



A 'Trivial' Reading of *Hamlet*

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A 'Trivial' Reading of *Hamlet*

Both Shakespeare and his audience were accustomed by their schooling to read a work in terms of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). That their school habits were carried into adult life and onto the stage is evident,¹ for example, in Jonson's *The Alchemist* when Subtle expostulates with Kastril :

O, this's no true Grammar,
And as ill *Logick* ! You must render causes, child,
Your first, and second *Intentions*, know your *canons*,
And your *divisions*, *moodes*, *degrees*, and *differences*,
Your *praedicaments*, *substance*, and *accident*,
Series externe, and *interne*, with their *causes*
Efficient, *materiall*, *formall*, *finall*,
And ha' your *elements* perfect. (IV.ii.21)

Subtle offers to teach Kastril how to quarrel :

I'll ha' you to my chamber of demonstrations,
Where I'll show you both the *Grammar*, and *Logick*
And *Rhetorick* of quarreling ; my whole method,
Drawne out in tables. (IV.ii.63)

Rhetoric is the art of finding in any subject matter the available means of persuasion. Three modes of persuasion are possible : *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*.

Ethos is the persuasion exerted upon the minds and hearts of the audience by the personal character of the speaker causing them to believe in his truth, his ability, his good will toward them. Both *logos* and *pathos* promote *ethos*, for people more readily believe and trust a speaker who reasons clearly and cogently (*logos*) and who creates in them a friendly and sympathetic attitude toward himself and what he has to say (*pathos*) ; spontaneous and genuine feeling in him begets a like feeling in them and convinces them of his sincerity. Although *ethos* has special reference to the speaker, *logos* to the speech, and *pathos* to those spoken to, all three modes of persuasion are intrinsic to the speech, all are under the control of the speaker, and the measure of success of all three is the effect on the hearers.²

1. For detailed evidence see my *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947) and T. W. BALDWIN, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, 1944). Compare also JONSON, *Discoveries*, ed. Castelain, p.122.

2. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, 1.2. 1356 a 1-25 ; 2.1. 1377 b 25-35. For a selected, detailed treatment of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* by Renaissance critics, rhetoricians, and logicians (Montaigne, Melanchthon, Susenbrotus, Ramus, Ascham, Brinsley, Kempe,

Of the three arts of the trivium, rhetoric was dominant in the Renaissance. It is, moreover, the architectonic art which governs the other two, logic and grammar, and in a sense subsumes them. Furthermore, while acknowledging that it is poetic which treats of the structure of tragedy, we may, without denying essential differences, observe important likenesses between poetic, rhetoric, logic, and grammar.

Of the six formative elements of tragedy which Aristotle discusses in the *Poetics*, five are related to the three modes of rhetorical persuasion: character determines the persuasion of *ethos*; ¹ thought ² and plot (which is defined as a cause and effect, and thereby as a logical relationship)³ are closely related to *logos* of the *Rhetoric* and also to the Logic (*Organon*); melody ⁴ and, frequently, spectacle ⁵ are related to *pathos*, a third mode of persuasion treated in the *Rhetoric*.⁶ Diction,⁷ a sixth formative element, includes intonation, figures of speech, and grammar for style, matters treated also in the *Rhetoric*.⁸ In addition, we may notice two further points: (1) the essential function which Aristotle ascribes to tragedy, namely, to arouse pity and fear in order to purge the audience agreeably of an excess of these emotions, is related to the persuasion of *pathos*; (2) this catharsis which is the essential function of tragedy is produced primarily by the *ethos* of the tragic hero, because it is through a flaw in his character or by an error of judgment that the protagonist brings upon himself the suffering which arouses in the audience pity and awe.

Since, then, *logos* (thought), *pathos* (arousing emotion), *ethos* (character), and style through grammar are basic in both rhetoric

Cox, Sidney, Harvey, Wilson, Peacham, Puttenham, Sherry, Fraunce, Fenner, Hoskyns, Day, Rainolde, Lever, Blundeville) see *Shakespeare's Use*, pp.7, 18, 23-40, 242, 308-399.

1. "Character in a play is that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, i.e., the sort of thing they seek or avoid" (*Poetics*, 6. 1450 b 8). "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others" (*Rhetoric*, 1.2. 1356 a 4).

2. Aristotle himself notes the relationship: "As for the thought we may assume what is said of it in our Art of Rhetoric [1.2. 1356 b - 1358 a 35], as it belongs more properly to that department of inquiry" (*Poetics*, 19. 1456 a 34).

3. *Poetics*, 7. 1450 b 27-32.

4. "Melody is the greatest of the pleasurable accessories of Tragedy" (*Poetics*, 6. 1450 b 16).

5. *Poetics*, 14. 1453 b 1.

6. 1.2. 1356 a 14-18; see also *Poetics*, 18. 1456 a 19.

7. *Poetics*, 19-22. 1456 b 8-1459 a 14.

8. 3. 1-12. 1403 b 5, 15-1414 a 28. "The arts of language cannot help having a small but real importance, whatever it is we have to expound to others: the way in which a thing is said does affect its intelligibility" (3.1. 1404 a 8). The Tudor rhetoricians likewise treated the schemes of grammar, both of words and of construction; see *Shakespeare's Use*, pp.293-307.

and poetic, we shall, after glancing briefly at the grammar, interpret *Hamlet* as a whole through *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*.

Through this analysis I hope to demonstrate the high quality of the logic in *Hamlet*; the value that an understanding of *pathos* has in interpreting certain significant passages; and, most important, the light gained from a careful consideration of the strongly Christian *ethos* both of the situation and of the leading characters. With respect to *ethos*, I find in *Hamlet* evidence that the centuries-old Christian doctrine of the discernment of spirits is a key to the understanding of the ghost; that the play is a Christian tragedy; that Hamlet is a Christian hero whose tragic flaw is his failure to measure up to the heroic Christian virtue demanded by the ethical situation and by the ghost; that Laertes, Fortinbras, and Claudius are ethical foils, showing by contrast Hamlet's character to his advantage.

Grammar

Even the briefest attention to the grammar of *Hamlet* can make a modern reader aware of some of the reasons for the vitality of language as Shakespeare used it.

As an example of remarkably effective structure and condensation achieved through skillful word order, we may note:

The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's eye, tongue, sword. (III.i.159.)

The mere juxtaposition of tenses succinctly conveys intense pain when Ophelia sees Hamlet so changed:

O, woe is me
T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (III.i.168.)

Haste and compression are communicated by omitting a word easily understood:

And he to England shall along with you. (III.iii.4.)

Shakespeare freely substitutes one part of speech for another, with happy and varied effects:

And many such-like as's of great charge. (V.ii.43.)

For goodness, growing to a plurisy,
Dies in his own too-much. That we would do
We should do when we would; for this 'would' changes,¹
And hath abatement and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents;
And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh,
That hurts by easing. (IV.vii.118.)

1. This play on verbal auxiliaries might remind us of poems by E. E. Cummings.

The political situation within Denmark is, however, of much greater importance, for it involves the throne itself and for its sake the thrust and counter-thrust "Of mighty opposites" (V.ii.62), as Hamlet himself remarks. He expresses his sense of opposition to the king even through the intermediary agents Rosencrantz and Guildenstern :

O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet. (III.iv.209.)

In this tragedy, the "mighty opposites" are Prince Hamlet, the protagonist, and King Claudius, the antagonist. Each of these two faces an important question, devises means to get the answer, and then acts upon that answer.

Hamlet faces the question, Is Claudius a murderer? Did the ghost tell the truth? Hamlet must have human evidence to corroborate the ghost's revelation of the murder.

How will he get the answer? He adopts two devices : (1) He pretends madness in order to overhear unguarded remarks, especially of the king and queen. This device is unsuccessful because (a) the king is by nature very guarded, and he is suspicious about the genuineness of Hamlet's madness ; and (b) the queen is totally ignorant of the murder (III.iv.30). (2) Hamlet's second device is to observe the king's reaction to the play he has arranged. This is successful. It answers Hamlet's question.

