A paper prepared for presentation at the 2008 conference of the ACTC:

"Hamlet, Core Texts, and the Interrogative Mode"

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You'll remember the statement of the conference theme: "Who Are We? Old, New, and Timeless Answers from Core Texts." That's certainly what I thought it was all about forty-plus years ago when I began to teach. I'd been learning answers to questions—questions about the literature I was studying. Now it was up to me to see to it that my students learned those answers, too. I would teach by sharing the answers I had learned with them. And how? Why by telling them the answers, of course. I lectured. They listened and learned.

And now? Forty-plus years later? I've come a long way baby (and since it's a long way towards a pedagogy that might be considered feminist in its focus on discussion in a student-centered classroom, the catch phrase is probably appropriate). I no longer think it's all about the answers. I think that in fact it's all about the questions—like the questions that emerged as I reconsidered the answers I thought I'd arrived at long ago—the questions that emerged as I taught texts which and students who forced me to reconsider the answers I thought I'd arrived at long ago. I know now that texts (and especially texts fine enough to be considered core texts) typically do raise more questions than they answer. I'd argue that the greatness of the Great Books more often resides in their refusal to answer questions than in their

insistence on doing so. They rather offer possibilities than assert certainties, open minds than close them. And they've long since opened my mind to the need to teach them in a way that accords their capacities along these challenging lines respect. They've helped me transform my teaching from the declarative to the interrogative mode—so much more suitable to the complexities of the texts and the simplicities of too many reader responses to them. As my pedagogy has shifted from lecture to discussion and, more recently, to student-facilitated discussion, with the students responsible for asking such questions as I used to ask and responsible for answering those questions, too, of course, I and my students have come increasingly to appreciate the way the best texts do themselves ask questions, not least by providing answers to those questions that are decidedly questionable.

Now, let me get specific, as we're supposed to do in these papers. Let me turn to the text that may be the best of the "best texts" that "do themselves ask questions." Let me turn to . . . duh, duh, dummmmm . . . a dark night in a castle that knows how to keep its secrets where one man is still trying to (say it with me) find the answers to life's persistent questions. I'm talking about Hamlet, of course. The guy who was noir centuries before Garrison Keillor was even a twinkle in his daddy's eye. The play begins with one of the most persistent questions of all—for Hamlet, for everyone else in the world of the play, and for us, as well—"Who's there?" And the next line offers an answer that's not an answer: "Nay. Stand and unfold yourself." In other words, "Back atcha." "Who am I? Nay. Who are you?"

It has often been observed that there could hardly be a better opening for this play in which questions of just this sort do dominate the lives of everyone living through it (or not living through it, as the case may be). And, of course, questions of just this sort dominate our experience of the play, as well. Hamlet isn't the only one seeking answers about all those with whom he interacts. We're doing the same. We, too, are trying to determine the truth about the Ghost, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (or Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, *pace* Tom Stoppard). And like them, all of them, we, too, are trying to determine the truth about Hamlet. Who's there? Can we "pluck out the heart of his mystery," the "heart" of anybody's "mystery"?

I find my students often think so—as I did myself once upon a time. Those who've studied and/or seen the play before often arrive in my classes with answers about Hamlet (Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play) already formulated in their minds. Moreover, they and the students who are coming to the play for the first time often are unaware that their opinions about the play *are* opinions, answers to questions that might well be asked. They tend to take assumptions for truths, for matters of fact rather than results of reasoning processes that have not in fact been particularly reasonable. They tend to assume that the Ghost *is* the ghost of Hamlet's father, for example. And they tend to assume all sorts of other things—all sorts of opposite other things. Which is why it's such fun—such instructive fun—to get them together and to get them talking—about Hamlet himself and about all of the other characters in the play about whom it's so difficult to see "Who's there?" It's not long

before they at least begin to see that views other than their own are possible—and that they've been begging lots of "questions to be asked."

Questions about Claudius. Does he love Gertrude? And if so, what sort of love might that be? Does she love him? And if so, what sort of love might that be. Was she complicit in the murder he committed? If not, has she since become aware of what he did? Does Hamlet's suggestion that someone (or perhaps some two) have "killed a king" get through to her at all? Does anything else he says in the closet scene get through to her at all? What are we to make of her behavior afterwards? And speaking of love, does she love Hamlet? And how much? Too much? And he her? Too much? Is there something oedipal going on or not? And how about Hamlet's love for Ophelia—if it is love, that is? And hers for him—if it is love? There's the way each behaves to the other at various points in the play—as well as the way they might have behaved in the past. What are we to make of his visit to her closet, his later insistence that she "get [her] to a nunnery," his challenge to Laertes at her grave? And what are we to make of Polonius' reaction to the relationship of these two young people? Is he a loving father, trying to protect his innocent child? Is he a wily politician, trying to use that child to advance his own far-from-innocent ambitions? Or is he perhaps a foolish old fart who only thinks he's a loving father and/or a wily politician? Or, or, or. Because there are other possibilities, too. Once again, "Who's there?" And whoever's there, does he deserve what happens to him? And do we approve Hamlet's assertion that he does—and Hamlet's assertion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserve what happens to them, as well?

You know the questions the play generates as well as I do, I am sure. And you know that these are only a few of them. Why, I haven't even mentioned such major questions as those that involve Hamlet's sanity—questions that have issued in centuries of argument such that one observer has asked a question of his own: "Are Hamlet's critics mad—or only pretending to be so?"

Well, if I can get my students arguing—about that or about anything else in the play—I feel like my work is done. I feel like *its* work is done. I, it, we have challenged their assumptions, insisted that they interrogate the text (and themselves). It's all about the questions that emerge in the course of class discussion—discussion of the play on the page, and just as important, discussion of the play on the stage, in live productions and film productions that we can compare and contrast and in scenes that the students enact themselves. It's all about the questions. And it's all about the discovery that answers to these questions may have to remain provisional, satisfactory for the sake of a particular performance, perhaps, but not for all performances, not for all time. And then there's the related discovery that that's all right—that that is, indeed, wonderful.

In conclusion, I'd simply say or say simply what I've come to believe—what teaching *Hamlet* has taught me—that work with such a play—and with other texts, core texts, of comparable complexity—is an excellent means to the end of that capacity for critical thinking—thinking in the interrogative mode—that is the primary end of

liberal arts education—thinking that involves, that *must* involve, "Old, New, and Timeless" questions before it can ever yield the "Old, New, and Timeless Answers" referred to in the statement of the 2008 ACTC conference theme.