



ISSN: 2044-4095

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Title: *Mason & Dixon and Hamlet*
Date: 2014
Volume: 2
Issue: 2
URL: <https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/57>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v2.2.57>

Abstract:

Although there is no explicit comparison in *Mason & Dixon* of the astronomer protagonist Charles Mason to the eponymous hero of Shakespeare's masterpiece, indisputable references to the play are to be found in the novel. Mason is endowed with qualities which mirror Hamlet's virtues and vices: he is a leader and a man of education and wit, though his metaphysical longings entice him towards madness and suicide. He is emburdened with a deep melancholy stemming from bereavement, loss of love, the hauntings of a ghost, indecision, even cowardice and frustrated ambition.

Introduction

The year 2013 saw the 250th anniversary of the beginning of the drawing of the Mason-Dixon Line that now defines the border of Pennsylvania and Maryland—it took four years— so it is not inappropriate to dedicate a few words to the novelised version of the drawing of the Line made by Thomas Pynchon in 1997.¹ The problem between the two colonies arose because English kings (who were obviously not alone in this) were in the habit of giving land in exchange for support and services rendered, which, in this case, was translated into “handing out huge tracts of American wilderness to their court favorites”, as William Ecenbarger puts it in his *Walkin’ the Line: A Journey from Past to Present along the Mason-Dixon* (2000, 15). He goes on to explain this particular dispute:

So it was that in 1632 King Charles I favored Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore and a Catholic, with a large grant north of Virginia. Calvert named the area Maryland in honor of Charles’s Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria. The charter set the northern boundary of Maryland as the fortieth degree of latitude.

In 1681, King Charles II gave William Penn a huge tract of land in America whose southern boundary was the fortieth degree of latitude. In a separate grant, Penn also received the so-called Three Lower Counties that now comprise the state of Delaware. The northern border of the Three Lower Counties was to be part of a circle drawn at a twelve-mile radius from the courthouse at New Castle.

The southern border of the main Penn grant (now Pennsylvania) was to extend along the fortieth degree of latitude until it intersected with the circular boundary. This was the big problem –for the fortieth parallel ran some thirteen miles north of the circle and at no point intersected. In other words, it was mathematically, geographically,

and physically impossible for both proprietary families to have the land stated in their charters. (*ibid.*)

The proprietors and their descendents wrangled over the issue for three generations, until the king (by this time King George II) ordered the two sides to come to an agreement. The case went through the courts in England in 1750. The compromise reached called upon local surveyors, three for each side, to draw up a specific boundary for the problem area. A decade later, the new line had still not been drawn, so the Royal Observatory was consulted and they recommended two English scientists: astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon. Ecenbarger tells how the enterprise, which was to take almost five years, began and how it required Mason's star-gazing skills and Dixon's on-the-ground surveying techniques to bring it to completion:

A contract was drawn up in 1763, and it was signed by the grandsons of William Penn and by Frederick Calvert, the sixth Lord Baltimore. Mason and Dixon arrived in Philadelphia on November 15, 1763, and got down to business immediately. For most of the Line, they worked in short bursts of about ten miles, calibrating their position and direction by the stars and then measuring on the ground with rods and chains. (16)

Since Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* is historical metafiction, his protagonists are real historical figures but fictionalised quite freely within the limits of the known facts of their lives, such as their dates and family details. The mix of history and fiction in historical metafiction requires us to focus not only on what may have happened, what these historical figures may or may not have contributed to history, but, as Linda Hutcheon explains, on how they were recorded, from what point of view and why, as many special interests may be involved: "What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past [...] In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'" (1988, 89). What we normally assume about historical statements, their "objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of narration" (90) is challenged. "History is not Chronology [...] nor is it Remembrance [...] History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other" writes the Rev. Cherrycoke (*M&D*, 349).

The textual ingredients, systems and processes that go into Pynchon's novel include an important intertext, Charles Mason's Journal of the cutting

of the Line, as well as the documents involved and historical accounts of both British and American origin. This material, what one might call authentic texts from a variety of sources and points of view, is dovetailed by Pynchon with fictitious versions such as the Reverend Cherrycoke's account of the events.

The bare bones of the matter are that Mason was an astronomer from south-west England and Dixon a surveyer from the north, and with this geographical and professional dichotomy, Pynchon sets the foundation for a series of binaries that forms part of the characterisation, and indeed, narrative structure of the novel. Mason and Dixon are differentiated by their professions, their contacts, religion (High or Low Church); but when it comes to their tastes (tea or coffee; wine or beer) and attitudes towards life (see Wallhead 2003), Pynchon has begun to show a free hand and to fabricate. Dixon, apparently single, is affable and optimistic. Mason, a widower, is quite the opposite. Their growing friendship is one of the backbones of the narrative structure as, although they are opposites, they become close friends: Menand calls the novel "a buddy story" (1997, 24). They even exchange some of their characteristics, undergoing a sort of mutual osmosis, as Coale puts it: "such polarized characters practically demand to be 'postmodernly' deconstructed, as Pynchon slowly dismembers them and reveals Mason's lighter and Dixon's darker side. Opposites merge, as both men long for revelation of some kind" (2005, 168).

A first reading of *Mason & Dixon* can leave one with the impression that Mason, with his melancholy and frustrated ambitions, is a sort of postmodern Enlightenment Hamlet figure. However, a closer scrutiny of the novel reveals that nowhere in the story, as told by its general narrator, the Rev. Cherrycoke, and others, is Mason seen *explicitly* as Hamlet, either by himself or by any of his companions. All the same, since there are indisputable references to Shakespeare's play, and we must accept *Hamlet* as an important intertext, in this study I venture to set out those qualities we find in Mason that mirror Hamlet's virtues and vices. Firstly, I discuss those references and their implications. Secondly, I examine the characterisation of Mason and his interrelations with the other characters to test for the presence of attributes in common with the Prince of Denmark. For although on less steady ground here, in that the comparisons are only implicit, Mason is endowed with positive and negative characteristics similar to those of the prince: he may not be of the upper classes —indeed, this is one of the bones of contention regarding his professional ambitions— but he is a leader and a man of education and wit, though his metaphysical longings entice him towards madness and suicide, as he is emburdened with a deep

melancholy stemming from bereavement, loss of love, the hauntings of a ghost, indecision, even cowardice, and, most acutely, frustrated ambition. Thirdly, I offer some suggestions as to why Pynchon would be interested in making such a comparison, both as part of his creation of the character and as part of the narrative technique, which, like previous Pynchon novels, derives its richness from a network of associations. Finally, I attempt to tie in this rewriting of Hamlet with Pynchon's discussion of American history, its roots in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe and its future built upon these foundations.