Convinced that the king is guilty, Hamlet acts swiftly and energetically. He discovers the king kneeling in the attitude of prayer and draws his sword to kill him. Then he reflects that it would hardly be revenge to send his repentant soul to heaven. Therefore he decides to wait for a fitter time and goes to see his mother, who has sent for him. There, finding the fitter time apparently so soon at hand, he thrusts his sword through the curtain, thinking the person hiding behind it is the king. Instead he has killed Polonius. Through this error of judgment Hamlet puts himself into his uncle's power, gives him the upper hand. This action is the turning point of the play, the cause of the chain of events that follow : the madness and death of Ophelia, the revenge of Laertes, the death of Hamlet.

Hamlet's antic disposition poses for Claudius the question : Why is Hamlet mad? Is he really mad?

To get the answer, Claudius adopts two devices : (1) He sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, to probe him on disappointed ambition (II.ii.1-18 ; Hamlet himself frequently hints that this is the cause). (2) He eavesdrops with Polonius to test the father's theory that it is love for Ophelia that has made Hamlet mad. Claudius concludes that it is not the cause, he doubts that Hamlet is mad, and he senses danger (III.i.170). These devices do not provide the answer.

The queen thinks the cause of Hamlet's madness is her quick remarriage after his father's death (II.ii.56). This is, in fact, the cause of his melancholy and anguish of heart even before Hamlet knows of the ghost's appearance (I.ii.138).

The killing of Polonius provides Claudius his answer ; he realizes that Hamlet intended to kill him (IV.i.13), that he must know of the murder, that he is sane, and that he is his dangerous foe. Moreover, this action has given Claudius reason to send Hamlet away to escape Laertes and the angry populace. How real this danger is is shown when the rebels enter the palace.

Claudius now acts swiftly. He seeks the death of Hamlet by three means : (1) He demands that the King of England behead him immediately upon his arrival there. (Hamlet, " benetted round with villainies," circumvents this plan, V.ii.29.) (2) He plots with Laertes, bent on revenge, to kill Hamlet with an unbated, poisoned sword (IV.vii.139) ; Claudius succeeds in this plot. But with the same sword Hamlet, mortally wounded, kills both Claudius and Laertes. (3) He prepares for Hamlet a poisoned drink, which the queen drinks and dies.

At the opening of the play, Marcellus had asserted " Something is rotten in the state of Denmark " (I.iv.90). At the end, Hamlet, wounded, hears Osric announce that Fortinbras is at hand (V.ii.361). Hamlet summons strength to say :

... I do prophesy th' election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. (366.)

Fortinbras enters, takes charge, and gives orders what to do with the bodies (406). Hamlet has cleansed Denmark at the cost of his life. The prospect is that Denmark will have in Fortinbras a worthy and a competent king. On the ruler " depends/The safety and health of this whole state " (I.iii.21).

Logos as reasoning is a strong element in *Hamlet* and it persuades the audience of the intellectual stature of the characters, especially the hero. Hamlet reflects on the intrinsic excellence of man :

What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! how infinite in faculties ! in form and moving how express and admirable !... the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. (II.ii.315.)

Much as he values reason, Hamlet knows its limitations :

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I.v.166.)

In instructing the players Hamlet explains the final cause, the purpose, of Shakespeare's own art of writing and acting plays, namely,

“ to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature ” (III.ii.24). Directing that the players be well provided for, he gives in an enthymeme a reason which expresses Shakespeare's esteem of his profession : “ Let them be well-us'd ; for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time ” (II.ii.547).

As he watches the gravediggers, Hamlet reflects on a chain of cause and effect :

To what base uses we may return, Horatio ! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a . . . beer barrel ? (V.i.223-235.)

The travesty of logic in fallacious reasoning provides comic effects. The gravediggers are rustic clowns, skilled disputants, their occupation no bar but rather a stimulus to their grim banter in light sophistic :

1 Clown. What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter ?

2 Clown. The gallows-maker, for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.

1 Clown. I like thy wit well . . . The gallows does well. But how does it well ? It does well to those that do ill. Now, thou dost ill to say the gallows is built stronger than the church. Argal, the gallows may do well to thee. (V.i.46.)

When Hamlet asks the clown for what man he is digging a grave, he answers, for no man and no woman ; it is for “ One that was a woman, sir ; but, rest her soul, she's dead ” (146). The gravediggers discuss the decision granting Christian burial to Ophelia, who was judged to have drowned herself, and they complain :

2 Clown. If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial.

1 Clown. Why, there thou say'st ! And the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christen (26).

Mindful that rational judgment constitutes the specific difference between man and beasts, the king, strong in reasoning powers, deplors the state of

poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts. (IV.v.84.)

The importance of the ruler stressed by Rosencrantz accentuates for the audience the crisis in Denmark where a murderer is king :

That spirit upon whose weal depends and rests
The lives of many . . . Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan. (III.iii.14-23.)

The quality of thought which distinguishes *Hamlet* is due in part to the large number of proverbs in the play, more than in any other by Shakespeare. For example :

Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. (I.ii.257.)

What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose. (III.ii.204.)

. . . to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. (III.i.100.)

A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear. (IV.ii.25.)

Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are reliev'd
Or not at all. (IV.iii.9.)

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions ! (IV.v.78.)

Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall. (V.ii.8.)

Pathos

In considering *pathos* in drama it must be remembered that there are two groups of hearers : the other characters in the play whom the speaker immediately addresses, and the audience attending the play, who are the ones ultimately addressed. Good drama must cause the audience to enter vicariously into the play, to share the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Consequently *pathos*, which is, strictly speaking, the temper of mind induced in the hearers by the speaker, includes in drama even more than in other discourse the feelings of the speaker himself.¹ It is precisely by identifying themselves with the persons and events in the tragedy that the audience experiences the catharsis of emotion, the purging through pity and awe. It follows from this identification that to analyse the emotions of the characters with whom the audience is in sympathy is equivalent to analysing the *pathos* of the play.

The importance which Shakespeare attached to *pathos* is expressed in Hamlet's advice to the players : " o'erstep not the modesty of nature " (III.ii.21). " O, it offends me to the soul to hear a . . . fellow tear a passion to tatters " (11). It is evident also in the fact that Hamlet chooses *pathos* as a means to test the ability of the players : " Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech " (II.ii.452).

1. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 17. 1455 a 30-33.

In his first soliloquy Hamlet reveals the anguish of his heart over his mother's remarriage :

Within a month . . . to post . . . to incestuous sheets ! . . .
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (I.ii.157.)

And when Horatio tells him, " I came to see your father's funeral," Hamlet replies :

I think it was to see my mother's wedding . . .
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio. (178-183.)

In my opinion, Shakespeare employs the persuasion of *pathos* as an effective means to convince the characters and the audience of some of the most significant points in this play.

Did Hamlet or anyone suspect Claudius of murder before the ghost revealed it? Hamlet's startled question (or exclamation) to the ghost, " Murder?" (I.v.26) indicates spontaneous, genuine surprise.¹

His mother's unfeigned astonishment evident in her question, "As kill a king?" (III.iv.30) convinces Hamlet (and the audience) that she had no part in his father's murder and was totally unaware of it.

Hamlet's most crucial problem is to obtain convincing human evidence that Claudius is guilty of murder, and he stakes the answer on *pathos*. He devises the ordeal of the play precisely as a means to "tent" his uncle "to the quick," to catch his conscience. The king's emotional reaction completely convinces Hamlet, and Horatio, of his guilt (II.ii.631 ; III.ii.297).

Hamlet experiences the strong persuasion of *pathos* when the ghost appears to him the second time.

Look you how pale he glares !
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable.— Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. (III.iv.125.)

Through a syllogism Hamlet shows toward Claudius dislike and bitterness, the more effective because the queen is not present at this time:

Ham. But come, for England. Farewell, dear mother.

1. Two passages require reconciliation with this view. Hamlet's earlier remark, " I doubt some foul play " (I.ii.256) is a natural but vague suspicion evoked by the report of the apparition ; it is comparable to the suspicion the apparition aroused in Horatio. "This bodes some strange eruption to our state " (I.i.69). The second passage, " O my prophetic soul " (I.v.40), is in accord with the response anyone might make when he learns that a person for whom he felt instinctive dislike (I.ii.152) is discovered to have committed a crime. Moreover, the dramatic structure of the play requires that this be a revelation, for it is the beginning of the action in a cause and effect sequence.

King. Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Ham. My mother! Father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother. Come, for England! (IV.iii.51.)

The persuasive power of *pathos*, affecting the plot, is accentuated in Laertes' words when he sees Ophelia mad:

Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge,
It could not move thus. (IV.v.168.)

Hamlet convinces the audience that he loved Ophelia when he leaps after Laertes into her grave.

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not (with all their quantity of love)
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her? . . .
I'll rant as well as thou. (V.i.292-307.)

Hamlet's emotional responses as shown in his reflections on Yorick (V.i.203), his attitude toward Laertes, "I loved you ever" (V.i.313) and toward Horatio lead the audience to like him.

A difficult problem concerning Hamlet is to determine the cause of his self-recrimination. Is he incapable of action? In my opinion, no (see p. 186 above). Why did he delay? Of necessity, for sound moral reasons (see pp. 198f. below). Why then did he blame himself? For emotional reasons natural to a normal human being in such circumstances.

When a man berates himself, we do not always take him at his own devaluation. Hamlet himself replies to Horatio, who has spoken slightly of himself:

Nor shall you do my ear that violence
To make it truster of your own report
Against yourself.¹ (I.ii.171.)

A man who is highly overwrought may be unfair to himself and we must discount his own testimony against himself. In my opinion, Hamlet misrepresents himself thus in soliloquy.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That, from her working, all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes . . . A broken voice . . . And all . . .

1. I think it likely that Shakespeare lets Hamlet make this remark to alert the audience to keep it in mind later in judging Hamlet himself. Cf. V.i.116-125, 129,136,171, where Hamlet and Horatio alert the audience to Osric's pretentious language; see *Shakespeare's Use*, p.73.

For Hecuba !
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
 That he should weep for her? What would he do,
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? . . . it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this
 I should have fatted all the region kites
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain ! (II.ii.576-607.)

But Hamlet is not pigeon-livered. The delay has been morally necessary ; he himself goes on immediately to say that he must have human evidence that the ghost spoke the truth. In this intensely emotional context, we need not accept at face value his words of self-condemnation. Self-reproach is the natural, sincere, but often unwarranted response to stress. I believe that to understand this passage in terms of *pathos* is of major importance in the interpretation of *Hamlet*.

Ethos

In a play the *ethos* of a person is revealed to the other characters and to the audience through his response to the situation in which he finds himself and to the moral problems he faces.¹

1. The Moral Situation

Although the king of Denmark is elected by the nobles from among the members of the royal family, we gather that he is an absolute monarch whose will is law and who directly exercises power over life and death.²

When Hamlet and Horatio witness the king's guilty conduct at the play, they are convinced by natural, human evidence that the ghost, a supernatural visitor, told Hamlet the truth : that Claudius gained the throne by murdering his brother. Thereby they know that there is indeed " something rotten in the state of Denmark " (I.iv.90).

According to the natural law, reason demands that the state protect the common good by punishing a murderer with retributive justice. Much more strongly does reason demand that the murderer be punished when he corrupts the very seat of government³ which

1. " It is not true . . . that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion ; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses " (ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, I.2. 1356 a 10).

2. The " grand commission " which Claudius sent to the King of England implies absolute power in both kings (V.ii.18, 23-25 ; likewise 46-47).

3. Ironically, the king himself asserts that " no place ", not even the church, " should sanctuarize " murder (IV.vii.128). The same should apply to the throne and the office of king.

he has unjustly won by murder. But in an absolute monarchy the king *is* the state. How then can he be punished? How can the state be cleansed and restored to health for the public good?

Although in Denmark the crown was not strictly hereditary, Hamlet would undoubtedly have succeeded his father as king, had not Claudius interfered in three ways: (1) He cut short his brother's life by violence. Had Hamlet's father lived his full time, he would very likely have publicly named his son his successor, as Duncan named Malcolm and as Hamlet named Fortinbras (V.ii.366; the electors, it is implied, would respect the expressed choice). Moreover, Hamlet would have been older, better qualified to rule. (2) Claudius quickly and cleverly maneuvered to get the nobles to elect him even before Hamlet arrived home after receiving word of his father's death. (3) Claudius quickly married the queen.

Therefore Hamlet, whom even Claudius publicly named as his heir in his first speech from the throne (I.ii.109; cf. III.ii.356), might reasonably regard himself as the person in whom the authority of the state justly resides and upon whom devolves the duty to cleanse Denmark, the body politic, of the canker (V.ii.69) that corrupts it in its most vital spot.

According to the supernatural law, the ghost, after revealing the murder which was suspected by no one, commands Hamlet to revenge (or avenge) it and so to cleanse the state. It is significant that when the ghost brings this message he appears in armor, in his public capacity as king and protector of the state. He comes on an errand of political justice and truth. Horatio concludes from his appearance in armor, "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.69), and Hamlet addresses the ghost, "I'll call thee . . . King, father, royal Dane . . . What may this mean/That thou . . . in complete steel,/Revisits thus?" (I.iv.45-53).

The ghost poses for Hamlet, for the audience, and for the reader the most crucial moral and dramatic problems in the play. Therefore the ghost must receive our close attention in this study. To understand it, much depends on what is "given" in the whole context of the *ethos* of this play.

In any work of dramatic art, whether basically a history like *Richard II*, or a fantasy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the artist creates a "world" suited to his subject-matter. That "world" may be pagan, as in *Julius Caesar*, or Christian, as in *Romeo and Juliet*. It is necessary for the audience or reader to enter into it as "given" by the artist in the text, somewhat as premises are "given" in a theorem in geometry. Now what kind of "world" and characters are "given" in *Hamlet*?

Hamlet is a Christian play with Christian characters and a Christian atmosphere in which the supernatural and the moral are of prime

importance ; and recognition of that fact is essential to understanding it and especially to understanding its *ethos*.

The pile-up of Christian detail in *Hamlet* is impressive. It is assuredly both deliberate and significant.

Marcellus remarks that no spirit dare stir in " that season . . . / Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated " (I.i.158-164).

Concerned about Hamlet's safety, Horatio prays, " Heaven secure him ! " (I.v.114). Twice he swears secrecy " by heaven " (120, 122). He exchanges " God bless you " with the sailors (IV.vi.6-9).

Ophelia declares that Hamlet has wooed her " With almost all the holy vows of heaven " (I.iii.114). Believing him mad, she prays, " O, help him, you sweet heavens ! . . . O heavenly powers, restore him ! " (III.i.138, 147). In her own subsequent madness, she says, " Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table ! . . . And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God b' wi' you " (IV.v.43, 200). Moved by her pitiful condition, Laertes cries, " Do you see this, O God ? " (201).

Polonius affirms, " I hold my duty as I hold my soul, / Both to my God and to my gracious king " (II.ii.44). Concerning spiritual hypocrisy, he comments, " We are oft to blame in this, . . . that with devotion's visage . . . we do sugar o'er / The devil himself " (III.i.46).

Guildenstern says of Hamlet, " Heavens make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him ! " (II.ii.38). Again he speaks of " Most holy and religious fear " (III.iii.8). Rosencrantz tells Hamlet he has come to bear the body of Polonius " to the chapel " (IV.ii.8).

Speaking of Hamlet, the queen begs Laertes, " For love of God, forbear him " (V.i.296).

