

## HAMLET: SHAKESPEARE'S CHRISTIAN HERO

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This paper is an attempt to provide an outline to an understanding of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in terms akin to medieval religious drama. Medieval drama, it can be shown, though not within the scope of this essay, was, in keeping with its very English character, the heritage of the Elizabethan dramatist, particularly Shakespeare. Although modern critics are inclined to flatter us and themselves with the view that Shakespeare was the first modern playwright, it would be more fitting to identify him as the last of the Medievals. In fact, Shakespeare's drama is arguably the highest development of the Medieval morality and mystery play. In Shakespeare we have the cosmological figures, archetypes and universals of traditional Christianity, which reveal man's nature and his relation to the Divine, embodied in and expressed through the relativity of a human and natural setting. In a word, the allegorical nature of Shakespeare's plays imitate the central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the Word become Flesh. As we hope to demonstrate with respect to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a composition of this kind works both allegorically and naturally, as form relates to matter. That is to say, the allegory, expressing the general meaning of the play, determines and shapes the human and environmental material of the drama, and is, hence, manifested by it. The allegory must be grasped or abstracted before the play can be properly understood either

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generally or in its particulars. Ironically, in perhaps the greatest or most widely celebrated of Shakespeare's plays, namely *Hamlet*, we have in the character of the Ghost the bald presentation of the supernatural, which is a direct borrowing from the leaner medieval dramatic predecessor. The Ghost is one of the chief symbols of the play. As the source of Hamlet's existence and the continuing ruling principle in Hamlet's earthly affairs and destiny, the Ghost represents the Divine, the High Father of heaven and the world. It is symbol, then, which will be our guide.

Before turning to the play itself, it may be helpful to consider in broad strokes the nature of Shakespearean tragedy and comedy, both of which are inspired by traditional Christian spirituality. The emphasis in Shakespearean tragedy is on the human suffering which stems from the ordeal of overcoming the self and cleansing the soul so that it may return to its Creator. On the other hand, Shakespearean comedy (and here we include the romance as well) stresses the soul's happy foretaste in this life of union with God through the spiritual wedding of the soul with the Divine. And this foretaste of the Beatific Vision is achieved in spite of tragic features, namely, the trial, suffering, and purgation, which necessarily precede the soul's union with God. Hence, in Shakespeare's comedies and romances, the drama often culminates in marriage and the restoration of benevolent political authority, which symbolize the reunion of the Divine with the soul (and the world) after an initial alienation perpetrated by the forces of evil. Nonetheless, as the word "restoration" implies, many of these plays have distressing moments which, were events not providentially reversed, would lead to an unhappy ending. Four plays that immediately come to mind in this vein are *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, and *Measure for Measure*. (The latter, deriving its title directly from Scripture,<sup>1</sup> is a clear allegory of the Last Judgment, with the

<sup>1</sup> *Mark* 4:24; *Luke* 6:38: "For the measure you give will be the measure you receive."

Duke as God, Lucio as Lucifer, and Angelo, the "low angel," as Man.) Comedies and romances frequently begin in or proceed to division and strife, a struggle with evil that both divides souls, kingdoms, and the world, and seeks to usurp or overthrow their right, natural, and divine order. Hence, the world is thrown into a temporary upset when, like Satan, who would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven, Don John, in *Much Ado*, says concerning his brother, Don Pedro: "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace . . ."<sup>2</sup>

In both his comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare portrays the human sphere as a battleground between good and evil, between the divine and the satanic. Whereas Shakespeare's comedies celebrate the triumph of the Divine, his tragedies express the ravages of evil along the way to the final victory of the good, the noble, and the true. In the tragedies, this final victory is permitted only a solemn observance in the last moments of the play because of the proximity of the devastation left by the war between the divine and the satanic across the human plain. Contrary to the tragedies, death in Shakespearean comedy is never physical, only spiritual. That is to say, there are only spiritual changes or turnings, a transformation of heart and mind, the eclipse of selfishness, or the opening of the soul to the reign of God. Divisions are healed, treachery, usurpation, and sin—the corruptors of nature—are all put down so that heaven and earth may be happily reunited through the spiritual wedding.

Nature in Shakespeare's comedies is redeemed and transfigured, imbued with the sacred. The transition from nature to eternity is continuous and finally joyous. Shakespearean tragedy, however, presents a different, yet complementary, view of the relation between nature and eternity and the passage between them. In the tragedies, nature and supernature are almost contraries; fallen nature is to be overcome, and

<sup>2</sup> I, iii, 25-6. All citations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (3d ed.). David Bevington, ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 1980.)

death, the means to that overcoming, is a severe break accompanied by a profound groan. Death is the awful end; it is the hard passage from nature to the eternal. It is the business of the Christian hero, then, to suffer and to die. And yet, as we will see with Hamlet, there is always an intimation in Shakespeare of eternal reward or heavenly immortality.

In light of the above, we can begin our analysis of *Hamlet* with a brief overview. Hamlet's life is the story of the birth and maturation of supernatural faith in Providence. As such, the play can be divided into three major parts, which correspond roughly to the soul's movement from hell, to purgatory, and, finally, to heaven. In the first part, we witness the journey of the human soul from melancholy musing on the state of the world to the revelation of the Divine Will. Here the war with evil begins as Hamlet must confront the sin of the world, and especially that within his own soul. In the second part, Hamlet must suffer the purgation of those elements within the soul which distract from the supernatural vocation of man. And, finally, in the third part, Hamlet heroically undertakes the self-sacrificing execution of the Divine Will on earth, an action through which he merits heaven.

The ghost of King Hamlet, as previously mentioned, is, in virtue of its supernatural origin, explicitly a symbol or representation of the Divine, that which is over nature, ordering and drawing the natural order to Itself as It demands the spiritual elevation and moral obedience of Its natural regent on earth, man. Furthermore, because King Hamlet, in his "days of nature,"<sup>3</sup> was a paragon, "So excellent a king,"<sup>4</sup> he expresses the former presence of the Divine in nature and in man, the prior unity of heaven and earth in the state of paradise. Standing in archetypal opposition to King Hamlet as "Hyperion to a satyr,"<sup>5</sup> is his brother, Claudius. In the microcosm of

<sup>3</sup> I, v, 13.

<sup>4</sup> I, ii, 139.

<sup>5</sup> I, ii, 140.

Denmark, Claudius is a figure of Satanic proportions, "the serpent" that stole into the kingdom of paradise, corrupted Nature (Gertrude), and severed Man (Hamlet) from his Divine source or Father (King Hamlet). Once Gertrude has been seduced and King Hamlet "exiled" to the spiritual beyond, then the World, namely, Denmark, becomes rotten, "an unweeded garden,"<sup>6</sup> morally and spiritually debased, overgrown with sin. We cannot miss here the allusion to the Garden of Eden, for Shakespeare has the Ghost not only refer to Claudius twice as "the serpent," but also twice identify the site of the murder as King Hamlet's orchard.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one cannot hear the first speech of the Ghost, who speaks as a pilgrim from purgatory, without hearing the reverberations of the horror and treachery of the Fall of man, the frightful slaying of man's soul, and the fratricide that followed soon after.

