

# Is There a Person in This Text?

## *Hamlet and Its Problems*

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Stanley Fish's famous question (Fish 303) was never answered, and it is unlikely that my rephrasing of it with respect to Shakespeare's most enigmatic play-text will meet with better fortune. Of all the ghosts that haunt the *Hamlet* text, the most persistent is the ghost of consciousness, or of the early modern person, conceived, to use Clifford Geertz's description, as a 'bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole, and set contrastively against other wholes and against a social and natural background.' Geertz calls this 'a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures' (Geertz 229). Yet despite its peculiarity, this notion of the person has proved to have a remarkably durable association with Shakespeare's melancholy prince, allowing him to function as a means by which later writers might project their own ideas of personhood—or their ideas of their own personhood, like Coleridge, who said 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.' (Coleridge 531)<sup>1</sup> Hamlet's world-weariness and apparent procrastination bred the phenomenon of *Hamletisme*, associated with Mallarmé's generation in France (Taupin 432), linked by Freud to an unresolved Oedipus complex (Freud 299), and taken by the South African psychoanalyst Wulf Sachs as shorthand for 'a universal phenomenon symbolizing indecision and hesitancy where no action is required' (Sachs 176). Such readings of *Hamlet*, discredited by a general assault on 'character-criticism' in the first half of the twentieth century, are now under fresh attack from a range of critics newly