Christian terms come easily and frequently to Hamlet's lips : " For God's love let me hear ! " " I'll go pray, " " by Saint Patrick, " " grace and mercy, " " God willing, " " Jephthah, judge of Israel, " ¹ " by'r Lady, " " God bless you, sir, " custom is sometimes an " angel, " " heaven hath pleas'd it so . . . that I must be their scourge and minister, " " I see a cherub, " " he that made us, " " By the Lord, " " By heaven. " ² Hamlet asks Ophelia to pray for him, " Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins rememb' red " (III.i.89). He warns the players not to act like some who have neither " the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man " (III.ii.34). He upbraids his mother for making " sweet religion . . . A rhapsody of words " (III.iv.47). He invokes the guardian angels : " Save me and hover o'er me with your wings, / You heavenly guards ! " (103). Hamlet writes to Horatio : " They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy ; but they

1. Christianity retains the books of the Old Testament, adds those of the New.

2. I.ii.195 ; I.v.132, 136, 180, 187 ; II.ii.422 ; III.ii.141, 390 ; III.iv.162, 173, 175 ; IV.iii.50 ; IV.iv.36 ; V.i.150 ; V.ii.354.

knew what they did" (IV.vi.21, echoing Luke 23 34). When he watches the gravediggers toss up skulls, he remarks, "This might be the pate of a politician . . . one that would circumvent God" (V.i.86).¹

Thus we see that almost every character in the play, whether good or evil, uses Christian terms. Many more examples appear in passages quoted elsewhere in this study.

2. *The Discernment of Spirits*

The Christian doctrine of the discernment of spirits is, I believe, the only rationale concerning spirits which accords with a careful consideration of the text of *Hamlet* and provides a true understanding of the ghost and the play. Fundamental in the action and the atmosphere of the drama, it generates the uncertainty and uneasiness which engage the characters who see the ghost (and the audience) and thereby give it dramatic "life." Because this testing of spirits must deal *successively* with *alternate* possibilities until it discloses the true one, it achieves both suspense and a *unity* impossible to an assumption such as that of J. Dover Wilson in *What Happens in 'Hamlet'* (New York, 1936), pp.60-74, that three separated and opposing views are expressed: Reginald Scot's skepticism by Horatio, King James I's and Ludwig Lavater's Protestant view by Hamlet, and Pierre Le Loyer's traditional Catholic view by Marcellus and Bernardo. Wilson lamely tries to account for Marcellus' (p.67) and Horatio's (p.70) shifts from the theory he assigned to each. Wilson's interpretation has been widely accepted by critics.

In his first epistle, St. John warns the Christian people: "Dearly beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, if they be of God" (4 1; cf. 6). And St. Paul lists among the diverse gifts of the Spirit of God "the discerning of spirits" (1 Co 12 10).

The discernment of spirits is a science that has received attention in the Church since the beginning.² It prescribes three successive steps to determine the character of a spirit: (1) Is a natural explanation of the appearance or the occurrence under consideration possible? Is it due to faulty apprehension of the senses or to illness or to imagination? If natural causes are ruled out, then it is preternatural and

1. This ironical, pithy remark is, I think, a profound comment on the wrong kind of politician in any society. Might Hamlet be thinking of Claudius?

2. See summary in Pope Benedict XIV, "De Servorum Dei Beatificatione, et Beatorum Canonizatione," *Opera Omnia* (Prati, 1840), III, 584-614. Also the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, III, 589; V, 28; XV, 477f. These summaries draw from Scripture, St. Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* (c.270-356; Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, XXVI), St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard's XXIII Sermon, works of St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, St. Catherine of Siena, Gerson, Suarez, etc. The discernment of spirits is applied also to the movements of nature and of grace, as described in Romans 7 19-25 and in *The Imitation of Christ*, Bk. III, Ch.54; cf. *Hamlet* I.v. 53-57.

must be produced either (2) by an evil spirit,¹ or (3) by the power of God acting either indirectly through a holy angel² or through a sanctified human spirit,³ or directly.⁴

These three steps are stages in elimination. The same mind holds these views as alternatives to be sifted, the second to be entertained only after the first has been rejected, the third only after the second has been eliminated. They represent a healthy caution, even a skepticism, that yields only to strong evidence.

We see these steps required in the discernment of spirits exemplified in the play in those who see the ghost, especially in Horatio and Hamlet.

Marcellus tells Bernardo that Horatio does not believe their report about the apparition, but thinks it their fantasy (I.i.23), that is, a phantasm of their imaginations. Horatio then sees the ghost, is harrowed with fear and wonder, and addresses it in religious terms: "By heaven I charge thee speak" (49). Bernardo, seeing Horatio tremble and look pale, asks him: "Is not this something more than fantasy?" (54). Moved by the experience, Horatio declares solemnly:

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes. (56)

So now, Horatio dismisses his proper first hypothesis, that the ghost was a mere delusion of his comrades' imaginations. He does not, however, hastily adopt another, but withholds judgment: "In what particular thought to work I know not" (67). He comments on alleged appearances of the dead when Julius Caesar died (113), and says that similar omens of "fierce events" have occurred among his own countrymen (121). He also remarks, not disbelievingly, that he has heard that the wandering spirit (154) must return to his confine at cock crow. Apparently, Horatio does not disbelieve in the possibility of a ghost appearing, but, as any healthy-minded person who does

1. Cf. Eph 6 11-12.; 2 Co 11 14.; Ap 16 14.; St. Martin resisted the devil when he appeared in the form of Christ (MIGNE, *Patrologia Latina*, XX.174).

2. Cf. Lc 1 11, 26.; the Voices of St. Joan of Arc.

3. Cf. 1 Sm 28 11-25., Qo 46 23. "The weight of both Jewish and early Christian commentators seems to give an affirmative answer to the question: Did Samuel's spirit really appear? . . . It was God rather than the witch who summoned Samuel to make clear the connexion between Saul's present misfortunes and past sins" (*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* [New York, 1953], p.317). Cf. Benedict XIV, p.572. Cf. also St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I, q.89, a.8 ad 2. — Robert H. West in "King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost," *PMLA*, LXX (1955), 1113, makes the curious statement: "The Friar's ghost in Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* . . . and the ghost of Montferrers in *The Atheist's Tragedy* . . . are the Jacobean stage ghosts that *suit* [italics mine] Catholic pneumatology."

4. Ac 9 3-5.; 2 Co 12 4.; Gn 46 1-4.

admit this possibility must do, he doubts any alleged instance until he has adequate evidence. The fact that all three men see the apparition at this time makes it necessary to rule out fantasy.

The ghost reappears and Horatio asks it three questions which were thought to be reasons why a spirit might return from the dead : (1) to ask that some good thing be done to ease the spirit ; (2) to warn his country to avoid an impending danger ; (3) to reveal where extorted treasure is hidden so that its restoration will ease the spirit (130).

Horatio is the spokesman when the three witnesses report the apparition to Hamlet. He is emphatic in stating that there was truly an apparition (I.ii.210, 221), that it is not merely natural, and he states as facts just how long it stayed and how it looked. He is also confident that it will reappear (243). Yet from the first experience Horatio harbors a thought that to encounter the ghost may be dangerous : " I'll cross it, though it blast me " (I.i.127). Hamlet also is from the first mindful of danger :

If it assume my noble father's person
I'll speak to it, *though hell itself should gape*
And bid me hold my peace. (I.ii.244)

When he first sees the ghost, Hamlet utters a prayer and then addresses it in words that explicitly state the doubt that he properly entertains, since it is preternatural, as to whether it is good or evil.

Angels and ministers of grace defend us !
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, . . .
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. (I.iv.39.)

Marcellus is also doubtful whether the ghost is good or evil. He remarks on its courteous action in beckoning Hamlet and yet he warns him : " Do not go with it ! " (62). Horatio echoes the warning more insistently and with more detail : the ghost may lead Hamlet to fall from the cliff into the sea ; or he may assume some horrible form and drive him to madness (70). These two men even seize Hamlet, who wrenches himself free and follows the ghost.¹

After the ghost has departed, Hamlet assures Horatio : " It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you " (I.v.138). This first judgment that the ghost is a good spirit results from his vivid experience and from the ghost's words. Immediate conviction is to be expected under such circumstances.² Horatio, too, had similarly been convinced by his experience and so, earlier, had Marcellus and Bernardo.

1. The voice of the ghost from beneath the stage is clearly a comic bit derived from medieval plays.

2. Cf. ST. TERESA, *Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansion, chap.III, *Complete Works*, tr. and ed. E. Allison Peers, II, 281f. : " It may be some time since [the soul] heard the words ;

But Hamlet's doubt returns, and he must take the next steps in the discernment of spirits. He must use reason to obtain human evidence that Claudius is guilty and the ghost true.