Parallels to the relationship between the two brothers, King Hamlet and Claudius, can be seen in a number of other plays by Shakespeare: Duke Senior and Duke Fredrick in *As You Like It*, Don Pedro and Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Prospero and Antonio in *The Tempest*. In these cases the benevolent authority is temporarily usurped or thwarted by the unlawful and false authority of the evil yet fraternal power. This aspect of fraternity, combined with the eventual dramatic reversal of the evil power or its subjection to the good, demonstrates that Shakespeare's cosmology is not dualistic or gnostic, but Christian. In other words, the existence of evil is paradoxically linked to the good, and plays a role within the pale of a single divine purpose: the freedom and sanctification of man.

Man is both a natural and a supernatural creature: he is the offspring of King Hamlet, the Divine, and Gertrude, who is Nature. Within man, even in the darkened state of Denmark, is the divine spark which leads him to scold mutability and

<sup>6</sup> I, ii, 135.

<sup>7</sup> I, v, 35-40, 60.

infidelity, to find the world "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,"<sup>8</sup> and which urges him to mingle his thoughts and soul with the Eternal, in short, to pursue the Ghost to the heights of Elsinore.<sup>9</sup> Man is akin to the Divine, the image of God, his supernatural and paternal sovereign, just as Prince Hamlet is his father's son, a reflection of the father.

In Horatio we have an orientation of character in contrast with Hamlet. Hamlet is theoretical: it is the highest truth that matters, the eternal, the Divine, not simply the human, the conventional or customary. Horatio, on the other hand, is sober and practical, preferring the familiar walls of Elsinore to flights beyond in quest of the mystical and transcendental. He fears the loss of human control, the abandonment of practical reasoning and self-preservation. Horatio shudders at the thought of falling into the sea,<sup>10</sup> which is to say, at the loss of self, the very way to the Divine; that way is the way of contemplative intuition or selfless receptivity to Divine illumination, such that the natural faculties are temporally darkened in order that the intellect be directly infused with the principles and insights necessary for the highest knowledge, and the will strengthened to act in accordance with the moral order. Horatio's understanding, however, does not extend to the highest things; thus Hamlet's friend is also ignorant in crucial matters with respect to the here and now. Horatio does not know, for example, the true condition of Denmark, except as mediated through Hamlet himself, because Horatio has restricted his vision to the temporal and the empirical.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the significance of the human realm, i.e., the reasons for Hamlet's present melancholy and the present state of the world (Denmark), are made intelligible to Hamlet by the Ghost, because Hamlet is open to the spiritual source of Nature and human existence, that is to say, because Hamlet

<sup>8</sup> I, ii, 133.

<sup>9</sup> I, iv, 64-78.

<sup>10</sup> I, iv, 69-78.

<sup>11</sup> I, i, 56-58.

"sees" with the metaphysical eye of the intellect, which is an intuitive as well as a discursive faculty of the soul. As Hamlet explains to the much amazed Horatio after the encounter with the Ghost, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."<sup>12</sup> Horatio is more the political figure, Hamlet more the philosophic or theological man. As such, there is a natural tension between the two friends that extends even to the end when Horatio wishes to insinuate the guidance of humanistic prudence or shrewdness into the superior resolve of Hamlet's spiritual maturity.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, despite this tension, by his ultimate support for and subordination to Hamlet, Horatio represents a higher form of politics, the politics that is willing finally to take its direction from the philosophic or theological spirit, the soul which contemplates the Eternal. Horatio meets his political foil in the character of Polonius, whom we shall consider later.

Now, Providence has worked an affinity between itself and the soul of man, and the product of this work is a human spiritual potential, which reveals itself as an openness to what is above and as a desire to transcend the world. Because this potential is well developed in Hamlet, the Divine (in the character of the Ghost) beckons the Prince and chooses to disclose itself fully to him alone. The Ghost's revelation imposes on Hamlet the supreme Christian imperative: to weed the garden, to ride the world of sin and the Devil's influence, to cooperate in the restoration of paradise, i.e., to take revenge against Claudius. Hamlet's struggle with his Christian vocation is not simply a metaphor for the Redemption, but rather an imitation of it. The life of the Christian hero is an imitation of Christ's original work, a following in the way established by the Redeemer. The Christian hero must suffer and die in the rebuilding of the fallen Jerusalem, the universal kingdom

<sup>12</sup> I, v, 167-168.

<sup>13</sup> V, ii, 206-222.

of Divine justice. Unlike Christ, however, the work of the Christian hero is complicated by sin; for Hamlet, the sway of Claudius in the kingdom will not be terminated until the power of sin, the Devil's handiwork in the interior world of the soul, has been overthrown and the kingdom of heaven firmly established within it. Just as hell resides at the nadir of the world, so its powers are present in the depths of the soul. They have found a home there, in the soul of Hamlet, through the frailty of Nature. In other words, because individual human existence arises from the commerce of the supernatural yet created soul with a fallen nature (as exemplified by Gertrude's turning from King Hamlet to Claudius), Hamlet must descend within to combat the likeness of Claudius within his own soul before he can topple Claudius himself from the throne of Denmark, and thereby transfigure or cleanse a fallen world.

Through his encounter with his father's Ghost, Hamlet has directly experienced the Spirit and is the recipient of a revelation. And here is an analogy with baptism: in order to commune with the Spirit, Hamlet has risked "the flood," which Horatio advised against in the name of an earthy sanity;<sup>14</sup> Hamlet has submitted himself to the dissolution of all worldly attachments, especially that of self-preservation. In turn, the Spirit has reasserted itself in the human world by breaking through the sinful legacy of fallen nature, represented here by Gertrude, and thereby implanting the kernel of supernatural faith in the soul of Hamlet. This faith is initially marked by a passionate belief in the reality of the Spirit and its revelation. As Hamlet tells Horatio immediately after the encounter, "Touching this vision here, It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you."<sup>15</sup> Such a faith must grow in understanding and be tested before it can mature into that full and salvific assent and communion with the Divine. The gestation and maturation

<sup>14</sup> I, iv, 58-86.

<sup>15</sup> I, v, 138-139.

tion of faith will inevitably be complicated by man's residual weakness to sin and error. Hamlet's deliverance from such weakness and imperfection will depend ultimately on grace and Providence.

