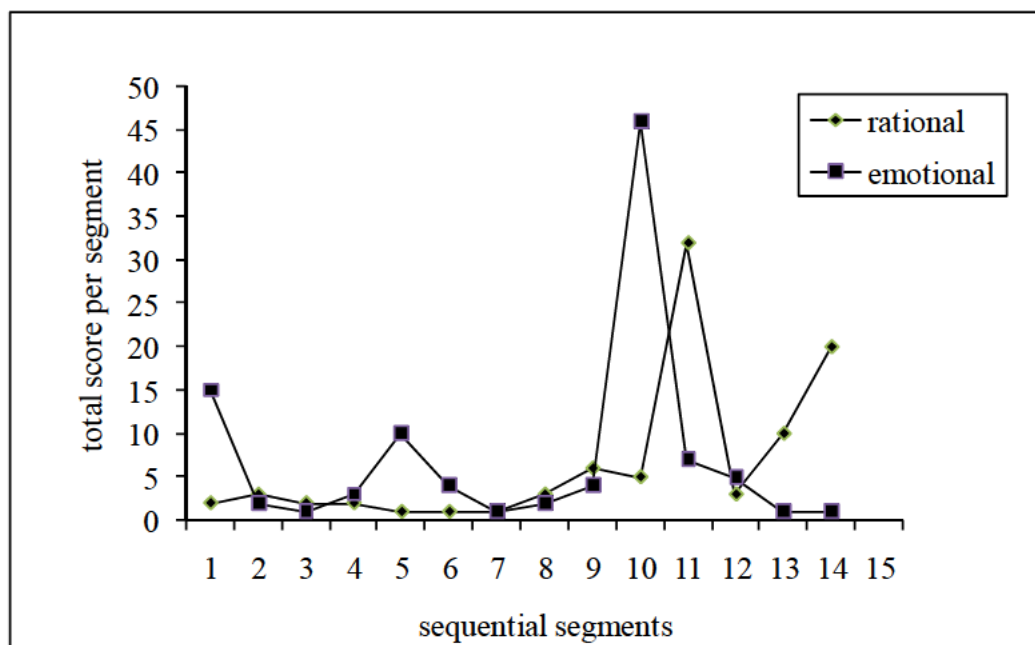


Figure 1. Summation of measures (emotional or rational) for sequential segments of unbroken sequences, using Reader A's results.

In order to try and achieve a result that was not based on only one person's reading, two other academics in the field of literary studies were asked to analyse the soliloquies using the same scale and units of meaning. They were designated Readers B and C. In view of the fact that an

actor may say the lines with varying levels of emotional intensity, it was noted that, in allocating values, the reader should not think of this in performance terms, but to rather think in terms of the levels of linguistic meaning. Using this same analysis the responses from these two other academics was very similar in proportion and outline to Figure 1, although varying in detail. Figure 2 shows results from the analysis of Reader B's data.