The spirit that I have seen
*May*¹ be a devil ; and the devil hath power
 T' assume a pleasing shape ; yea, and *perhaps* . . .
 Abuses me to damn me. *I'll have grounds*²
More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (II.ii.627.)

Hamlet earnestly asks Horatio, to whom he has meanwhile revealed the ghost's message, to observe independently the reaction of Claudius, so as to make more sure of the truth.

There is a play tonight before the King.
 One scene of it comes near the circumstance,
 Which I have told thee, of my father's death.
 I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
 Even with the very comment of thy soul
 Observe my uncle. *If*³ his occulted guilt
 Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
 It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
 And my imaginations³ are as foul
 As Vulcan's stithy. Give him needful note ;
 For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
 And after we will both our judgments join
 In censure of his seeming. (III.ii.80.)

When the king, unable to endure the scene Hamlet had devised to "tent him to the quick" (II.ii.625), rushes out, Hamlet is convinced of his guilt, and he compares his own judgment with Horatio's.

Ham. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound ! Didst perceive ?

Hor. Very well, my lord.

and both their working within it and the certainty which it had at the time that they came from God have passed away. So these doubts arise, and the soul wonders if the whole thing came from the devil, or can have been the work of the imagination. Yet at the time it had no such doubts and it would have died in defence of their veracity."

1. The force of *may* and *if* is important. These words indicate that the ghost should be regarded as a devil, the second supposition in the discernment of spirits, until positive evidence to the contrary eliminates this alternative. Hamlet at no time entertains a doubt as to the reality of the ghost but only as to whether it is an evil spirit or a good one, an honest ghost. Only Horatio doubts its reality and he later explicitly retracts this doubt (I.i.56).

2. The use of reason to test the preternatural and to corroborate the ghost's message is necessary morally, and Hamlet's delay until he gets the answer is adequately justified. Hamlet emphasizes the sanction of reason and the natural law (V.ii. 63-70).

3. That Claudius is a murderer.

Ham. Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Hor. I did very well note him. (III.ii.297.)

Hamlet has taken the second step in discerning this spirit and he concludes that the ghost is not a devil. From this point on, having eliminated the first two, he unfalteringly holds to the third position, that the ghost is a good spirit sent by God. What matters both morally and dramatically is that Hamlet in his conscience accepts this incident as the needed proof, whether it is strictly adequate objectively or not.

3. *A Christian Tragedy*

These steps in the discernment of this spirit have been external to it. What does the spirit say of itself?

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd¹ away. (I.v.9.)

The spirit claims to be the soul or ghost of Hamlet's father. The words I have italicized indicate that he is undergoing *temporary* punishment in his "prison house" for sins;² that he is being cleansed or *purg'd* by fire; in other words, that he is a soul from purgatory.³

1. The late Monsignor I. J. Semper, in "The Ghost in *Hamlet*: Pagan or Christian," *The Month*, IX (1953), 224, a reply to R. W. Battenhouse, "The Ghost in *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology*, XXVIII (1951), 161-192, has pointed out that precisely these words "burnt and purged" appear in Caxton's translation of *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, ed. F. S. Ellis (London, 1900), VI, 124. This book, reprinted as late as 1527, was one of the popular books in recusant homes. John Shakespeare, the poet's father, was listed among recusants in Stratford; see J. H. DE GROOT, *The Shakespeares and "The Old Faith"* (New York, 1946), p.253. Semper also notes the similarity of "Sulph'rous and tormenting flames" (line 4) with Sir Thomas More, *The Supplication of Souls*, in *Works* (London, 1557), p.337, and with Dante, *Purgatorio*, XXVII, 49-51; he remarks (p.225) that Battenhouse presents (p.189) an inaccurate picture of Dante's purgatory.

2. Only venial sins and imperfections (cf. I.v.79) are purged and thereby removed in purgatory to prepare the purified soul for the Beatific Vision. The souls in purgatory are confirmed in sanctity; they have won salvation, but it is temporarily deferred.

3. Shakespeare uses the word purgatory in *Romeo and Juliet* III. iii.18 and in *Othello* IV.iii.79. Cf. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1936), p.70: "the ghost is Catholic; he comes from Purgatory." Shakespeare's own belief in purgatory is no more involved than is his belief in the advice of Friar Laurence in *R & J* or his belief in fairies in *MND*. Cf. MARLOWE, *Dr. Faustus*: "My lord, it may be a ghost, newly crept out of Purgatory, come to beg a pardon of your Holiness" (III.i.72). There is, however, a strong probability that Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare (*not* the Stratford shoemaker) was a Catholic; his mother was of a Catholic family, and his upbringing was therefore probably Catholic. See DE GROOT, especially pp.10, 14, 100-110, 120. It may be worth noting, too, that Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, belonged to a Catholic family.

The ghost's most bitter complaint is that the murderer deprived him of the benefits of the last sacraments of a dying Christian, namely, Confession, of which he was "disappointed," Communion (Holy Viaticum), for he died "unhous'led," and Extreme Unction, for he died "unanel'd" (77). Lacking these helps, his present suffering is more severe (14-20) than it would otherwise be ;¹ with them, he might not have needed to be detained in purgatory at all.

The ghost could not come from purgatory without God's permission and as a soul confirmed in grace he could not command Hamlet to do evil. He not only reveals Claudius' crime, but he solemnly commands his son :

If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . .
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. (23.)

Can this command be just? As "given" in the play, it is just, because it is a message brought by a spirit, who, as we have seen above, has been tested by reason and eventually proved to be a *good* spirit ; and therefore the command he brings can be only from God, the sole master of life and death.² This message makes Hamlet the agent of Divine justice.

Moreover, although he leaves Hamlet free to exercise human prudence as to the means, the ghost, being a good spirit, solemnly utters two warnings :

. . . howsoever thou pursuest this act,
(1) Taint not thy mind, (2) nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her.³ (84-88)

What is the significance of the warning, "Taint not thy mind" ? To taint is to infect, corrupt, contaminate, deprave, sully, stain.

1. Shakespeare might have read this relevant story in *The Golden Legend* (VI, 127) by Jacobus de Voragine : "there was a noble knight that . . . prayed his cousin that if he died in battle, that he should sell his horse and give the price thereof to poor people. And he died, and that other desired the horse and retained it for himself. And a little while after, he that was dead appeared to that other knight, shining as the sun, and said to him, Cousin, thou hast made me to suffer pain eight days in purgatory, because thou gavest not the price of my horse to poor people, but thou shalt not escape away unpunished." Quoted by Semper, p.227.

2. In *Exodus*, to which Shakespeare alludes seventeen times in his plays, we read that Moses communicated to those who stood with him on the Lord's side God's command to kill those who had worshipped the golden calf (32 27.). Commenting on this passage, St. Thomas writes : "Those who, at the Lord's command, slew their neighbors and friends, would seem not to have done this themselves, but rather He by whose authority they acted thus : just as a soldier slays the foe by the authority of his sovereign, and the executioner slays the robber by the authority of the judge" (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q.64, a.3 ad 1). See Semper, p.228.

3. Here Shakespeare describes guilty conscience.

What can it mean to taint the mind or soul except to sin grievously? Hamlet is a young man who habitually values his soul and his eternal salvation¹ far above his life, which he sets at less than "a pin's fee" (I.iv.64-67). The command to avenge the foul murder must be carried out in such a manner and with such a disposition on the part of the avenger as to incur no sin of anger or hate. One may be angry and not sin (Eph 4 26.), but when it lasts a long time, anger engenders hatred,² and hatred renders an agent of justice unjust.³ Moreover, Hamlet has special need to be warned against hate. In his very first words in the play, spoken aside, Hamlet had shown dislike for Claudius, who had just addressed him as "my son": "A little *more than kin* and less than kind!" (I.ii.65; he was thinking of his uncle, now become his father). As soon as he was alone he had poured out his anguish over his mother's speedy remarriage to this "satyr":

. . . within a month . . .
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
 It is not, nor it cannot come to good. (145, 156.)

Now immediately after the ghost has given him his message and departed, Hamlet, deeply moved, cries out:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
 And shall I couple hell? Hold, hold, my heart! (I.v.91)

Here Hamlet seems to resist the hell of hatred rising in his heart, against which the ghost had warned him. But in a moment he exclaims: "O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!" (106).