I. References to Hamlet

There are at least three references in *Mason & Dixon* to Shakespeare's tragedy. Two are explicit, and the third is so obvious that no prompt is needed. In the latter, with the mere mention of the word "arras", we know we are with Hamlet, killing Polonius behind the tapestry, mistaking him for his uncle Claudius, the king. Mason explains to Dixon:

"The Clothiers had made of children my Age Red Indians, spying upon them from the Woodlands they thought were theirs. We call'd them 'the White People,' and the House they liv'd in, 'the Big House.' Splendid boyhood, you might say, but you'd be wrong, —what I had imagin'd a Paradise proving instead but the brightly illustrated front of the Arras, behind which all manner of fools lay bleeding, and real rats swarm'd, their tails undulating, waiting their moment. I discover'd the Rulers who do not live in Castles but in housing less distinct, often unable to remain past Earshot of the Engines they own and draw their Power from [...]" (*M&D*, 313).²

One wonders what Mason is talking about, and what Polonius has to do with the enterprise of cutting the "Visto", the eight-yard swath which was to become known as the Mason-Dixon Line³. The connection is between weaving⁴ and power. The arras of *Hamlet* is related to the clothing manufacturers in Mason's home town of Stroud at the time of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. Mason's youthful memories (he was seventeen), are of the poor weavers rising up on behalf of the Jacobites against the English. Most people in Scotland and Wales (Stroud in Gloucestershire being near the Welsh border), Catholics and High Anglicans (like Mason's family) sympathised. Following the logic of the old adage, "my enemy's enemy is my friend," Mason and Dixon are discussing America as being yet another connection that brings up the great themes of politics, commerce, religion and power play (also music and sex: "I was expell'd from Paradise by Wolfe and his Regiment.

One Penetration, and no Withdrawal could ever have Meaning,” notes Mason bitterly, *ibid.*)⁵ As Stacey Olster points out: “For all Mason’s assumption that astronomy removes him from politics, as occurs when he leaves Stroud to work with Bradley the year of the 1756 riots, his application of astronomy in the colonies is very much a political activity, promoting as it does the interests of British colonial hegemony [...]” (2004, 5).

In terms of form rather than content, there may be another connection here, and that is Henry Fielding. Fielding must have been an important model for Pynchon’s pseudo-18th-century prose (indeed, *Tom Jones* is referred to on page 117), and not only did he write about the tortuous slowness of 18th-century sea travel in his *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755), but he also edited the satirical weekly *The Jacobite’s Journal* (1747).

Of the two explicit references to *Hamlet*, the first turns out not to be a reference at all, it is one of Pynchon’s pseudo-references or a non-reference.⁶ After Mason’s return from America, because, against his conscience as a “Lunar” or “Lunarian” —those astronomers who believed in the determination of longitude by observations of the moon’s position as opposed to reference to clock time— he has been put in charge of the “Harrison Watch”. This is presumably John Harrison’s famous No. 4 marine chronometer, which would eventually, years later than was due, win part of the Board of Longitude’s £20,000 prize for an accurate chronometer for sea voyages. Maskelyne is therefore on his honour not to cheat by manipulating the watch. Driven almost insane by the pressure, Maskelyne takes to addressing the watch, locked in its case. He is thought to be heard saying: “‘Were Honor nought but Honor’s Honor kept’”, with the rhyming couplet either as repartee from the watch, or completed by Maskelyne himself: “‘All Sins might wash away in Tears unwept’” (*M&D*, 728). A “room-steward” at Maskelyne’s chambers remarks to Mason: “‘Couldn’t believe it [...] like watching Hamlet or something, isn’t it?’” (*ibid.*). Indeed, it is the “or something”, because it is not *Hamlet*; the only thing from *Hamlet* here is the room-steward’s name: Gonzago. Pynchon has named him after the Duke Gonzago, who is murdered in “The Mouse Trap”, the play Hamlet arranges to be performed to touch the conscience of Claudius. Indeed, “All Sins might wash away in Tears unwept” sounds like Claudius praying but finding himself unforgiven, yet it is not.

The other explicit reference to *Hamlet* comes in a discussion among the Cherrycoke family members about history and its relation to truth and fact, and their relation to narrative and literature. We readers see it as Pynchon gathering some 18th-century characters together for a postmodern discussion

of versions of history and history as discourse or text. Namedropping goes on amongst the brothers and their children, from Herodotus and Aesop to Gibbon, Dr Johnson and Walpole, until they settle upon the question of Shakespeare. After their dismissal of the *Henry* and *Richard* plays as “make-believe History” and “theatrical rubbish” (351), thus reflecting Shakespeare’s supposed fall from grace in the 18th century, the erotic undercurrents between the cousins, Tenebrae and Ethelmer, orchestrated by their voyeuristic uncle, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, focus upon *Hamlet*:

“Aye, and *Hamlet*?” suggests the Revd., staring carefully at the youngsters in turn.

Her eyes a lash’s width too wide, perhaps, “Oh, but Hamlet wasn’t real, was he?” not wishing to seem to await an answer from her Cousin, yet allowing him now an opening to show off.

Which Ethelmer obligingly saunters into. Of course he has the *Data*. “All in all, a figure with an interesting Life of his own, —alas, this hopping, quizzing, murderously irresolute Figment of Shakespeare’s, has quite eclips’d for us the man who had to live through the contradictions of his earthly Life, without having it all re-figur’d for him.”