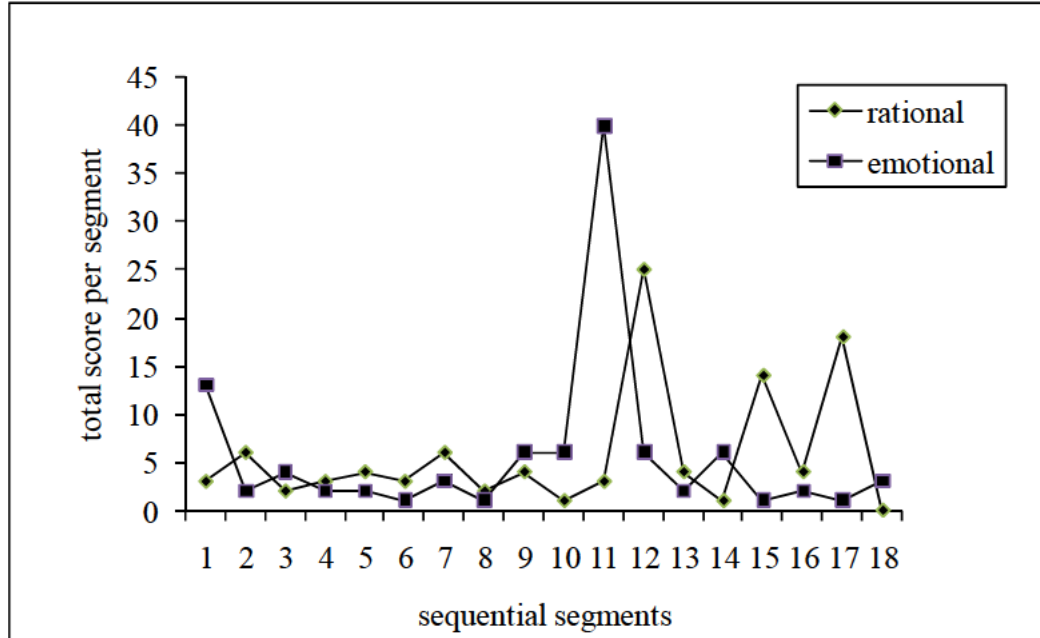


Figure 2. Summation of measures (emotional or rational) for sequential segments of unbroken sequences, using Reader B's results.

One problem with these analyses is that participants' final sequences of rational and emotional segments, while very similar, are not identical – making exact comparisons difficult. To rectify this problem, one of the participants was chosen as a benchmark for the actual length of segments. Reader B was chosen for this benchmark because he split the text into the most segments. Using his segment lengths, the summation was (re)calculated for the other two participants. Reader A's results are given again in Figure 3 and Reader C's in Figure 4.

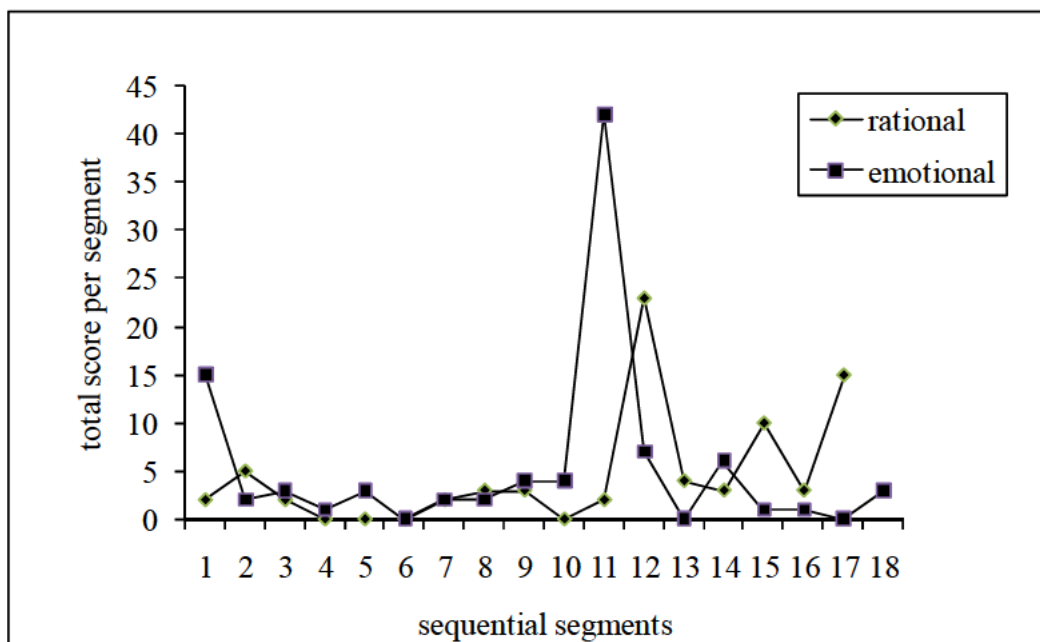


Figure 3. Summation of measures (emotional or rational) for sequential segments of unbroken sequences, using Reader A's results but according to Reader B's sequences.