1. See II.ii. 627-632; III.ii. 85-89.

2. ST. THOMAS, *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q.46, a.3 ad 3.

3. "In the infliction of a penal evil on one who has sinned . . . we must consider the mind of the avenger. For if his intention is directed chiefly to the evil of the person on whom he takes vengeance, and rests there, then his vengeance is altogether unlawful: because to take pleasure in another's evil belongs to hatred, which is contrary to the charity whereby we are bound to love all men. Nor is it an excuse that he intends the evil of one who has unjustly inflicted evil on him, as neither is a man excused for hating one that hates him" (St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q.108, a.1). These principles apply to a ruler and his agent, the executioner. Cf. Mt 5 44.; 1 Jn 2 9. The ghost has been charged with self-praise and personal vindictiveness incompatible with the characteristics of a saved Christian soul. I do not agree. In my opinion, the ghost, now enlightened as to truth and holiness, can without vanity speak of his own virtue (I.v.47-50) as freely as he does of his own sins (12, 76, 79); and without personal vindictiveness, he can narrate his brother's sins of seduction and murder (42-46, 50-52), impersonally reject pity for himself (5), and, as the messenger of God's wrath sent to promote justice, he can deliver to his son the command to avenge the murder (25; cf. p. 200, note 2) and cleanse the state (82 f.). While thus preserving the ghost's character as a saved soul, Shakespeare makes him not only a messenger from God but also the dramatic agent who tells Hamlet and the audience essential antecedent events in a vivid, impressive scene.

For approximately two months Hamlet seeks until he manages to find the morally necessary independent evidence in the order of nature to corroborate the supernatural revelation of Claudius' crime.¹ When he has thus verified the ghost's message and before he goes to his mother at her request, Hamlet reveals both his rising passion of hate against his uncle and his mother and his effort to restrain it :

... now ... hell itself breathes out
 Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
 And do ... bitter business ...
 O heart, lose not thy nature ; let not ever
 The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom. (III.ii.406.)

On his way, he sees the king kneeling. He raises his sword to execute justice upon the regicide. Blinded by surging hate,² he suddenly conceives that it would hardly be revenge³ "To take him in the purging of his soul" (III.iii.85) and so send him to heaven. Therefore he sheathes his sword and decides to wait for a time when his uncle is

... about some act
 That has no relish of salvation in't —
 ... that his soul may be as damn'd and black
 As hell, whereto it goes. (91)

The hatred that Hamlet expresses here is, I submit, his tragic flaw.⁴ By thus yielding to his personal hatred for Claudius (1) he radically disregards the ghost's warning, "Taint not thy mind" ; (2) ironically, Hamlet misjudges from the outward posture of prayer that Claudius is repentant, forgiven, restored to God's friendship, no longer in a state of sin ; (3) this Christian prince who has so justly delayed to kill Claudius until his reason and his conscience were satisfied that the king is guilty and the ghost true, now through hatred disqualifies him-

1. I agree with Robert R. Reed, Jr., "Hamlet, the Pseudo-Procrastinator," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, IX (1958), 177-186, that Hamlet does not delay because of psychotic factors. In my opinion, his *feelings* about the enforced delay are natural in the circumstances, and I believe Shakespeare put us on our guard against misunderstanding his self-recrimination. Cf. p.191 and foot note.

2. Shortly after this, Hamlet admits to the ghost that "laps'd in time and passion" he has not yet fulfilled the "dread command" (III.iv.107). This recurrence of hate coupled with the frustration of enforced delay may account in part for Hamlet's self-recrimination.

3. Hamlet keenly resents the more intense pain his father suffered in purgatory (III.iii.80-84) because, as the ghost complained, he was deprived of the benefit of the last sacraments. See p.200 and note 1.

4. Hamlet's malevolence is worse than that of Achilles, who denies Hector's request that the victor should promise burial to the vanquished (*Iliad*, Bk. 22). The Greek belief that without burial the soul had to wander on this side of the River Styx is much less terrible than the Christian belief in a lost soul's eternal intense suffering in hell.

self morally as the agent of retributive justice which the ghost's command made him.¹

Hamlet is a Christian tragedy because the hero, who was called upon to exercise heroic Christian charity, not to taint his mind and soul with personal hatred in spite of the strongest impulses of nature to do so, failed signally to practise such virtue, and, on the contrary, indulged in such intense hate as to will explicitly the eternal damnation of the criminal.² Furthermore, through this flaw in his character and his double error of judgment in assuming the king to be repentant and in killing Polonius whom he mistook to be Claudius, Hamlet brought upon himself great sufferings: the dispatch to England,³ the death of Ophelia, the plot of Laertes and Claudius, the death of his mother, and his own death. Dramatically, however, these errors are the very virtues of the play, for they increase the conflict of "mighty opposites," the tempo, the suspense, the tragic quality. For full dramatic effect, the moral aberration and its powerful dramatic function need to be kept simultaneously in mind. Thus the hero's flaw, which makes him a tragic hero, is precisely and concomitantly a failure in his character as a Christian; and the decision which is the crucial instance of his failure to exercise charity, the most necessary and the most Christian of virtues (cf. Jn 13 35), constitutes the interior peripety of his character which leads almost immediately to killing Polonius, the act which constitutes the exterior or structural peripety of the tragedy. One might judge that his costly mistake in killing Polonius is a direct punishment for his hate and, ironically, an advantage to Claudius, for Hamlet says of dead Polonius: "heaven hath pleas'd it so, / To punish me with this, and this with me" (III.iv.173).

The second punishment comes quickly. On his way to take ship for England, ostensibly for his "especial safety" (IV.iii.42), Hamlet and his escort meet Fortinbras leading his soldiers across Denmark to Poland,

To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell. (IV.iv.52.)

Stung by the contrast, Hamlet reflects upon his own failure to fulfill the ghost's command:

How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,

1. Cf. pp.201, note 3, and 200, note 2.

2. Our ethical judgment of Hamlet is not, in my opinion, essentially affected by the prevalence of similar expressions of an evil motive of revenge, either elsewhere in Shakespeare (e.g., *H VI* III.ii.216; IV.x.83; *R II* IV.i.25; *H V* III.vi.60) or in the works of his contemporaries (Nashe, Kyd, Marston, Webster, Ford, Shirley, etc.).

3. Although Claudius entertained the idea earlier, when he realized Hamlet might prove dangerous (III.i.175), the plan to send him immediately and to have him executed there very probably took shape when the king realized his own narrow escape (IV.i.13).

Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? (56)

How did this failure come about? Not from nature.

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd. (36)

He has used reason well, but has he not also misused it? He asks himself

. . . whether it be . . . some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event, —
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward. (39)

Might he be referring to the too precise thinking, from a vengeful point of view forbidden him, that induced him not to kill Claudius kneeling? He goes on to say,

I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't. (43)

These words aptly describe the opportunity he neglected then, not through paralysis of will but through perversity of will as "passion's slave." Now, sent away from Denmark by royal order and hampered by his two companions, he hardly has the means; but, stirred by Fortinbras' example of spirited action, he looks to the future:

O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (65)

4. *The Sufferings of the Hero*

Hamlet is a tragic hero precisely because he is not perfect and because he brings suffering upon himself by his own fault, error, and sin. Moreover, his natural disposition and sensitivity combined with his usual high regard for the moral and the supernatural make him capable of suffering very keenly, and this great capacity for suffering increases both his stature as a tragic hero and our vicarious suffering with him.

In his first soliloquy we learn that it is his moral and emotional revulsion against his mother's speedy, incestuous remarriage to his uncle that has so radically changed Hamlet's naturally cheerful disposition.

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't; ah, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature
 Possess it merely. That it should come to this !
 But two months dead ! Nay, not so much, not two . . .
 But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue ! (I.ii.133-159.)

Hamlet contrasts his present gloom and despondency with his past disposition :

I have of late . . . lost all my mirth . . . It goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. . . . What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! . . . in action how like an angel ! in apprehension how like a god ! . . . And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust ? Man delights not me — no, nor woman neither (II.ii.309).