Before we investigate Hamlet's descent into hell, it is necessary to address the question of the Ghost's truthfulness. Modern commentators, who are disturbed by the Ghost's cry for vengeance, are more inclined to associate this apparently unchristian desire with the Devil than with the Divine. They are quick to quote the famous line from *Deuteronomy*, which is twice quoted by St. Paul: "'Revenge is mine, I will repay,' saith the Lord."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the argument goes, the Ghost must be the Devil, or his agent, since he spurs Hamlet on to commit an unchristian act which will damn Hamlet's soul. And this argument appears to be worthy of consideration since Hamlet himself contemplates the possibility that he may be deceived, despite his initial conviction that the Ghost is honest. Note, however, that Hamlet never contemplates the question of whether revenge is unchristian, but only whether Claudius did indeed murder his father. Nevertheless, since revenge is at the heart of the play, the question of its appropriateness for a Christian cannot be avoided.

Now, the interpretation of the modern commentators is flawed for three reasons: first, it is overly literal; second, it is based upon a univocal understanding of revenge; and third, it is essentially Protestant. God's claim that revenge belongs to Him does not mean that God does not employ mediators of His revenge. Consider, by analogy, the question of who can forgive sins. Although forgiveness of sins, like revenge, belongs in one sense to God alone, we also know that God uses His priests as mediators of his mercy, and that He forgives sins through His priests. It is proper to say, then, that priests have the power to forgive sins, so long as we remember that this power belongs most truly to God Himself, who forgives men

<sup>16</sup> *Deuteronomy* 32:35; cf. St. Paul *Romans* 12:19.

through His chosen instruments. Likewise, God uses human instruments for His vengeance. Lest there be any doubt that this is so, consider the following verses from *Psalms* 149:

The saints shall rejoice in glory:  
 they will be justified in their beds.  
 The high praise of God shall be in their mouths:  
 and two-edged swords in their hands:  
 To execute vengeance upon the nations,  
 chastisements among the people.  
 To bind their kings with fetters,  
 and their nobles with manacles of iron.  
 To execute upon them the judgment that is written:  
 this glory is to all his saints.  
 Alleluia.

The modern commentators, shocked at the hard language of justice in the mouth of the Ghost, fail to distinguish between the unchristian vengeance of a personal vendetta, and the vengeance that God works through his chosen ones. Hamlet is chosen by God through the Ghost to be, as Hamlet later tells his mother, the "scourge and minister" of divine justice.<sup>17</sup> The modern commentators, however, in true Protestant fashion, believe that, because all attributes and powers belong most properly to God, namely, wisdom, justice, goodness, truth, and beauty, man can have no part whatsoever in these things. In keeping with the Protestant denial of all mediation, these commentators assume there can be no mediated vengeance.

We can see this same flawed view with respect to a word like "hate." While it is true that hatred can be a deadly sin, it is also true that there is a proper sense of hate, such as the hatred for sin and for the Devil. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas, in his opening words to the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, quotes from *Proverbs* as follows: "My mouth shall meditate truth,

<sup>17</sup> III, iv, 180-182.

and my lips shall hate impiety."<sup>18</sup> Along these same lines, St. John Chrysostom writes in his homily on *Ephesians*, "As we are making war with the Devil, we are making peace with God."<sup>19</sup>

We can see, then, that it is not so much a question of Hamlet's right to revenge, but of his duty to carry out God's vengeance. God calls Hamlet to spiritual combat with the Devil, the head of whom God has promised He will crush through His mediators. Hamlet is not called to revenge for personal reasons, but for the satisfaction of divine law. Indeed, Hamlet is not just any individual, but the rightful heir to a usurped throne. Note that Shakespeare, like all playwrights, can speak directly to us only in a play's title; and there Shakespeare identifies Hamlet as the "Prince of Denmark."

Our argument up to this point has not intended to suggest that there is no danger to Hamlet's soul, for it becomes readily apparent that Hamlet is tempted by a personal and sinful revenge. But it must be stressed that this temptation comes not from the Ghost, who warns Hamlet against this by saying, "But howsoever thou pursues this act, Taint not thy mind."<sup>20</sup> Every good thing, including truth, can be a temptation for a man who would misuse it, and Hamlet succumbs to this and other sins. But the problem is in Hamlet, not in the Ghost, whose truthfulness is borne out as subsequent events unfold. Moreover, lest someone argue that the Devil uses the truth itself to destroy man, the actions of the Ghost support his words. At that very place where the Ghost warns Hamlet not to taint his own mind, he also commands Hamlet to leave his mother to heaven, "And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, To prick and sting her." But when Hamlet ignores this command and rails against his mother, as if with the possible intent to kill her, the Ghost reappears not only to set

<sup>18</sup> *Proverbs* 8:7.

<sup>19</sup> St. John Chrysostom *Homily on Ephesians* 24:6.

<sup>20</sup> I, v, 85-86.

Hamlet back upon his true course, but also to urge Hamlet to minister to his frightened mother. Certainly the Devil would not interrupt Hamlet's sinful abuse of his own mother, nor encourage him to act compassionately toward her. It is not the Ghost, then, who prompts Hamlet to a sinful revenge. Indeed, Shakespeare shows us a successful temptation of this sort through Claudius, who cleverly manipulates Laertes into a revenge that has nothing heavenly about it.

But let us return at this point to Hamlet's own struggle with Claudius and his own sin. The first vice that we notice that Hamlet suffers from is the first of the seven deadly sins: pride. In Medieval lore, the seven deadly sins are associated with the planets and luminaries. Pride is associated with the sun. And indeed, considering the more profound meaning beneath the pun, Hamlet, in his very first words, associates himself with the sun. When Claudius asks Hamlet, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" Hamlet answers, "Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun."<sup>21</sup> Yet the sun stands for more than pride. It is also the greatest light in the heavens and as such, and in contrast with the changeableness of the moon, has traditionally symbolized truth, the eternal verities, or the changeless wisdom of the Divine. As we have already seen, testifying to King Hamlet's theological significance, Hamlet compares his father to Hyperion, the sun god. Moreover, Hamlet denies association with and disparages the sublunar realm of his mother, the "most seeming-virtuous"<sup>22</sup> Queen, which is the realm of mere nature or appearance and of change, the realm of seeming and becoming, motion and inconstancy, as opposed to the sphere of permanence, of Divine Being and eternal truth. Thus, although Hamlet accepts the truth of his mother's (Nature's) proposition, that "All that lives must die,"<sup>23</sup> he nevertheless reacts strongly to her

<sup>21</sup> I, ii, 66-67.

<sup>22</sup> I, v, 47.

<sup>23</sup> I, ii, 72.

suggestion that he should put aside his mourning for his father. Note that Hamlet, in his response, focuses on Gertrude's use of the word "seems." Gertrude says to him, "If it be, Why *seems* it so particular with thee?" Hamlet then responds as follows:

Seems, madam! Nay, it is! I know not "seems."  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play,  
But I have that within which passeth show;  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.<sup>24</sup>

Herein lies the character of Hamlet's pride: while he properly prefers Reality to mere appearance, the inward to the outward, and exhibits a longing for truth and divine being, he too closely, and in form and expression suggesting self-justification, identifies himself with the Divine. By his contempt and proud disdain, Hamlet risks the mortal sin of self-deification, a level of prideful egocentricity that concludes in absolutizing the self.