“Then did he ‘really’ have a distant cousin named Ophelia,” Tenebrae inquires, a shade too softly to be heard by any but Ethelmer, “and did he, historically, break her Heart?”

“More likely she was out to break his, —being his foster-sister actually, working on behalf of his enemies, tho’ with no success. A minor figure, who may have charm’d Shakespeare into giving her more lines than she merits, but who does not charm the disinterested Seeker.”

“Did he love anyone, then? besides himself, I mean”

“He ended up marrying the daughter of the English King, ’s a matter of fact, and later, in addition, the quite intimidating Hermuthruda, Queen of Scotland.”

“What about that stage strewn with Corpses?” wonders Uncle Lomax.

“Two wives!” (352)

Two wives is, in fact, one of the things the historical Hamlet and Charles Mason have in common. They are both real people who end up in a work of literature, and readers are interested in the interplay between the “real”

Hamlet, the “real” Charles Mason, and their literary recreations. Also, the use of the word “eclips’d” to underline the difference between the fictional Hamlet and the Hamlet of history, or previous versions, is not innocent, given that Mason spends a lot of his time observing eclipses. For Ethelmer, the rational, 18th-century “disinterested Seeker”, as he describes himself, fact is more important; for Tenebrae, she of the gothic name, already looking ahead towards Romanticism (see Collado Rodriguez 1999 on reason versus imagination in this regard), feelings and sentiment come before reason; hence her innuendo: through asking about Hamlet’s love, she is really asking Ethelmer if he is romantically interested in *her*, his cousin. Historical records —births, marriages and deaths, and in the case of Mason, official documents related to the institution of the Royal Society, and the reports of the Astronomer Royal— are the bare bones which the playwright or novelist embellishes, and in these postmodern times, we know we must distrust even what is held to be historical fact, and neither have we yet outlived Romanticism.

II. Charles Mason and Hamlet: the creation of character

The ghost of Rebekah, Mason’s first wife, calls him “Mopery” (165 & 409)⁷, and there are about a dozen references to his melancholy (e.g. 25, 61, 72, 165, 272, 290, 300, 312, 316-7, 409, 436, 675 & 762). The Dutch at the Cape see him as “Mason the widower with that Melancholick look” (61), and he himself acknowledges it: “Go ahead, but don’t expect me to ascend wearily out of my Melancholia just so ev’rybody else can have their own idea of a good time [...]” (272). He even cultivates it: “But Mason can ever locate those spaces most fertile for the husbanding of Melancholy” (290). It is suggested at the end that, in spite of marrying again and fathering another five children (or is that *because of* ?) Mason eventually died, in America, of melancholy (762).

At the time of Mason and Dixon’s work on the “Visto”, inhabitants of the colonies did not yet see themselves as American, though Pynchon suggests at the end that Mason’s children by Rebekah would come to consider themselves American. In the course of the novel, however, the Englishness of the two men is often accentuated, and Mason’s melancholy may be part of this lack of optimism in the new country. Moreover, certain forms of melancholy were considered for a long time to be specifically English: Boissier de Sauvages wrote of “Melancholia anglica ou toedium vitae” (t. VII, 366). George Cheyne, in his 1733 study, *The English Malady*, begins his work of classification by saying that this allegation comes from foreigners, not from

the English themselves. It is attributed to a number of factors: the humidity of the air; rich food; the sedentary life of urban living, etc., thus is seen to proceed from the progress of civilization. In women it is diagnosed as hysteria; in men, hypochondria. Even Shakespeare could have been partly responsible: in the 18th century, especially after Rousseau, it was believed that watching plays and reading novels could drive you mad.

Mason always wears neutral-to-dark-coloured clothes (17 & 61): “a darken’d, volish neutrality” (83), in stark contrast to Dixon, who frequently flaunts his Englishness by wearing a red coat and hat. Mason is in mourning, like Hamlet, and both are accused of carrying their mourning to excess:

Instantly, Mason concludes (as he will confess months later to Dixon) that it all has to do with Rebekah, his wife, who died two years ago this February next. Unable to abandon her, Mason is nonetheless eager to be aboard a ship, bound somewhere impossible, —long Voyages by sea being thought to help his condition, describ’d to him as Hyperthrenia, or “Excess in Mourning” (25).

As Foucault reminds us in his *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*: “One thing at least is certain: water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man” ([1961] 2006, 12). Referring to the period of Mason and Dixon, he also remarks on the prevalence of melancholy amongst the English: “In the classical period, the melancholy of the English was easily explained by the influence of a maritime climate, cold, humidity, the instability of the weather; all those fine droplets of water that penetrated the channels and fibers of the human body and made it lose its firmness, predisposed it to madness” (12-13). On the connection between melancholy, madness and the sea in Pynchon, Copestake informs us: “Abnormal mental states, sometimes even madness, become identified with the sea in Pynchon’s novels, beginning with *The Crying of Lot 49* and reaching a novel-length thematic in *Mason & Dixon*” (2005, 171).⁸ Ironically, however, cause and antidote seem to be fused: a long sea-voyage is recommended for Mason’s condition, and also for the Reverend Cherrycoke’s:

The Revd. Cherrycoke is keen to point out his acquaintance with mania, having avoided imprisonment for his crimes by allowing himself to be declared insane. [...] Cherrycoke’s liberty is made possible by medical Reason’s perception of the sea as a restorative to mental health (Copestake 2005, 176—7).

Robert Burton, in his best-seller of a century before, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*⁹, comments on “why melancholy men are witty, why they

suppose they hear and see strange voices, visions, apparitions” (129), which might explain why Mason becomes acquainted with talking dogs as well as ghosts. As Scott Coe points out:

In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon takes up this 18th-century yearning and hunger for both history and “futurity,” science and miracles – “bodily resurrection” in particular, the revolutionary desire to overcome ultimate history, or death – and demonstrate how they, in a religious nation, necessarily haunt and hunt each other (2005, 148).