Hamlet suffers from the tension between his natural disposition and the obligation laid upon him to avenge his father's murder. True, he shows notable courage and resolution when he insists on following the ghost :

I do not set my life at a pin's fee ;
 And for my soul, what can it do to that,
 Being a thing immortal as itself ? (I.iv.65.)

And he fervently declares concerning the ghost : " Thy commandment . . . shall live/Within . . . my brain . . . yes, by heaven ! " (I.v. 102.) Yet a few minutes later he expresses a strong natural distaste for this duty.

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
 That ever I was born to set it right ! (189)

Through anguish of heart tempted to suicide, he reflects :

O that this too too solid flesh would melt . . .
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter ! O God ! God ! (I.ii.129)
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, . . .
 But that the dread of something after death
 . . . makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of ?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all (III.i.70.).

Here Hamlet notes the conflict between conscience and false codes of honor. By conscience Hamlet means that " regard " for the moral consequences of our acts which here prescribes (1) bearing even " the oppressor's wrong " rather than violate conscience by suicide and (2) a turning from " enterprises of great pith and moment " although such conduct be termed cowardly by fiery young men, such as Fortin-

bras and Laertes, who do not let "the pale cast of thought" affect "the native hue of resolution" (84-88) "When honour's at the stake" (IV.iv.56). This "honor" is clearly not a moral but a social concept that does not scruple to lead two thousand men to death in strife for a straw (25; cf. Laertes' words V.ii.255-261). Hamlet could not and should not act upon the dictates of such "honor." Yet in self-recrimination he labels it shame in himself (59) not to do so. In his better moments, however, we see him a conscientious prince, strong in meekness, who, until he can make a clear moral judgment about the king's guilt, says he "should take it" if anyone should pluck his beard¹ or tweak his nose (II.ii.600). His emotions, we notice, tend often to misrepresentation of himself and to evil, his reason to morally good judgments.

Hamlet suffers from the changes in his personal relations. Ophelia, whom he loves, becomes a decoy to probe the genuineness of his madness (III.i.30-37). Heartsick over his mother's actions, and perhaps aware of the listeners (134), he rails at Ophelia and all women (95-157). At the play and in the presence of the court he treats her very harshly, even indecently. This conduct and her father's death at his hand drive her to madness and to death.

Hamlet wanted to get at the heart of things, at the truth. To his mother he said :

Ham. I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you . . .
Leave wringing of your hands . . .
And let me wring your heart . . .
Queen. Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul . . .
These words like daggers enter in mine ears (III.iv.19-95).

Hamlet so sharply chides his mother that he disregards the ghost's warning to "leave her to heaven" (I.v.86). The ghost, now, significantly, in domestic dress, appears to Hamlet and bids him adopt a more kindly attitude toward his mother : "O, step between her and her fighting soul !" (III.iv.113.)

After this visitation,² Hamlet speaks more gently to his mother : "How is it with you, lady?" (115). Now he concerns himself not with angry reproof as before, but with sound spiritual advice, urging her to remedy the sinful state of her soul by taking three necessary

1. Cf. Claudius, IV.vii.30-33. The contrast of *ethos* is in Hamlet's favor.

2. This visit has a calming and healing effect on Hamlet. The queen does not see or hear the ghost (132). Cf. Ac 9 7.; 22 5-10.; 26 12-19.; 1 Co 15 8.; Jn 12 28-30., where the bystanders hear something but not distinctly. The queen's experience (117-122) resembles that of the bystanders at Lourdes in 1858, who neither saw nor heard the apparition, but they witnessed the transformation of Bernadette, who did.

steps to reconciliation with God — confession, contrition, and a firm purpose of amendment.

Mother, for love of grace, . . .
 (1) Confess yourself to heaven ;
 (2) Repent what's past ; (3) avoid what is to come . . .
 . . . go not to my uncle's bed . . . Refrain tonight,
 And that shall lend a kind of easiness
 To the next abstinence ; the next more easy ;
 For use almost can change the stamp of nature (III.iv.144-168).

Thus we see that Hamlet, in this crisis in his mother's life, urges her to use Christian means to cleanse her soul.

Only Horatio is his solace, and it is precisely for his virtue that Hamlet values him.

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
 As e'er my conversation cop'd withal . . .
 Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
 And could of men distinguish, her election
 Hath seal'd thee for herself . . . Give me that man
 That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
 In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
 As I do thee (III.ii.59-79).

Horatio probably understood the heart and character of Hamlet better than anyone else. That was not easy then — or now. Hamlet protested to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern :

You would pluck out the heart of my mystery . . . 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe? . . . You cannot play upon me (III.ii.382).

These two schoolfellows are the king's spies, one of the reasons why, "at each ear a hearer" (II.ii.399), Hamlet "can say nothing" (596). He calls Guildenstern "a sponge . . . that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards" (IV.ii.12). He trusts these two "as adders fang'd" (III.iv.203).

An act of Hamlet particularly difficult for us to judge morally is his changing the "grand commission" whereby Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suffer the immediate death, "not shriving time allow'd" (V.ii.47), which Claudius had ordered for Hamlet through their agency. Hamlet had said of them :

. . . they must . . . marshall me to knavery . . .
 For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
 Hoist with his own petar ; and 't shall go hard
 But I will delve one yard below their mines
 And blow them at the moon (III.iv.205).

To Prince Hamlet these friends turned spies and willing agents of the malevolent murderer-king may have seemed traitors not only to friendship but to the public weal. It is noteworthy that he has no moral scruples about his act. He explicitly asserts to Horatio :

Why, man, they did make love to this employment !
They are not near my conscience ;¹ their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow² (V.ii.57).

Furthermore, Hamlet cites the incident as clear, instructive evidence that Providence works pervasively in the affairs of men, whether they realize it or not.

. . . and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will. (9)

Horatio agrees : " That is most certain " (11). Asked how he sealed the altered document, Hamlet answers :

Why, even in that was heaven ordinant.
I had my father's signet in my purse. (48)

Hence, it is simply " given " that this act is explicitly justified in the subjective forum of Hamlet's conscience, whether or not it is objectively justified. Moreover, Hamlet gives Horatio this account after he returns from exile. From this point to the end of the play, except for his excitement at Ophelia's grave, Hamlet shows notable spiritual balance and serenity.

He states clearly to Horatio his own ethical judgment about killing Claudius, emphasizing political justice :

He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother ;
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes ;³
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz'nage — is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm ? (64)

1. Hamlet uses " conscience " precisely as the act of the practical reason making conscious judgment of a personal particular act as morally good or evil. It is significant that the word " conscience " is used eight times in the play, four times by Hamlet, twice by Claudius, and twice by Laertes, all in the Christian sense of the inner forum of moral consciousness. In addition, the idea, but not the word, is present in I.v.87 and in the talk between Hamlet and his mother (III.iv.20, 35, 89, 113, 156).

2. Although his schoolfellows did not know the contents of the sealed documents they carried (IV.iii.58, 66), Hamlet apparently believes they did and that they were willing accomplices.

3. Hamlet says " hopes " not " rights. " He does not deny the legality of Claudius' successful effort to be elected by the lords, but he questions its equity.

He asserts that it is not only "perfect conscience" but strict duty in order to prevent further public harm.

And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (68)

How did Hamlet plan to kill Claudius with "perfect conscience"? It is noteworthy that he remarks to Horatio about his own swordsmanship, with respect to Laertes: "Since he went into France I have been in continual practice" (220).

Although he has a presentiment against it, Hamlet with serene trust in God will not let Horatio try to defer the fencing match with Laertes. "Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow¹ . . . the readiness is all" (230).

When the queen dies, crying: "The drink! I am poison'd" (321), Hamlet shouts:

O villainy! Ho! let the door be lock'd.
Treachery! Seek it out (322).