As suggested earlier, the Ghost reveals to Hamlet his divine vocation or destiny: to cooperate in correcting and purifying the temporal order, to make way for the reign once again of the Divine. Thus, Hamlet is inspired to a zealous spiritual perfection that urges him to act in accordance with the command of the Ghost. Yet, what comes with his spiritual calling is also a malaise that urges only, at times, skepticism and hesitancy, a malaise which is strongest at the start and residually lingers, though eventually overcome, near consummation and death. The malaise of Hamlet is the effect of the inauguration of the

<sup>24</sup> I, ii, 76-86.

psychomachia, the war within the soul between the virtues and the vices for psychic supremacy, the possession of Hamlet's soul. Hamlet himself alludes to the psychomachia when he tells Horatio, "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting That would not let me sleep."<sup>25</sup>

Hamlet's struggle with his divine vocation is an imitation of the Passion and Redemption, for the life of the Christian hero is an imitation of the life of Christ. The Christian hero must suffer in the building of the universal kingdom of Divine Justice, the salvation of the world, i.e., Denmark. The imitator of Christ will necessarily suffer from Satan's (Claudius') sway and also, from the emerging battle within the soul against the presence of sin. In order to live out his divine calling, to perfect himself spiritually, Hamlet must rout and put to flight the sin and vice within himself. To purify the world, the soul must first submit itself to purgation. But for this to happen, Hamlet must experience the awakening of the raging power of evil in his own soul. The soul cannot be purified and made a temple of the Divine if vice remains dormant or hidden; sin must be called out and faced. The process of purification of Hamlet's soul is expressed through the dramatic emergence of sinful thoughts and impulses that are eventually defeated.

After the revelation of the Ghost, Hamlet's natural pride swells to new levels of mischief. It manifests itself through feigned madness, in expressions of radical subjectivity or solipsism, and in a self-reliant individuality that purports to be a law unto itself and to consider its existence in whatever terms it willfully chooses. For example, when confronted by his old "friends," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet engages them as follows:

HAMLET . . . What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?  
ROSENCRANTZ Prison, my lord?

<sup>25</sup> V, ii, 4-5.

HAMLET Denmark's a prison.  
ROSENCRANTZ Then is the world one.  
HAMLET A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.  
ROSENCRANTZ We think not so, my lord.  
HAMLET Why, then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. *To me* it is a prison.<sup>26</sup>

This famous line—that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"—could be spoken truly only by God Himself. In Hamlet's mouth, however, these words amount to a denial of objective reality and truth. What are these words if not an expression of the original sin of man, who rejected God when he ate the fruit so that he himself might become a god, thus knowing both good and evil.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, modern critics and readers of *Hamlet* often quote this line with gleeful approval, finding in Shakespeare an authoritative confirmation of their own subjectivism. They fail to see, however, that Shakespeare presents this as the view of a deeply troubled man who, when he acts upon this false judgment, will leave death and destruction strewn across the stage. We are thinking here of the slaying of Polonius, which in turn leads to the death of Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, and even Hamlet himself.

In his encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet also decries the beauty, majesty, and order of the created universe, and the likeness of man to the Divine:

. . . this goodly frame, the earth, seems *to me* a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing *to me* but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work

<sup>26</sup> II, ii, 240-252, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> *Genesis* 3:5.



is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, *to me*, what is this quintessence of dust?<sup>28</sup>

Hamlet sees the beauty and order in the universe and in man, but he refuses to acknowledge their purpose, which is to reflect the Divine, and in such refusal, therefore, he casts in his lot with the drift of spurious autonomy, highlighted by his repeated use of the telling phrase: "to me." Notice, too, that Hamlet ends his diatribe with the question, "And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" Hamlet must necessarily leave this question unanswered, for he cannot, nor can anyone who holds to subjectivism, give a satisfactory answer to the simple question, "What is a man?" And yet, that he can ask the question at all, gives a kind of existential answer to his own rhetorical question. Hamlet, in his subjectivism, simply refuses to acknowledge the obvious answer that he knows, but will not accept. Therefore, we see Hamlet's radical subjectivity continue to express itself through his persistent inclination to deify himself. For example, when Polonius says that he will use the players according to their own desert, Hamlet snaps back: "God's bodkin, man, much better! Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty."<sup>29</sup> Once again Hamlet's words are appropriate for God alone, with whom Hamlet, in his forgetting of the Divine, has hubristically identified himself.

Hamlet's pride then proceeds to ally itself with certain passions, notably wrath, which brings Hamlet to vexation. Wrath sharpens the personal loss of Hamlet's inheritance, which is the kingdom of his father, namely, paradise. Hamlet's interest in and exuberant portrayal of the "hellish Pyrrhus," "roasted

<sup>28</sup> II, ii, 299-309, emphases added.

<sup>29</sup> II, ii, 529-533.

in wrath and fire,"<sup>30</sup> clearly shows his identification with the wild and vengeful slaughter of Priam. Pride and wrath combine to aggravate Hamlet's subjectivity; instead of viewing himself as serving within a larger Divine purpose, as an instrument of an avenging God to set aright a kingdom reduced to moral turpitude, Hamlet perverts his ministry into vindictive self-gratification. Hamlet now seeks personal revenge, the mere desire to inflict injury for injury done. The storm of wrath and violent desire submerges Hamlet in solipsistic confusion, as evidenced by his soliloquy that appropriately begins with the words, "Now I am alone."<sup>31</sup> Having lost the grasp of the real ground of self-knowledge and his calling, which is the experience of the Divine from whence his identity and purpose derive, Hamlet's pride acts to close him in on himself. Thus, Hamlet is paralyzed by self-doubt and skepticism, and his Divine calling is disabled.

But just as pride and wrath, and their ironic offspring, self-doubt and skepticism, seem to be victorious over the soul, the divine spark or grace suddenly reasserts itself in Hamlet through an appeal to "god-like reason."<sup>32</sup> That faculty helps to quell his passion and raise his enterprise to more virtuous and objective terrain, what Hamlet calls "grounds More relative."<sup>33</sup> Reason emerges in Hamlet to subdue anger and passion in general, and to lead him out of subjectivity by harmonizing the intuitive experience of the supernatural with reasonable evidence within the natural world. Thus, Hamlet decides to test the Ghost's story by using the players to prompt Claudius to reveal his guilt. At the same time, if we look at the darker side of Hamlet's motivation, we see that Hamlet's self-deification has led him to the idea of creating his own world within the world, what comes to be the famous play within the play. Consider, in this context, Hamlet's words

<sup>30</sup> II, ii, 450-464.

<sup>31</sup> II, ii, 549.

<sup>32</sup> IV, iv, 38.