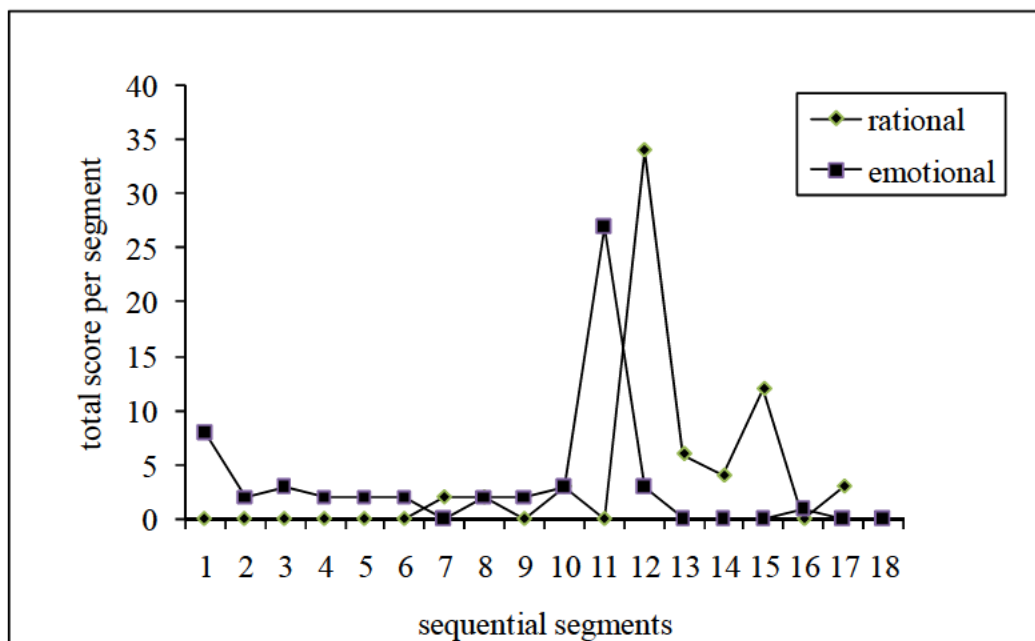


Figure 4. Summation of measures (emotional or rational) for sequential segments of unbroken sequences, using Reader C's results but according to Reader B's sequences.

In each graph there is a close correlation between emotion and reason. Two thirds of the way through the graph there is a sudden emotional “spike” immediately followed by a corresponding rational peak. All four graphs end with two further rational peaks.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? First of all, that there is a correlation between emotion and reason in Hamlet's thinking in the soliloquies; that his rational thoughts are driven by emotional responses. Furthermore, that this characteristic pattern might be taken as a signature of his character and that there is a deep structure to Hamlet's thought (one which was distinctive and apparent to three individual readers working independently). This suggests a basic stability to the character in contrast with the notion, expressed by the actor Michael Pennington, that Hamlet is a “blank sheet” on which individual actors can project their own personalities and interpretations (quoted in Rosenberg x).

Could these conclusions have been reached by more traditional methods of literary analysis? Some of them may have been previously affirmed, but a systematic analysis would not have been invented for reasons of literary analysis. The scale used here was unique, while the methodology utilised enabled a deep structure to be uncovered – a structure which is independent of any one particular reading.

## Discussion

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), observes the similarity between Hamlet and the Dionysian man (46). In seeing Hamlet as a Dionysian figure rather than as an Apollonian one, Nietzsche recognises that Hamlet's character is driven by an emotional response rather than simply by intellect or reason. Perhaps it is this Dionysian quality which gives the character what Auerbach describes as “a demonic aura” (329). Yet he is also preeminently a reflective character – although not simply a dreamer. Harold Bloom, describing Nietzsche's view of Hamlet, characterises him “not as the man who thinks too much but rather as the man who thinks too well” (193). The intellectual aspect of Hamlet's thought is a response to emotion, an attempt to take control through reason of his extreme emotional states.

Our research tends to confirm Nietzsche's perception regarding Hamlet: that he is driven first and foremost by his emotions and that his rational perceptions are a response to his emotions. This contrasts significantly to characters in dramatic literature who are driven by reason – such as Pentheus in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, who attempts to prevent the worship of Dionysus – yet who become ruled by their emotions or passions. Another example is Antonio in *Measure for*

*Measure*, who in suppressing his passions and censuring the behavior of others, reveals his own hypocrisy through his lustful response to Isabella. Malvolio too, in *Twelfth Night*, concerned with social decorum and order, becomes subject to emotions which he has repressed. Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* is also an example of an Apollonian character, unable to recognise or sympathise with Antigone's perspective until he has himself become a victim of the tragedy.

Jonathan Uffelman, referring to four possible answers to the question of Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius, as identified and dismissed by Bradley, presents his own view which links in with our argument in this paper: "The premise ... is that Hamlet delays because he is a law student. Hamlet questions, equivocates, and demands proof before he ultimately achieves his ends. Most importantly, Hamlet deeply distrusts his emotions and works to suppress them" (Uffelman 1727). While one might agree with this, it is also true that Hamlet does not suppress his emotions in the soliloquies and that he allows himself full expression of these emotions, especially in the earlier two soliloquies; it is once these emotions have been expressed that his reason asserts itself and takes control of his emotion. This is different to other moments in the play where Hamlet appears to be momentarily out of emotional control, such as when he slays Polonius.