Laertes admits the treachery of having wounded Hamlet with an unbated, envenomed foil, but, he says, for the poisoned drink "The King, the King's to blame" (331). With that same envenomed point, Hamlet stabs Claudius, and he forces him to drink the remaining poison. The attendants cry, "Treason!" (334), but the testimony of dying Laertes has its effect. Thus publicly before the lords and attendants now aware of the king's crimes, Hamlet fulfills the ghost's command to punish this murderer. The brief outcry of the attendants indicates the difficulty Hamlet would have faced had he killed Claudius under circumstances that did not thus publicly expose the crimes of the king.²

Hamlet answers Laertes' plea for forgiveness of his treachery: "Heaven make thee free of it!" (343). Then he shows his deep concern that the people should understand the justice of his act. He begs Horatio,

. . . report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied . . .
O good Horatio, what a wounded name
(Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
. . . tell my story (350-360).

1. Cf. Lc 12 6-7.

2. This scene vividly indicates the external obstacle to fulfilling the ghost's command that had confronted Hamlet all along. This, added to the moral obstacle of lacking human evidence of the king's guilt, exonerates Hamlet from the charge of procrastination before the play scene. He had to delay then; he did not procrastinate after the play scene; through hate he decided to delay.

When Hamlet dies, Horatio, who knew him best, asserts :

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.¹ (370)

Fortinbras, whom Hamlet names as king, orders his burial as a soldier, and states his estimate of Hamlet :

. . . he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally (408).

At the price of his life, Hamlet accomplished his mission and cleansed Denmark, which in Fortinbras (399-401) has now the prospect of a better future.

5. *Ethical Foils*

Fortinbras,² Laertes, and Claudius are ethical and dramatic foils for Hamlet, and the contrasts all redound to Hamlet's credit. Hamlet himself recognizes Laertes as a foil : " by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his " (77). And to Laertes he says :

I'll be your foil, Laertes. In mine ignorance
Your skill shall, like a star i' th' darkest night,
Stick fiery off indeed. (266)

Our first impression of the character of Claudius is good (I.ii.1-16). He seeks the good of the state. He consulted the lords about marrying his brother's widow. He gives them thanks. He shows competence in summarizing the situation with respect to Norway and in dispatching ambassadors to improve it (I.ii.17-35). He graciously grants Laertes' petition to go to France. He gently reproves Hamlet, urging religious motives for desisting from his too-long-continued mourning for his father : " It shows a will most incorrect to heaven . . . a fault to heaven " (95, 101). He names Hamlet his heir (109), asks him to think of him as a father and to remain in Denmark. A good judge of character, he recognizes that Hamlet is " Most generous, and free from all contriving " (IV.vii.136).

Claudius sincerely desires to live peacefully with Hamlet for two reasons — for his mother's sake, and because Hamlet is popular with the multitude (IV.iii.4 ; vii.11-24).

Claudius has occasion to reckon with the angry multitude. He shows dignity and courage when the rioters led by Laertes break down the doors of the palace, crying : " Choose we ! Laertes shall be king ! " (IV.v.106).

1. Cf. Christian burial service : " In paradisum deducant te angeli . . . Chorus angelorum te suscipiat."

2. See p.203.

Laertes confronts him, demanding : " O thou vile king, / Give me my father ! " (115).

Claudius asserts : " There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would . . . Tell me, Laertes, / Why thou art incens'd " (123). These words do not assuage Laertes. He cries out :

How came he dead ? I'll not be juggled with :
To hell, allegiance ! vows, to the blackest devil !
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit !
I dare damnation ¹ (130).

Claudius calmly invites Laertes to investigate the facts and punish the offender, who is not himself (204-218). Laertes is restrained by the king's reasoning. But Claudius deliberately arouses his wrath against Hamlet ² and asks what he will undertake when Hamlet comes back. He answers, " To cut his throat i' th' church ! " (IV.vii.127). Laertes forcefully states his motives for revenge : " I have a noble father lost, / A sister driven into desp'rate terms " (25).

When the priest explains to him in the graveyard that Ophelia can be buried with only " maimed rites," Laertes cries :

I tell thee, churlish priest,
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be
When thou liest howling (V.i.263).

Laertes has the grace to confess his treacherous use of a poisoned unbated foil, to repent it, and to ask forgiveness.

I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery . . .
The foul practice / Hath turn'd itself on me . . .
Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
Nor thine on me ! (V.ii.319-343.)

It is obvious that Laertes is a Christian, although not a model one. His conscience pricked him at the crucial moment to restrain him from this evil, but he did not heed it (V.ii.307).

Claudius, too, is a Christian, well instructed, yet wicked. After hearing Polonius philosophize on hypocrisy, he reflects on his own duplicity : " How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience ! "

1. These words are in direct contrast to Hamlet's when he fears the ghost may be a devil who abuses him to damn him (II.ii.626). Laertes is clearly a foil here, but surely less admirable.

2. Again Laertes is a poor contrast in character to Hamlet, for the King can and does " play upon " him ; cf. III.ii.389.

(III.i.50). Hamlet's plan could succeed because the king has a conscience that he can catch.

The prayer of Claudius is a supreme example of sound Christian doctrine and searching ethical analysis. It combines *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. He sees his crime in true perspective as detestable.

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven ;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder ! (III.iii.36)

He knows that prayer means to raise the heart to God, but his heart is not single and therefore he must admit to himself :

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect.

But he knows from Scripture (Is 1 18.) that if our sins be as scarlet, and we repent, they shall be made whiter than snow. He pictures his own condition.

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow ?

The answer is yes. He recognizes his own situation as most fit to the exercise of God's boundless mercy, he knows the doctrine of prayer, and he takes hope.

Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence ?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down ? Then I'll look up ;
My fault is past.

His too optimistic hope is immediately dashed, however, when he reflects on the necessary conditions of forgiveness, which he well understands, for he is not ready to give up his ill-gotten gains.

But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn ? ' Forgive me my foul murder ' ?
That cannot be ; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder —
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain th' offence ?

He knows the answer is no, and he contrasts the inexorable quality of divine retribution with the venal waywardness of human tribunals.

In the corrupted currents of this world
 Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
 And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
 Buys out the law ; but 'tis not so above.
 There is no shuffling ; there the action lies
 In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd,
 Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
 To give in evidence.

Confronted with these truths, he again takes heart.

Try what repentance can. What can it not ?

But immediately he realizes that this door is closed to him by his own evil will which he cannot bring himself to rectify ; his will would again make the same choice to gratify the same desires.

Yet what can it when one cannot repent ?

In despair he looks into his soul.

O wretched state ! O bosom black as death !
 O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
 Art more engag'd !

By assuming the posture of prayer, he makes a last desperate effort really to pray.

Help, angels ! Make assay.
 Bow, stubborn knees ; and heart with strings of steel,
 Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe !
 All may be well.

Coming in at this moment, Hamlet, deceived by the outward appearance of the king kneeling into thinking him restored to the friendship of God, decides not to kill him now. Unaware of Hamlet's brief visit, Claudius rises. His attempt at prayer and repentance has failed, and he must live with futile, gnawing remorse.

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
 Words without thoughts never to heaven go (97).

This is for the audience one of the most ironic scenes in drama. Because of his inveterate attachment to his ill-won gains (55), the antagonist, on the one hand, with full moral awareness turns away from the opportunity of Christian regeneration, hardens his conscience, and goes forth to add crimes to crime. On the other hand, partly because

he erroneously thinks his opponent has succeeded in Christian repentance, the protagonist fails notably by consenting to vengeful hate expressly forbidden him and thereby both disqualifies himself as an appointed agent of Divine justice and, by killing Polonius, unwittingly gives his opponent occasion to make him the victim of renewed and ruthless villainy.

Seeing in the heart of the villain some good and in the heart of the hero some evil, although he is on the whole basically good and engages our admiration and sympathy, we gain insight into the frailty of men ; we pity Hamlet and we fear our own weakness and instability.

We conclude, accordingly, that *Hamlet* is a Christian tragedy, in the strict sense. Christian issues impregnate its essential structure : the command of the Christian ghost initiates the action ; Hamlet's decision through hate not to kill Claudius until he is fit for damnation is the peripety ; and his final fulfillment of the ghost's command is the dénouement. Christian problems, especially that of discerning the character of the ghost, determine the moral situation. In their response to the moral and the dramatic situation the characters consciously accept or reject Christian principles. And finally the flaw in the tragic hero is his failure in the moment of crisis to measure up to the demands of Christian charity.

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