<sup>33</sup> II, ii, 604-605.

to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which follow immediately after his famous line that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." There Hamlet says, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."<sup>34</sup>

In Act III, Scenes ii and iii, Hamlet has reached the nadir of his spiritual journey, i.e., hell. In fact, throughout this significantly central part of the play, Hamlet has much in common with Claudius as the diabolical tendencies within the Prince are exposed as a prelude to their purgation. Both Claudius and Hamlet in Act III, Scene i, speak of their burdens in relation to their consciences: Claudius' self-recrimination culminates in his crying out to himself "O heavy burden!" and Hamlet asks himself, "Who would fardels bear" in his famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy.<sup>35</sup> Both see conscience, the prick and reflection of moral reason, the embassy of the Divine within the soul, as an obstacle to their happiness, if not as an outright opponent or adversary. Indeed, there is a curious rising and falling of stars during the progress of these three scenes with regard to Claudius and Hamlet, respectively. Claudius' star rises, whereas Hamlet's falls, until they meet on similar ground in the chapel scene.

Claudius' sense of his burden in the first scene of Act III appears more noble than Hamlet's, because Claudius expresses a clear and objective awareness of the blackness of his soul, of his own flaws and sins. Hamlet, on the other hand, in his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy has glossed over through generality his own self-pity. He is utterly turned in upon himself and therefore has lost—as an aftermath of the unholy alliance of pride and passion—the intellectual vision of the end and purpose of human suffering, and particularly his own. He has lost sight of the obligation to bear the destiny imposed or ordained by the Divine. Suffering appears purposeless to

<sup>34</sup> II, ii, 255-257.

<sup>35</sup> III, i, 55, 77.

Hamlet; hence, existence is pointless and the continuation of living, folly. But what is of even greater folly is Hamlet's perverse reduction of the goad of conscience to a mere advocate of cowardly self-preservation and fear of death. This soliloquy is a discourse on death, on being and non-being, as the play as a whole is; yet Hamlet has completely misunderstood its significance. Hamlet believes that, because conscience has made a coward of him, it has saved his life. But not until he jumps into the grave, literally and figuratively, in Act V, Scene i, that is, until he voluntarily and spiritually dies, as in dying to the self, will he save his life and avoid damnation.

After his well-known soliloquy, we witness further manifestations of the impairment of Hamlet's moral integrity, especially in his treatment of Ophelia, the significance of which we will consider later. Then, through the play within the play—a device of reason inspired by the Divine—Hamlet acquires a natural perception of heavenly authority in the world. Discursive reason, on the basis of natural evidence, confirms the intuitive experience of Divine Truth. Indeed, after Claudius publicly reveals his guilt, Hamlet says to Horatio, "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?"<sup>36</sup> Hamlet is thus emancipated from the windowless enclosure of his own subjectivity and skepticism—his "nutshell,"<sup>37</sup> as it were—by the objective reality of heaven. Reason, however, is not immune from pride, and therefore hell will wax before it wanes. We are not completely surprised, then, to find Hamlet planning to visit his mother after the success of his play, rather than proceeding directly to a confrontation with Claudius.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Hamlet's immediate response to Claudius' show of guilt has prepared us for this crucial mistake. Although Hamlet affirms the truth of the Ghost's story, nevertheless he is more focused on

<sup>36</sup> III, ii, 284-285.

<sup>37</sup> II, ii, 255.

<sup>38</sup> III, ii, 382.

celebrating his own skill as a playwright than he is upon killing the guilty Claudius. Before Hamlet even acknowledges the truth of what the Ghost has revealed to him, Hamlet says to Horatio: "Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers . . . get me a fellowship in a cry of players?"<sup>39</sup> Hamlet has all but forgotten that the success of his device—the "Mousetrap," as he calls his play—was wholly dependent upon the plot as revealed to him by the Ghost. Whatever artistic ability Hamlet employed—and it was relatively minimal, although admittedly brilliant—it was necessarily subordinate to the divine inspiration lent by the Ghost. Art, as Hamlet himself earlier lectured the players, is an imitation of nature,<sup>40</sup> and in this case, of what is above nature. Yet Hamlet, like a modern artist, celebrates and revels in his own creative powers. Shakespeare, we presume, did not share Hamlet's presumption concerning his own plays, especially *Hamlet* itself, where this lesson in humility is clearly taught.

As we have mentioned, Claudius, by virtue of self-accusation, appears, at this point in the play, to recommend himself more than Hamlet, who is not particularly impressed with his own deficiencies, imperfections, or sinfulness. In the chapel scene, however, Claudius is revealed as finally unregenerate in spite of his ritualistic attempt at reconciliation with heaven. By contrast, Hamlet, with the aid of reason, although with a strong admixture of pride, has refocused his spiritual life in pursuit of his divinely ordained end: the regaining of paradise through the vanquishing of the Devil, Claudius. Yet, reason alone will not unite Hamlet with heaven; he will not accomplish his spiritual goal simply by reasoning his way there. The Divine is, ultimately, supra-human, hence supra-rational. So man must, in the final ascent, allow himself to be wholly guided to salvation, elevated to paradise, rather than try to

<sup>39</sup> III, ii, 273-276.

<sup>40</sup> III, ii, 19-24.

lead himself, a lesson which will be expressly taught in the last Act of the play. This explains why Hamlet does not, and indeed cannot, slay Claudius in the chapel.

The chapel scene depicts the limitations of human calculation and the error of a rationality turned rationalism. Reason spurred by pride has reasoned to excess, has falsely lead Hamlet to believe that he has reached the Divine sphere of power, the power over eternal life or death. Hamlet, in his speech before Claudius in the chapel, has presumed an equality with heaven in the judgment and sentencing of the soul; he presumptuously reasons the power to dispatch Claudius directly to heaven or hell, to save or to damn him. Accordingly, Hamlet does not view himself as an instrument of Divine purification of the world, but as someone to whom the gratification of injury for injury is due. As a result, Hamlet is lead astray by himself, by his excessive ratiocination, for in fact Claudius is ripe for dispatch—a reality hidden from natural reason—since secretly Claudius cannot and will not atone. Ironically, Hamlet, who identifies himself with Being, and not seeming, is here deceived by appearances. Hamlet himself is not ripe or ready to play his part since he cannot return the Devil to the region below the world until he has exiled sin from his own soul. Accordingly, Hamlet, whose reason is captive to his pride, spares Claudius when he should slay him, and then, almost immediately thereafter, he accidentally slays Polonius when he should spare him. Here, at the height of his self-deification, reality crashes in upon Hamlet when he tries to carry out, according to the dictates of his own limited mind, the two god-like functions of slaying and sparing. These two extreme actions, which man can execute properly only under Divine guidance, are tragically switched by the all too human Hamlet.