Like Hamlet, Mason is tempted by thoughts of suicide. Montesquieu wrote in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that the English killed themselves “when one can imagine no reason for their decisions” (Part 3, ch. 12: “On laws against those who kill themselves”, 2002, 241). But Mason has a reason, there is reason in his madness: the hope of meeting Rebekah again (719). Her ghost, however, taunts him for thinking too much (409), again like Hamlet, who chides himself for thinking instead of acting. Mason admires Dixon for acting, especially showing his bravery in the slave-driver episode (698).

Because Mason is one of the most well-educated men around, and because he is eccentric, to say the least, he earns the reputation of a “Philosopher Fool” (717). He is renowned for his quick wit, indeed, he usually cannot resist witty, if vicious, repartee (see Wallhead 2003). Burton quotes Aristotle: “*nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae*” (111), indeed, ever since Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving “Melencolia I, (1513-14)”, of a rather depressed angel in a state of disarray, genius has been associated with melancholy. Mason is recognised by another wit, “Lord Pennycomequick, the global-Communications Nabob” (721), as “a professional Wag of some sort” (721-2). He is also given to speaking in soliloquies full of metaphor, like Hamlet: “All the way back to the Visto, Mason is seiz’d by Monology. ‘Text, —’ he cries, and more than once, ‘it is Text, —and we are its readers, and its Pages are the Days turning’” (497). As Foucault says: “In learned literature, too, Madness or Folly was at work, at the very heart of reason and truth” (14).

Burton describes how closely melancholy is associated with madness: many writers “make madness and melancholy but one disease” (Burton, 140). That Mason has gone mad is referred to on several occasions (e.g. 52, 70, 72, 674, 717), and this is touched on by Millard, especially given that Mason was a scientist (2003, 96). On one occasion, it is a question of *pretending* to be mad, like Hamlet:

“Safest thing’s to act insane, of course,” Mr Crawfford advises.

“How’s that?”

“We style it, ‘Doing a Chapman.’” A trader by that name, captur’d near Fort Detroit, at the time of Pontiac’s rising, famously having escap’d execution by feigning to be mad.

“These folk respect Madness. To them ‘tis a holy state.”

“As I told thee, Mason, —nothing for thee to worry about ...?” (674)

A share of Mason’s madness is due to extreme frustration. Just as Hamlet was sent away to England because he was becoming dangerous, Mason and Dixon come to believe that their responsibilities in America are simply a cover for what is really a form of exile. Mason’s rivals in the race to become Astronomer Royal (Mason had been Bradley’s Assistant), have contrived, if not conspired, to get rid of him (182), particularly Maskelyne and his protectors, Morton, and his own brother-in-law, “Clive of fucking India” (437): “Is that what this fucking exile in America’s about then [...]?” asks Mason (438).

Maskelyne’s elevation to Astronomer Royal cuts Mason deeply, just as Gertrude’s remarriage to his uncle and the chance that there might be new heirs who would displace Hamlet in the line to the throne is one of the causes of the prince’s malaise. Also, just as Hamlet knows that both he and his father are far better men than Claudius, Mason knows he is more worthy than Maskelyne. Curiously, just as Hamlet returns from “exile” to his home country and sends two men to their death (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), two men have to die on the Line in place of Mason and Dixon when things get dangerous in Indian country to the west. Mason and Dixon see Baker and Carpenter as “surrogate twins” who die in their place (672; Mason’s father is a baker, and Dixon, as a surveyor, works with wood stakes). And just as Hamlet can be cruel, though he insists he is being “cruel to be kind”, Mason can be very cutting with Dixon and others, even though Dixon is a Horatio to Mason, he is his “only Ally”.

This is known as “Masonickal behaviour” (717), with all the connotations the word has. At one point someone asks, “Shakespearean, correct?”, and the answer is, “Nay, Transcendence, —’twas but Masonick.” (690). Indeed, many of the qualities associated with a melancholic are negative in social terms, for such a person, according to Burton, is solitary, love-lorn, avaricious, superstitious, an insomniac and a hypochondriac (see, for example, the frontispiece illustration to Burton’s *Anatomy*, 9).

Another aspect of madness is paranoia or obsession focussed in a certain direction within a context of perceived conspiracy. Paranoia can be seen as connected to performance. Just as Shakespeare gives *Hamlet* one of the most

famous examples of a play-within-a-play, “the Mousetrap”, so does Pynchon endow some of his works with this Chinese-box kind of device. The embedded narrative “The Courier’s Tragedy” in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which draws upon early 17th-century tradition, is the most obvious, but similar examples can be found in his other novels. In the section “The text as a field of performance” in his article “Performing Pynchon”, Gary Thompson shows how “by writing a performance into the novel” (2012, 278), the problem of the distinction between what is fictional and what is real can be enacted. He goes on to discuss the relation of this to performance and paranoia:

The novels contain other set pieces [...] the Learned English Dog and Rev. Cherrycoke’s side-narratives from *Mason & Dixon*. As with the early modern play-within-a-play, this motif can become a little spooky. If we are watching characters who are watching others perform, who is watching *us* perform, in what may be the play of our lives? To be paranoid is to suspect that others are only playing a part. The ever-present trope of paranoia in Pynchon’s works is connected to performance, as the paranoid surmises that h/she is in the throes of a plot organized around him- or herself, and adjusts the performance accordingly. To be paranoid is to be written into a plot –not precisely deterministic, but with avenues of action or available plot lines laid out for you by others. And apart from staged performances, Pynchon’s characters are themselves performers, who act in ways distinct from their usual, daytime roles (278-9).

The embedded narrative in *Mason & Dixon* is “The Ghastly Fop”, most closely related to the Cherrycoke family and their internal play-acting. The figure of the fop is in itself a performer, someone pretending to be other than what he really is. The claustrophobic interiors evoke the 18th-century gothic genre, and this is blended with enclosure in other sites, such as the Indian Captivity tale, which at the same time ties in with the nun’s tale. Together, they presage the Convent Captivity story which would find a readership amongst anti-Catholics in the United States in the early 20th century.