Eric Levy, however, points to instances in which Hamlet uses reason in order to motivate emotion:

We reach now a central paradox in Hamlet's character. On the one hand, he allows emotion to provoke him to unthinkingly violent action, as when stabbing blindly at the figure hidden behind the arras or grappling with Laertes. But on the other hand, Hamlet so little trusts emotion to prod him to action that he even invokes the opposite tactic of exploiting thought as a goad of emotion: "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (4.4.66). Here blood and judgment are to be commedled not, as in Horatio's case, by the rational control of emotion, but by the rational arousal of emotion. Instead of disciplining emotion, here the function of thought is to excite emotion so that irrational violence results.

(Levy 83-95)

However, the occasions when reason is used to motivate emotion in terms of violence (as distinct from enacting emotion through exaggerated performance) are relatively infrequent compared to the number of times in the soliloquies when it is emotion that precedes and appears to motivate reason.

Levy traces the theme of the relation between emotion and reason in the play, which goes well beyond their relationship in Hamlet's own character. It is a dominant theme in *Hamlet*, announced in the opening act with the appearance of the Ghost, "a figure whom Horatio eventually associates with a threat to the 'sovereignty of reason' (1.4.73)" (Levy 83). He writes: "Thus as formulated on the platform, the fundamental danger posed to reason in the world of the play is that it might lose sovereignty over emotion" (95). Hamlet himself emphasises the need to control passion on many occasions in the play, as Levy notes.

The moment cited by Levy, when Hamlet reaches the point of invoking reason to motivate emotion ("My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth"; 4.4.66), occurs well into the fourth act of the play and at the very end of the sequence of four soliloquies which we have discussed. At this point in the play, Hamlet's rational thought is at last able to align itself with his emotions. He is no longer in conflict or distrustful of his emotions and, for the remainder of the play – when he reappears in Act 5 – he is masterly in his control of emotions. Yet there is a momentary emotional outburst at the funeral of Ophelia when he suddenly realises that she has died and he grapples with Laertes. Although the word "madness" is used by Gertrude to describe his behaviour, Hamlet's reaction to Ophelia's death is a natural response, indicating the depths of his grief. By the end of the scene he has reestablished a sense of balanced control over his emotions. The scene indicates that Hamlet's sense of rational control is in no way unresponsive to the loss he feels at Ophelia's death. In fact, Hamlet is able to trust his emotions in this circumstance, publicly announcing his identity: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.224). He no longer has any fear that his emotions are misleading him and he is able directly to challenge the

Danish court. Compared to Laertes, his emotions are not excessive, and in fact he rightly criticises Laertes for excessive emotion.

Our thinking in this paper is in line with Uffelman's argument that Hamlet's reasoning does not conform to the Aristotelian ideal of being 'free from passion', as legal reasoning dictates and which Uffelman challenges. In fact, Hamlet's reasoning is informed by and stimulated by his emotions. It is through his human empathy and compassion that he reaches towards rational judgments. This is a view of reasoning which challenges the way we understand emotion as a positive rather than a negative factor in Hamlet's identity.

Returning to an earlier phase in the development of Hamlet as a canonical character, Michael Davies has written about the first 'criticism' of Hamlet, which appears in the form of a parody of the character in Ben Jonson's play *Eastward Ho* (1604-05), where Hamlet appears as a "frantic footman" (1). Davies writes: "Like his tragic twin, footman Hamlet cannot keep still either: it is Hamlet's own frenetic footmanship – chasing after ghosts and leaping around graveyards – that this footman mimics and which thus defines both characters alike" (3). Davies uses this analogy, originally drawn by Jonson and his collaborators, to discuss and analyse Hamlet's character in relation to later criticism; he defines Hamlet as a "character on the run" (Davies 25-28). This perception relates to our own research, which tends to suggest that Hamlet's character is defined in terms of his reason being "on the run" from his emotions. Hence, Hamlet is constantly trying to keep one step ahead of his emotions and his rational thinking is an adaptive response to his intense emotional responses. His rational thinking is often at its most heightened immediately following an intense emotional expression. In this sense, the character is entirely different from other major Shakespearean tragic heroes such as Othello, Macbeth and King Lear, who in their different ways are governed by their emotions. Hamlet would immediately mistrust the false evidence presented by Iago, would be increasingly suspicious of witchcraft (unlike Macbeth) and would see through the emotional manipulation which Lear is presented with at the very opening of *King Lear*. Where each of these characters show a descent from a state of reason to that of 'madness', where emotion governs action, Hamlet consistently demonstrates a rational response to emotion. It was Bradley who said that the heroes of *Hamlet* and *Othello* are "so unlike that each could have dealt without much difficulty with the situation which proved fatal to the other" (Bradley 174). Indeed, this is true of Hamlet in relation to *Macbeth* and *King Lear* as well. Whereas the characters of Othello, Macbeth and King Lear are "on the run" from rational thought, Hamlet is "on the run" from his emotions. He is the Dionysian character who seeks the escape of reason.