Scene iv of Act III begins the purgatorial process of Hamlet's soul, and this requires the intervention of grace, i.e., the reappearance of the Ghost. Hamlet proceeds to his mother's chamber to represent her fallen self to her, to set up before

her a glass,<sup>41</sup> a mirror, so that she may see or understand herself and what she has become. Hamlet must create a true image or verbal portrait of his mother to separate her from herself in order that she, the subject, may become the object of knowledge for herself. Hamlet must play the artist, for through art—the still representation of nature in motion—comes human knowledge and from that, self-knowledge and the reformation of character. Here Hamlet's notion of art is Aristotelian and Medieval: art is the mirroring or imitation of Nature. Now art, in this vein, edifies by making of Nature an object of reflection—separated from the knowing subject and removed from the flux of experience—through the sensible portrayal of her both as she is and as she ought to be. Hamlet, the artist, wishes to reform his mother by subjecting her to his portrait of her as she was in the days of King Hamlet, and as she is in her currently corrupt state. Note that Hamlet literally uses art, the portraits of King Hamlet and Claudius, to teach Gertrude in this scene. Hamlet says to her: "Look here upon this picture, and on this, The counterfeit presentment of two brothers."<sup>42</sup> By means of the entire play itself, of course, Shakespeare seeks to do the same for us.

But the combination of pride and moral reasoning in Hamlet has made him self-righteously indignant, to say nothing of fostering a judgment severe and unrelentingly harsh, without self-reproach and compassion. Now, if Gertrude is in need of regeneration, so too is Hamlet, for Gertrude symbolizes Nature through which and out of which Hamlet (i.e., Man) is brought into existence; thus, Hamlet must partake of "nature's livery,"<sup>43</sup> of defect, corruption, and sin. Hamlet rails against his mother without compassion, a compassion that can spring only from the recognition of his participation in her corruption. Such a recognition is possible only by the grace of God.

<sup>41</sup> III, iv, 20-21.

<sup>42</sup> III, iv, 54-55.

<sup>43</sup> I, iv, 32.

Hence, in the midst of Hamlet's rage, the Ghost of King Hamlet, on whose mortal brow "grace was seated,"<sup>44</sup> intervenes to remind Hamlet of his own dereliction, of disservice to his king and father, which is to say, to the Divine. Recall that at the conclusion of his first visit, the Ghost had warned Hamlet to leave his mother to heaven. Here the "visitation" breaks the Prince's proud if righteous fury and softens his heart, making of him that "penetrable stuff"<sup>45</sup> that Hamlet would have his mother's heart become with respect to truth.

By bidding Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul,"<sup>46</sup> the Ghost commands Hamlet to minister or render pastoral care to his mother rather than condemn her. This means that man must imitate the Redeemer by helping to recover the fallen world (i.e., Gertrude) for the Creator. He does so through obedience to the Divine Will, thus becoming a spiritual knight in the hosts of the Redeemer, assisting and showing corrupted Nature the way back to Light and victory over the dark adversary of sin. The Ghost illuminates by reminding Hamlet that, though his end is beyond nature, his vocation is in the natural world, that he must heal her divisions, and that, moreover, he is also a creature of nature and subject to her divisions, the opposition between spirit and recalcitrant flesh. Hamlet therefore advises Gertrude as follows: "Confess yourself to heaven, Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,"<sup>47</sup> but he will also add, "And when you are desirous to be blest, I'll blessing beg of you."<sup>48</sup> In this way Hamlet, the artist, is brought not simply to exhibit a portrait of tainted Nature, but to observe himself in it as well, and to see, furthermore, the possibility of redemption, of a purified nature to which he in turn will owe veneration as a sign of holiness pointing the way to the Divine. We cannot hear

<sup>44</sup> III, iv, 56.

<sup>45</sup> III, iv, 37.

<sup>46</sup> III, iv, 117.

<sup>47</sup> III, iv, 156-157.

<sup>48</sup> III, iv, 178-179.

Hamlet's words here—"And when you are desirous to be blest, I'll blessing beg of you," without thinking of Mary, the second Eve, who is nature perfected. As for the dead Polonius, Hamlet concludes by saying to Gertrude, "For this same lord, I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so, To punish me with this, and this with me, That I must be their scourge and minister. I will bestow him and will answer well The death I gave him."<sup>49</sup> The rejection of the desire for revenge for the purposes of personal satisfaction, and the acceptance of his instrumentality with regard to Providence, are dramatic signs of Hamlet's and the play's turn from hell to purgatory.

Hamlet's recognition of his own participation in Nature's corruption initiates the purgation of his soul and the recovery of his, and through him, Nature's union with the Divine (King Hamlet), which was lost through the commerce of Gertrude (Eve or Nature) with Claudius (Satan). Hamlet, by regeneration, is to become a second Adam. And this possibility of reuniting with heaven suggests that while man is a creature of nature, the horizon of his being is not limited to nature. Man is born out of nature but is created and endowed with the likeness of Supernature, by the Spirit which has issued from eternity the ideal of nature, and which directs her by grace to her end or perfection. Shakespeare thus distinguishes between the gnostic, or, what is more relevant to his own day, the puritanical view of visible nature as utterly vile, and the Christian view which respects nature's essential goodness and ultimate ordination to heaven, as seen in the marriage of King Hamlet and Gertrude, the marriage of heaven and earth. King Hamlet is likened to the sun-god, Hyperion, a symbol of the Spirit, Pure Act, whereas Gertrude represents the feminine sub-lunar world of material nature where seeming or appearance and mutability, as well as receptivity, are characteristic. Hamlet, as Man, lives between these reaches, thus constituting the cosmic or metaphysical drama of the play. As Hamlet says

<sup>49</sup> III, iv, 179-184.

to Ophelia concerning his own dilemma, "What should such fellows as I do, crawling between heaven and earth?"<sup>50</sup> By likeness and receptivity, man's nature is open to Supernature, until it is closed off by deadly sin, as indicated by Gertrude's blindness to the Ghost, her inability to "see" metaphysical Reality.

As a result of the Ghost's second visit, Hamlet's sinful presumption of superhuman judgment has been discovered and vanquished by humble recognition of limitation and the moral and metaphysical distance between man and Spirit. Hamlet is able to see himself properly as the freely cooperating instrument of Divine purpose in the spiritual war against the Devil, rather than as co-judge or co-equal with heaven; the lesson of leaving the judgment and sentencing of souls to heaven and conscience<sup>51</sup> is ultimately learned.

Pride is finally exiled from Hamlet's soul, and he is left to reflect on the use and over-indulgence of "god-like reason."<sup>52</sup> Right thinking is the basis, indeed, the indispensable condition of right conduct; great acts require sufficient reasons. Hamlet now remarks, "Rightly to be great, Is not to stir without great argument."<sup>53</sup> Hamlet has come to understand, to grasp rationally the revelation, that is, his experience of the Divine, and to find empirical confirmation. Natural reason with the aid of grace has succeeded in bringing to light the Prince's supernaturally ordained end despite the obfuscation of sin. Yet sinfully excessive thinking—"Of thinking too precisely on the event"<sup>54</sup>—has prevented Hamlet from properly acting toward the realization of his end, though he had earlier counseled Horatio of the limitations of human reason.<sup>55</sup> The Prince's rationalism is a reduction of the experience of the

<sup>50</sup> III, i, 128-130.