Before leaving the theme of madness in the novel, whether in its modality of feigned, as in Hamlet, or possibly real, as in Ophelia, it is interesting to remember and ponder two further points made by Copestake. The first is that of the connection between America and madness,¹⁰ *Mason & Dixon* being a story of how “America” came into being:

The symbolic identification of madness and the sea that Pynchon plays upon is in part informed by romanticism and concepts of the

sublime, in which the spectacle of nature offers man a means of affirming the interconnection between selfhood and Godhead. But more influential is a longer and specifically American tradition that Pynchon is well aware of and subsequently brings to the fore in *Mason & Dixon*, a tradition linking madness, divine election, and national selfhood (171).

Pynchon is unquestionably concerned with American selfhood, the present state of the question and its antecedents. Stacey Olster studies how *Mason & Dixon* traces the New World's "history of empire (past, present, and future)", suggesting ideas on distinguishing between the New World and the Old:

I use the term "empire" deliberately here, for the critique of American exceptionalism that prompts Pynchon's return to the late 18th-century period during which the modern nation-state was conceived reflects the late 20th-century period in which the end of the Cold War and emergence of a globalized economy have led critics to proclaim the entire era of the nation-state as over. Recreating the 18th century in fiction as an "Era of fluid Identity" therefore concerns more than postmodern notions of individual selfhood (469). In terms of national identity, it concerns the relevance of individual nationhood within a world in which a shift from imperialist to imperial sovereignty has resulted in the decentered and deterritorialized apparatus that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "Empire." As even Mason, more at home with stars than stocks, cannot help but notice, "Charter'd Companies may indeed be the form the World has now increasingly begun to take" (252). Establishing what is an American and, by extension, what is America under these circumstances thus becomes an act of representation, not simply a "making present again" as the word's etymological origins indicate, but, as Hanna Fenichel Pitkin recognizes, "the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact" (8-9)¹¹. Because that act, as Wolfgang Iser adds, is performative rather than mimetic, a function of the "active imaginings" through which "the intangible can become an image" (226)¹², representing America in Pynchon's novel will turn out to be less a question of politics, as the colonists demanded, and more a question of aesthetics, as the mapping in which Pynchon's eponymous characters engage illustrates (2).

I have quoted this rather long passage in full as it discusses not only how the novel tackles the idea of emergent nationhood, but it ties in with

the view of the characters as actors performing a role, and in this case, performing a significant role in history. Indeed, America became independent of the mother country at a moment in history when the latter was ruled by a monarch deemed mad, “Mad King George”, King George III suffering, in fact, from porphyria. Robert R. Hill writes of Pynchon “reiterating the theme of exporting madness” (2003, 147).

Copetake’s second point reminds us of the double divisiveness of the Line: firstly intentionally, dividing the lands of the Penns from those of the Calverts and secondly, its association with carnage, like the final scene of *Hamlet*, through its significance a hundred years later, as the boundary line between the north, with its opposition to slavery, and the south, whose insistence on conserving slavery and opposing Abolition, led to the Civil War:

Mason & Dixon is Cherrycoke’s tale and it continues to embody the characteristics of the exposés for which he was condemned by taking the form of an account of the perverse ethics inherent in the Age of Reason which underlay the divisive product of Mason and Dixon’s partnership. His status as a wanderer by sea and land, and a teller of fantastic tales, his melancholy following the passing of Mason (8), and his role as the timekeeper of the novel, make him a true child of Saturn. Such associations are bolstered by the acronym of the book’s title, M.A.D., the use of the ampersand in the written title helping to underline the different resonances given to the title when it is spoken. In such ways Pynchon emphasizes the importance of the history of insanity to his memorialization of man’s need for division and definitions which nevertheless give credence to the inhumanity of conflicts such as the Mason-Dixon Line (181).

This reference to the ampersand and the idea of division and its opposite, inclusion, widens the discussion to make suggestions upon Pynchon’s overall message about America through his novel. In his article “*Mason & Dixon & the Ampersand*,” Samuel Cohen stresses the importance of this symbol, foregrounded by Pynchon himself in his contribution to the artwork of the book’s cover (1):

The emphasis on the ampersand is likely no accident, because it points to what I will argue is a central idea in the book, one that is essential to its vision and so, also, to its difference from its author’s earlier works. *Mason & Dixon*’s ampersand is more than historically accurate; it expresses the shift in Pynchon’s thinking that the novel represents. As he spins a picaresque historical tale in *Mason &*

Dixon, Pynchon also tells a new, more hopeful story about America, emphasizing relation, connection, and possibility. At the center of this new story is the ampersand (2).

I think all these points add up to a strong argument that Hamlet is latent in the background of the characterisation of Mason, but the case might have been water-tight had Pynchon made reference to two factors (which he doesn't): black bile and Saturn. As we know, in early medieval doctrine, melancholy was one of the four humours, alongside the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic. It was associated with black bile and the earth and linked to the planet Saturn. Mason, however, is phlegmatic (60, 122 & 735), indeed, "a true Phlegmatick" (735), in opposition to the sanguine Dixon. Perhaps he is phlegmatic because he is northern (in terms of Europe, not in terms of England, where he is southern, in relation to the northerner, Dixon). Burton does assure us, however, that a melancholy person can have mixed humours; he quotes Hercules de Saxonia and Cardan as saying that melancholy "may be engendered of phlegm [...] though it seldom come to pass" (173). In the section "Definition of Melancholy," he tells us that the name comes from black choler (169), and that a melancholy person tends to be "cold and dry, thick, black, and sour" (148). Burton's caveats reflect the tone of the age, for in the 17th century: "a debate began over the origin of melancholia: must one necessarily have a melancholic temperament to be afflicted with melancholia? Is the melancholic humor always cold and dry - is it never warm, or humid? Is it the substance which acts, or the qualities which are transmitted?" (119).