This research began as an empirical study but has developed into a conceptual one, questioning a central assumption in Shakespeare criticism: the modern view of Hamlet that he is a contradictory character, an enigma. Robin Headlam Wells writes: "*Hamlet* has the reputation of being Shakespeare's most enigmatic play. Even Hamlet himself provocatively challenges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to pluck out the heart of his mystery (3.3.353-54)" (64). The problem in relation both to the play and to the central character is compounded by the fact that there are three distinct and contradictory original texts and a myriad of solutions to the textual problems surrounding the play. As far as the character of Hamlet is concerned, there has been no satisfactory conclusion to the questions of whether he delays, or why he delays; to what extent he is insane, or simply feigning madness; and whether Hamlet is noble, or cruel and callous.<sup>2</sup>

Rosenberg describes the character's "asymmetry" in terms of a series of contradictions (ix-x). This view of Hamlet as essentially contradictory, an enigma, is echoed through many critical commentaries – such that a modern editor of the play like Jonathan Bate, in discussing Hamlet's character, provides the reader more with an overview of how differently authors and critics have perceived him than with a consistent view (13). Our own view is that, in spite of these many contradictions, there is nevertheless an underlying 'signature' to the character based on the consistent response of his rational judgment to his emotions. The character is "on the run" then, not – as the parody would have it – in a physical sense, but in an intellectual one. Our research confirms Nietzsche's perspective and tends to refute the modern relativistic view that Hamlet's character is defined by inconsistency. It would appear that Nietzsche's viewpoint is verifiable today and is not simply a reflection of late nineteenth-century thought.

There were, however, inevitably certain limitations to this study. It was a preliminary study that will hopefully lead to further enquiries of this nature. One criticism of our approach might be that it has treated Hamlet as a psychological case study, focusing on the character and the speeches outside of the dramatic context of the play; this problem could be addressed by future studies. It also might be argued that there are defining features of Hamlet's language other than 'reason' and 'emotion' – for example, David Schalkwyk sees a dialectic in Hamlet's thought between interiority and performance, or "privacy" and "theatricality" (102). Future studies may also take into account how the focus on reason and emotion in Hamlet may relate to the world of Renaissance thought, influenced by the medieval doctrine of the Four Humours, with the idea that Hamlet's emotions are governed by a prevailing 'humour'.<sup>3</sup> The dialectic between reason and emotion in Hamlet refers to a more modern post-Cartesian conceptual framework, yet it is nevertheless a defining feature of Hamlet's identity.

## Conclusion

Beginning with an attempt to chart the rational and emotional extremes in Hamlet's character through four soliloquies, our research found that our own results were verifiable through a comparison of the results of two other literary academics who rated the levels of emotional and rational response in similar ways. Given that so much *Hamlet* criticism is riddled with contradictions and disagreement, it was surprising to find that a consensus could be achieved. This suggests that our method of rating the different levels can provide a measure of objectivity in a subjective and relativistic field. The results also pointed to an important conclusion: with Hamlet, emotion precedes reason and Hamlet's reason is stimulated by his emotion. We conclude that this basic pattern, indicated in the graphs, is a signature of his character.

## NOTES

1. Line references are given as in Edward Phillips's New Cambridge Shakespeare edition. The RSC Shakespeare edition by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen does not include the fourth soliloquy except in an appendix entitled, "Second Quarto Passages that do not appear in the Folio" (147-48).

2. See Morris Weitz (203-14) for an account of the issues in Hamlet criticism over which there has been often violent disagreement.

3. See Lily Campbell's earlier account of emotion in Shakespeare's tragedies, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion*.

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