<sup>51</sup> I, v, 85-89.

<sup>52</sup> IV, iv, 38.

<sup>53</sup> IV, iv, 53-54.

<sup>54</sup> IV, iv, 41.

<sup>55</sup> I, v, 167-168.

supernatural to the natural scope of thought, thereby confusing his obligation to the Divine with self-service, that is, with following the dictates of his reason alone as adequate to achieve conformity with the Divine call. This kind of self-reliance resulted in a misguided humanism, in reasoning within his own terms and in keeping with personal and vindictive desire. Hence, subsequent to the rational confirmation attending the experiment of Hamlet's dramatic production, we are witness to a series of towering misperceptions or misadjustments: the inauspicious chapel scene, the accidental murder of Polonius, and the initial inveighing against Gertrude. Hamlet attempted to limit the Divine Being and Will to the ever refining and confining activity of prescriptive thought which is to conflate the Divine with the human by making of the Divine something academic, something merely logical. In a word, Hamlet had a notional rather than a real understanding of the Divine; he could think about it, but it was not a reality for him. Hamlet, the student, had made the upper world solely theoretical: in speech only. He could not bridge the gap between himself and the Divine until the Divine became, once again, a salvific reality through an experience of grace and moral action. This could only come about by a supernatural movement and guidance of Hamlet's will—the kind of guidance we will see Hamlet testify to in Act V—accompanied by a conscious submission and decision to act in accordance with revealed command. This bespeaks of a sacred receptivity of soul and a unity of thought, affection, and will which bears resemblance to the Sacred Heart of the Redeemer, who Hamlet will imitate as the slayer of Claudius (Satan) and the redeemer of Denmark (the soul, the city, and the world).

The treatment of Polonius and his family by Hamlet is vital to the understanding of the play at this juncture. Polonius is a creature of convention. His mental and moral horizon is confined to the positive constitution or de facto political and legal order of the state of Denmark, and therefore is insensible to the possibility of its corruption in the light of the

natural moral order and supernatural law. His sententiousness is characterized by a traditional index of bourgeois morality that accounts thrift, shrewdness, and respectability above unconventional nobility. And despite his moralizing, he is blind to the immorality of Claudius' conduct; Polonius is merely the servant of the positive state, good or bad, whether ruled by Hyperion or a satyr. Polonius' political humanism restricts his search for the truth into the mystery of Hamlet to material causality alone: Polonius ascribes all of Hamlet's motives to the carnal, whereas, interestingly, Claudius, because of his own confrontation with and defiance of the natural and supernatural order, recognizes something truer and greater in Hamlet. Polonius contrasts with Horatio as the side of convention that is closed, if not inimical, to guidance or reform of the state and its social life by the transcendental view of a Hamlet, and by the eternal verities such a view presupposes. Polonius represents that portion of the state that has been corrupted by its association with Claudius who would, to safeguard his usurped position, prevent the political community from suffering moral scrutiny and regeneration. By slaying Polonius, Hamlet has cleansed the state of part of the effect, but not the source of its corruption that is, of course, Claudius.

As regards Polonius' daughter, Ophelia, Hamlet's rejection of her grows out of his prideful and overly facile rejection of the world of seeming. As Hamlet says immediately after his first meeting with the Ghost,

Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> I, v, 98-105.

or willfulness, which manifests itself in natural and human disorder.

Now although Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, and thus subject to his authority, she nevertheless exhibits a genuine love for Hamlet and thus a certain receptivity to the higher order which he represents. Nonetheless, Hamlet associates her, along with his mother, with vitiated Nature, a nature impaired by the Fall, i.e., the ascendancy and reign of Claudius in Denmark, and, thus, estranged from the Divine. Hamlet, in his pride, apparently reasons that if he were to turn toward Ophelia, he would abandon his divine vocation and mission, and instead embrace the world of seeming and becoming. But by rejecting her, and turning his prideful wrath against her, Hamlet leaves her to the formless world of chaos, namely, her mental demise and watery death. Without direction from the formal world outside and beyond the natural order, there is only psychic disintegration and non-being. This psychic state is analogous to matter without intelligible form. Such a state is without rational or divine bearing, which means inevitably the miserable torment of perpetual doubt and servitude to deception, endless and everlasting anxiety and confusion, in short, chaos, or the kingdom of the creature who is most divorced from the Creator, namely, Satan. Hamlet apparently rejects Ophelia because he despairs of any redemption for the material world, just as he despairs of the worth of his own existence. "Get thee to a nunnery" is the sum total of his "advice" to her,<sup>61</sup> and this advice is itself confused and self-contradictory since Hamlet gives it while simultaneously insisting that she should believe no man, including himself.<sup>62</sup> Thus Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia represents a mistaken rejection of the world as unredeemable by God. Her madness, then, is a reflection of his own descent toward self-destruction and separation from Divine Being.

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<sup>61</sup> III, i, 122-152.

<sup>62</sup> III, i, 122-130.

This play has as its primary theme, Being, the Real as opposed to mere seeming to be, and the soul's journey or ascent from the world of becoming and passing away to the eternal realm of Absolute Being. Individual existence out of touch with its universal Source and final cause tends toward death, non-being, or nothingness. The soul turned in on itself and away from the Divine has only arbitrary reasons, or no reasons at all, for suffering "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."<sup>63</sup> Therefore, such a soul must drift from the grasp of order and life, from the bond with the eternal Being who brings forth order out of chaos. Even so, Hamlet expressed a truth when he said of death, "'Tis a consummation, Devoutly to be wished."<sup>64</sup> At the time of this utterance, Hamlet's use of the word "devout" was more ironic than he knew. His view of life and death was limited to corporeal being because he had lost touch with Divine Being. Life and its sufferings seemed pointless, while bodily extinction presented itself as increasingly desirable, until hyperbolic self-pity added further confusion and hesitation with ponderings on the possibility of more misery after death.<sup>65</sup> Yet the answer to the Prince's troubles, the path to knowledge and union with Truth and Being, is death, a spiritual death and regeneration. How this is brought to pass in the course of the drama will be explained shortly.

It is through the purgation of self-centering sin and obedience to the will of his father that Hamlet is able to recover his divine purpose. The accomplishment of this purgation, obedience, and recovery can only be effected by a spiritual death which leads to spiritual consummation: the death or surrender of the old self and the rebirth, through the action of grace, of the new and sanctified self, a soul ordered—intellect, will, and passion—to heaven and the divine life.

<sup>63</sup> III, i, 59.

<sup>64</sup> III, i, 64-65.

<sup>65</sup> III, i, 77-83.

To this end the individual must first humble himself through meditation on his own nothingness apart from the Divine, on his own vanity and mortality. When Hamlet returns from his voyage, he enters a graveyard, which is the occasion for just such a meditation upon death in the form of the skull of the King's jester, Yorick.<sup>66</sup> The obvious change of mood, the atmosphere and acute transformation of tone here, clearly suggest a transformation of spirit and the passing away of old eruptions of self-justification, all of which signal Hamlet's dying to his old self. Imperiousness, pride, wrath, the willfulness and wantonness, and finally the passion for personal revenge—a litany of deadly sins—which dominated and characterized Hamlet earlier, have now been superceded by a contemplative serenity and humility.