Burton informs us that Paracelus "wholly rejects and derides this division of four humours and complexions" (173), and as the 18th century progressed, belief in the humours declined, but not so belief in astrology. It is well known that Newton practised alchemy to the end of his life, and leading scientists like him had their birth charts drawn up. Burton insists that a melancholy disposition comes from the stars, particularly Saturn, at birth (207)¹³. Like the fictional Cherrycoke, Burton himself was born under Saturn, and dedicated his life's work to the study of melancholy: "Saturn was lord of my geniture" (18). Not so Mason: Dixon is apparently a Leo, born under the influence of the Sun, while Mason — if his uncertain birth date is fixed at 1st May — is a Taurean, born under the influence of Venus. Pynchon's narrative structure offers a four-year drawing of the Line sandwiched between two Transits of Venus. Maskelyne has drawn up Mason's chart and finds he has the qualities of a Taurean: a born leader, independent, "humane, inclin'd to Science, a devotee of Reason" (*M&D* 139). But the influence of the

Sun appears to be negative, and makes Mason a “truculent and wary neighbor” (139) to Dixon. Perhaps Maskelyne is just making it up anyway, or being diplomatic, or only telling half the story, who knows? And we may say the same of Cherrycoke, and Pynchon is keeping his options open.

To end this discussion on the contribution of Hamlet to the creation of the character of Charles Mason, I put forward the argument that the resonances of Shakespeare’s protagonist, indeed, aspects of the play as a whole, add to the multivalent nature of Mason. The richness and density of ideas, often connected in a network, contribute to Mason’s complexity. History and fiction are text, text is words and words reach out, as in the “meta” of “metafiction”. I would dare to suggest a lexical parallel between the Bard and Pynchon, one of the greatest (if not the greatest) 20th- and 21st-century writers in English: their immense range. George Steiner informs us that Shakespeare had a vocabulary of 20,000 words which could “give an all but total rendering of the Elizabethan world” ([1967]1985, 230-1). Pynchon has in theory a lexicon in current English of more than half a million words, but what Steiner has to say about Shakespeare’s sensitivity to the potential of words could be applied to Pynchon: “In Shakespeare, this mastering response to the sum of all potential meanings and values, reached an intensity far beyond the norm [...] When using a word, or set of words, Shakespeare brings into controlled activity not only the range of definitions and current modes noted in the dictionary; he seems to hear around the core of every word the totality of its overtones and undertones; of its connotations and echoes. [...] To Shakespeare, more than to any other poet, the individual word has a nucleus surrounded by a field of complex energies” (1985, 232-3). The resonances Pynchon sets up, Steiner’s complex energies, are largely controlled by him (not necessarily totally controlled, as he cannot know all his readers) and captured in varying degrees by his different readers. Many of the resonances are connected in a network, and what Coale has remarked about the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* in terms of connections can be applied to Mason, as, indeed, he suggests: “Pynchon meticulously plots Oedipa’s progress in terms of the connections she makes and how she makes them. It is a process most of his characters will pursue in later novels” (145). But Samuel Cohen reminds us that very few characters in Pynchon are as complex and rounded as Oedipa Maas and Mason and Dixon, and the former is not as “warm” a character as the 18th-century pair:

The relationship between these two is one element of *Mason & Dixon* that makes it new in Pynchon’s corpus. It is generally accepted that V., *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Vineland*

(1984) are not marked by the creation of and attention to fully rounded characters. [...] This characterization of Pynchon's fictional worlds is also generally accepted: though there is much humor in the novels, and much attention to the prevalence of human indecency and unkindness, there is not much warmth. Though some demur, Pynchon's work up until *Mason & Dixon* has been largely seen as relatively cold; in its attention to large ideas, national and international histories of ideas and systems, and in its painting pictures of the world as a place riven by conspiracy or suspicions thereof, his work has had neither the time nor the inclination to present round, sympathetic, engaging characters. *Mason & Dixon* has been widely seen to have a warmth lacking in these earlier works, and this perception is due in large part to the way Pynchon draws these two men, separately and together (10).

In a study of Oedipa Maas presented at the Granada Pynchon Conference of 2006 (see Wallhead 2009), I applied Schema Theory to demonstrate how the character, through the connections she makes upon leaving her home in Kinneret, not only extends her role of house-wife but becomes different things to different people, and aspects of these new roles tie in with each other forming a network of related ideas (rather like the metamorphoses in *V.*). For example, in what becomes a multi-faceted persona, she is Oedipus and Alice in Wonderland, but also the Virgin Mary to the dying sailor, Marilyn Monroe to Metzger, Rapunzel to Pierce Inverarity, etc. Schemata function by setting up frameworks in the form of scenarios in which events are re-enacted, and through the re-enacting, similarities and disimilarities —what is *not* there is equally important in Pynchon—are pointed out, and through the connections, ideas are developed in many ramifications. An image or schema can be triggered by just one idea or even word, and when it is triggered, it comes up in our minds, because of common knowledge, in its entirety. Thus “tower” can trigger Rapunzel, and a woman's skirt blowing up brings to mind Marilyn Monroe and all the ideas connected to her: beauty, performance, music, sexuality, conspiracy, death, to name the most important.

The word “melancholy” applied to Charles Mason can trigger Hamlet, and once that is triggered, we tie in all the ramifications with similarities and differences:

1. haunted —contact with other worlds, messages from the dead; Old King Hamlet relays an unequivocal message whereas Rebekah has no clear message, even though she haunts Mason for four years (no clear message, as at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*)

2. frustrated –he is a would-be Astronomer Royal as Hamlet is the frustrated heir to the throne
3. companionship –he is a friend to Dixon, as is Horatio to Hamlet
4. unwanted –Mason and Dixon feel they are sent away, as is Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
5. exploited –Mason and Dixon are sent to unravel a disagreement caused by the favours and scheming of kings, while Hamlet is at times the unwitting puppet of the king
6. procrastinating –the theme of missed opportunities. Mason misses chances, an example of Pynchon’s Borgesian forked paths, ultimately on reaching the Indian warpath and giving up. By comparison, if Hamlet had acted immediately on the ghost of his father’s message, he might have caught Claudius by surprise and he would still have become king and had heirs. Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern and Gertrude would not have died. But there would have been no play.