Hamlet's leap into Ophelia's grave, after Laertes jumps in first, summarizes Hamlet's voyage to sanctification. The grave represents both death, figuratively and literally, and the pit of hell. The three young nobles in the play—Laertes, Hamlet, and Fortinbras—are symbolic aspects of Hamlet himself. The Prince observes of his youthful adversary, Laertes,

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,  
That to Laertes I forgot myself,  
For by the image of my cause I see  
The portraiture of his.<sup>67</sup>

Laertes is an image of Hamlet's old self—full of hurt pride and wrath, and dominated by the need to gratify his vindictive spirit through personal revenge.<sup>68</sup> Laertes' soul has been corrupted by Claudius who has exhorted that "Revenge should have no bounds."<sup>69</sup> So when Laertes shouts at Hamlet, "The devil take thy soul!"<sup>70</sup> this line must be viewed ironically in

<sup>66</sup> V, i, 172-204.

<sup>67</sup> V, ii, 75-78.

<sup>68</sup> IV, v, 131-138.

<sup>69</sup> IV, vii, 128.

<sup>70</sup> V, i, 259.



light of Laertes' own possession by Claudius. Thus, the character of Laertes serves to mark the distance traveled by Hamlet from his desire for personal revenge to his willingness to serve as the instrument of divine revenge. Likewise, we can clearly see at this point the difference between the vengeance imposed by the Ghost on behalf of the Divine, and that which is imposed by Claudius on behalf of the Satanic.

As Hamlet grapples with Laertes in the grave, we are witness to a symbolic action manifesting an inward reality: the psychomachia of Hamlet and his descent into hell. Here in the pit with Laertes, Hamlet is wrestling with his old, sinful, and diabolical self, the presence of Claudius within the soul. And the fact that Hamlet ultimately vanquishes Laertes and Claudius is testimony to his victory over the corrupt self.

Furthermore, Hamlet advises Laertes to "Be buried quick with her, and so will I."<sup>71</sup> This sheds more light on the whole meaning of the grave symbolism, and the journey and sufferings of the Christian hero. After rejecting Ophelia, Hamlet in effect returns to her. He now openly acknowledges his love for her, which signifies his new understanding of nature as redeemable. But to achieve a spiritual union with the Divine, a gracious and saving participation in the Divine nature, Hamlet had to suffer the spiritual death of the fallen man in order to receive the Spirit. Ophelia's grave, her world of water and death, points to this mode of Nature, formless yet open to form, and the pure receptive state of the soul, dark yet open to Light and Being, like the waters of *Genesis*. Thus, we are brought, by suggestion, to the water and grave symbolism connected with the sacrament of baptism: to be baptized is to be buried and reborn with Christ, and no man can attain heaven except through water and the Spirit. Such is the significance of Hamlet's advice to Laertes—to be cleansed as Hamlet is himself cleansed of original and secondary sins, the marks of Satan; but Claudius has hardened Laertes' heart against any

<sup>71</sup> V, i, 279.

reformation or transformation. Laertes has cast out of himself the feminine nature, i.e., the receptivity of the soul for sanctifying grace, by "casting out" Ophelia and water. As Laertes says of his own tears, "When these are gone, The woman will be out."<sup>72</sup>

We discover, in addition, by Hamlet's account of his time at sea—a period suggestive of the psychomachia and the symbolism of water and death just discussed—how the Prince entered into the dark night of the soul beyond the senses and the light of reason, beyond "deep plots,"<sup>73</sup> groping, until divinity shaped his destiny and led him away from death so that he might live to crush the head of the serpent, Claudius.<sup>74</sup> When he was busy with passion and the scope of reason, he could not accomplish the end to which he was called. When he sought to hold on to life and self, he was lost; and when in danger of losing them beyond credible recovery, he was, by grace, redeemed. The spiritual death or psychic receptivity of baptismal experience rendered possible a spiritual communion with heaven—a communion which permits a vision of providential design in all things no matter how small, like the "fall of a sparrow." This communion is marked by a redirection of passion to divine rather than human purposes. The desire for personal revenge is now utterly gone from Hamlet's soul, and he speaks of a willing submission to Providence:

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.<sup>75</sup>

Hamlet's complete transformation is summarized not only in his solemn and noble resolve, "The readiness is all," but also,

<sup>72</sup> IV, vii, 188-189.

<sup>73</sup> V, ii, 9.

<sup>74</sup> V, ii, 1-25.

<sup>75</sup> V, ii, 217-222.

and most perfectly, in his final words, "Let be." It cannot be accidental, that Hamlet's last words before his final confrontation with Claudius recall the first word spoken by God in *Genesis: Fiat*, or "Let be." Through these words, we are brought back to the pristine purity and primordial order of God's creation, an order which has now been re-established in Hamlet's soul. Hamlet's speech here, therefore, provides the perfect response to his earlier, and sadly, more renowned, "To be, or not to be" speech of Act III. There the human subject viewed himself and the world subjectively, and thus despaired of life and Being. Here Hamlet, as subject, views himself objectively, and thus fully embraces life and Being. Hamlet now rejects the false choice of "To be, or not to be," with its illusion of false power, false autonomy, and false knowledge. As a result, any reluctance or hesitation has been completely eclipsed by Hamlet's immediate readiness to submit to the authority of the Divine. Hamlet is willing and spiritually prepared to carry out Divine purpose as communicated to him through the figure of his father, who is a sign of the heavenly Father. With the above declaration, Hamlet and Providence have already succeeded in expunging the Devil, Claudius, from the soul, which is the precursor of the overthrow of Claudius' reign over the world, Denmark, as will be suggested by his slaying.

Hamlet, at the end, stands on the threshold of Paradise. This state of affairs is suggested by a significant transfer, so to speak, of Hamlet's identity to the young prince, Fortinbras. Just as Laertes represented the old, corrupt self of Hamlet, Fortinbras represents the new or regenerated self of the Prince of Denmark. Fortinbras disposes of the carnage and restores order. Denmark has been cleansed, paradise regained, and her new virtue and sanctity is symbolized in her new living head whose life is simply a reflection of Hamlet's spiritual glory and eternal inheritance.

In sum, the life of Hamlet is an imitation of Christ, subject to the human and personal struggle with the effects of

the Fall. Hamlet, the Christian hero, becomes and is a son of God. This completes the Christian vision of Shakespeare's play without diminishing the tragedy. As the suffering and profound sadness of the human drama of the Passion and the Crucifixion is undiminished by the superhuman drama of the Resurrection, so the suggestion of Hamlet's immortality does not change the tragic circumstances of the end of his earthly ministry.