All of these ideas tie in with the big concepts Pynchon discusses in all his novels: power and its sites, authority, subversion, commerce, the difficulty of human relations, the meaning of life and death, magic, reason, entrapment, dreams, madness, sexuality, investigation and quests, science, and of course, history, and attitudes to all these concepts during the different eras in history: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Modern era. Mason is made by Pynchon to be obsessed with connections: on his deathbed, he sees the universe as ““a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. I have all the proofs you may require. Not all the Connexions are made yet, that’s why some of it is still invisible”” (772). The astronomer is scrying ahead to the black holes of the future, well aware that what may not appear to be there could, after all, be significant.

III The relevance of *Hamlet* as intertext and why Hamlet?

At the beginning of the 20th century, Spanish writer Ramiro de Maeztu wrote an article comparing the varying fortunes in terms of the creation of an empire and the loss of it of his own country and Britain. Inevitably, he saw Britain as still holding a certain hegemony, albeit declining, over its colonies, while Spain had, with the loss of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, sunk into the ignominy of becoming, after its past glories, a shadow of itself. Maeztu compares the two countries through a literary metaphor: England/Britain is represented by *Hamlet* and his own country by *Don Quixote*:

El *Hamlet* es el drama más popular de Inglaterra; El *Quijote* es el libro más leído de España. En torno a las dos grandes obras se ha venido cristalizando el alma de los pueblos. Inglaterra ha conquistado un imperio. España ha perdido el suyo.¹⁴

For Maeztu, who had lived in England for several years in his capacity as a reporter, *Hamlet*, in spite of its final tragedy and the melancholy, inertia and possible madness of its protagonist, had served as an energizing force for the English, while the madness of Don Quixote and his retrograde perspective seemed to match the mood of decadence of Spain. Maeztu diagnosed Spain's problem as the servitude of her ruling classes to ideals of a religious nature whilst disregarding the secular and economic.

There is a widely-held belief that Shakespeare fell into almost utter oblivion in the 18th century. But as D. Nichol Smith asserts about this doubt over Shakespeare's popularity in the 18th century: "The early nineteenth century was too readily convinced by Coleridge and Hazlitt that they were the first to recognise and to explain the greatness of Shakespeare. [...] To this century [the 18th] as much as to the nineteenth, Shakespeare was the glory of English letters" (1903, x). We saw how Pynchon references *Tom Jones* in *Mason & Dixon*; a further resonance, as pointed out by Nichol Smith, is the connection between *Tom Jones* and specifically, *Hamlet*:

Even those who are willing to give the 18th century its due have not recognised how it appreciated Shakespeare. At no time in this century was he not popular. The author of *Esmond* tells us that Shakespeare was quite out of fashion until Steele brought him back into the mode. Theatrical records would alone be sufficient to show that the ascription of this honour to Steele is an injustice to his contemporaries. [...] When Tom Jones took Partridge to the gallery of Dury Lane, the play was *Hamlet*. [...] During the entire century Shakespeare dominated the stage (xi).

To return to the theme of madness and the comparison between Shakespeare and Cervantes, Foucault compares madness in Shakespeare's various plays, not just *Hamlet* but *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and Cervantes's Don Quixote: "In Shakespeare, madness is allied to death and murder; in Cervantes, images are controlled by the presumption and the complacencies of the imaginary." And again, as we think more of Ophelia than Hamlet himself: "In Shakespeare or Cervantes, madness still occupies an extreme place, in that it is beyond appeal. Nothing ever restores it either to truth or to reason. It leads only to laceration and thence to death" (31).

Another reason for looking back to Shakespeare and specifically *Hamlet* can be found in Pynchon's discussion of Enlightenment Reason and its contribution —not always positive— to the creation of America. Pynchon shows us “the inadequacy of reason alone to explain the mystery that surrounds us. The haunted world, the suprarreal, the ghostly, and the impossible have the same valence as the facts of history as we receive them” (Boyle 1997, 9). Cohen's article discussed the opposition between the inclusiveness of the ampersand and the divisiveness of the many lines both explicit and implicit in the novel: “One important context for the story of this line, then, is the story of the Enlightenment. Pynchon's telling of it is less celebratory than the traditional version and more nuanced than the usual revision” (3).

We must not forget either the similarity in background between the Pennsylvania-Maryland dispute and the context of *Hamlet*: the setting of the play is Elsinore in Denmark, where King Claudius's permission is being requested by Fortinbras (whose father, the King of Norway, was killed by Claudius's brother, Old Hamlet) to march in a line across the territory with a host of soldiers to take a small parcel of land which was in dispute. The quotations from Ecenbarger at the beginning of this study serve not only as explanation of the need for cutting the Line, but as evidence of the power of kings and their whims. Claudius's lust for power and for Queen Gertrude, his sister-in-law, are the impulses that prompt the course of the action that will end in tragedy in *Hamlet*, just as the needs of King Charles I and II to bribe or repay important noblemen come into conflict over time and prompt the ultimate solution of official and imposed delineation.

To return to discussion of lines in relation to the Enlightenment as opposed to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, any assault on Reason is going to be an assault on linear structures. Because Mason is haunted, it is a short step to use him to discuss anything reason cannot account for, such as strange beings, talking dogs and mechanical ducks, and plunge him back into the enchantment of medieval belief which had been exiled by the Enlightenment. Mason is the object of epiphanies, he receives strange revelations, as, for example, his plunge into the vortex or “Loop”¹⁵ in time of the missing eleven days caused by the calendar reform of 1752. In the Bodleian Library at Oxford:

Mason had seen in the Glass, unexpectedly, something beyond simple reflection, —outside of the world, —a procession of luminous Phantoms [...]. There may be found, within the malodorous Grotto of the Selves, a conscious denial of all that Reason holds true. [...] there

are beings who are [...] ever and implacably cruel, hiding, haunting, waiting [...] and any one who sees them out of Disguise are instantly pursued [...]. Spheres of Darkness, Darkness impure [...] of Spirits who dwell a little over the Line between its annihilation [...] between common safety and Ruin ever solitary (769).

Another aspect of this inclusion of the preterite or the magic concerns Pynchon's approach and style: his rejection of literary realism. According to Jeff Baker, literary realism can be seen as "state fiction" as it supports the status quo, thus Pynchon in this novel uses then disrupts "realist narrative strategies [as] an act of narrative subversion that repudiates reality in favor of the monstrous possibilities of the unreal" (2000, 180). As a postmodern writer, Pynchon produces text that is far more complex than what we normally find in literary realism. The latter tends to be offered to the reader as a "finished product", the construction of which is impervious to the reader's penetration, even in works that are apparently autobiographical, with a first-person narrator. Pynchon gives us more hints on how the novel came to be put together. He is able to show us his original contribution in terms of imagination while conserving the necessary mimetic givens of a simulacrum of an 18th-century text. As Linda Hutcheon puts it with reference to Derrida and to Foucault, historiographic metafiction combines the effects of two important tendencies in poststructuralist theory and thus can encompass the different textualities of the moment of writing and the models of the past, with their multiple resonances:

[A]s metafiction, they incarnate the Derridean network of traces in their own self-reflexive textuality; but as "historiographic" metafiction, they present their texts as part of a larger set of Foucauldian discursive practices (defined as bodies of "anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function" Foucault 1972, 119). Textuality is reinserted into history and with the social and political conditions of the discursive act itself (1988, 81).

The multiple resonances undercut any idea of fixity either at the moment of the "historical" event being portrayed or at the moment Pynchon or whoever is portraying it, or at any intervening moment. Hutcheon emphasizes the cruciality of the concept of variability made available by the use of this subgenre:

But historiographic metafiction enacts a concern, not just for the general notion of subjectivity, but for the specific pragmatics of the conditions of production and reception of the text itself, and these two problematizing strategies of enactment work together to suggest “a theory of meaning as a continual cultural production that is not only susceptible of ideological transformation, but materially based in historical change” (de Laurentis 1984, 172, on Umberto Eco) (85).

Conclusion

Mason & Dixon portrays an America-in-the-making, a “becoming” through appearing on a map. The novel depicts a small moment in the mapping, the drawing of lines, but sets up resonances to the past and to the future. Cohen’s thesis about lines and their positive and negative effects illustrates Pynchon’s methods in revealing the openness, the potentiality, the porousness of historical moments:

While it seems not to accept the traditional, Enlightenment, progressivist model of history, *Mason & Dixon* does not draw a downward line either. It does not tell a story of descent or degradation. The story this novel tells is one of repetition, of repeated moments of potential change, of utopian promise, followed by failures to fully realize that promise (12).

Hamlet as an intertext functions successfully in opening up discussions of power, monarchy, conspiracy, potential, comradeship, frustration, failure, love, sadness, death, heritage, and all their interrelated ramifications.

End notes

1. A shorter version of this essay was read at the “Transit of Venus” Thomas Pynchon Conference in Malta, 2004.
2. The reference is *Hamlet* Act III, scene iv: “*Hamlet*: How now! A rat? [*Draws*] Dead, for a ducat, dead! [*Makes a pass through the arras.*]”
3. As the Line did not come to bear the names of the two scientists who had cut it until long after, Pynchon does not refer to it as such in his novel.
4. For some of the connections concerning weaving and power in *The Crying of Lot 49* see Wallhead 2009, 88.
5. That Pynchon was freer in his depiction of General Wolfe than in that of the young Mason is well explained by Frank Palmeri in his article “General

Wolfe and the Weavers: Re-envisioning History in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*" (Palmeri in Hinds 2005).

6. One wonders too about such usages as sleep and dream when Cherrycoke comments on colonial America (or is it the "insomniack" Mason thinking aloud?): "Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?" (345) in light of Hamlet's "To sleep! Perchance to dream:—ay, there's the rub" (Act III scene i). As Douglas Lannark points out: "There are enough references to dreams in Pynchon's works to fill at least one future IPW (International Pynchon Week conference)" (2012, 354). Also, the reference immediately after to "wherever 'tis not yet mapped" sounds rather like "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveller returns" later in the soliloquy.

7. "— a designation used three times in *Gravity's Rainbow* as well", Douglas Lannark reminds us (2012, 360).

8. See also Copestake 2003.

9. Although *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was out of favour in Mason's time, with no editions between 1677 and 1799 (Burton, xxv), it came back in soon after his death in 1786 and remained in print.

10. In addition to St. Helena and madness: "[...] from which, due to the incessant beating of the sea against its mountainous sides, all are said eventually to go mad" (Copestake 2005, 176).

11. Olster draws upon H.F.Pitkin (1967) *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: U. of California Press.

12. She draws upon W. Iser (1987) "Representation: A Performative Act." *The Aims of Representation: Subject/Text/History*. Ed. Murray Krieger. New York: Columbia UP, 217-32.

13. For Saturn as a divinity with a special relationship to water, see also Millard (201).

14. "Hamlet y Don Quijote", *España*, 28 November 1904. "Hamlet is the most popular play in England; *Don Quixote* is the most widely-read book in Spain. Around these two great works, the soul of the people has been slowly chrysalising. England has conquered an empire. Spain has lost hers." (my translation)

15. Evans Lansing Smith argues that this is a nekylia, or visit to the underworld: "Oxford becomes the underworld, a '*Tempus Incognitus*,' into which Mason descends (556). At the middle of the maze is the Bodleyan [sic] —as in Nabokov, Borges, and Eco, the revelatory climax of the nekylia occurs

in a library, catalyzing the energies of hermeneusis" (202). Thus Mason is not just Hamlet, but Orpheus too.

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