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HAMLET WITHOUT TEARS

Books by I. J. Semper

HAMLET WITHOUT TEARS

IN THE STEPS OF DANTE

THE FINE GOLD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

SO YOU'RE GOING TO COLLEGE

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

A SHAKESPEARE STUDY GUIDE

Hamlet Without Tears

BY I. J. SEMPER

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INTRODUCTION

It has been asserted that the philosophy of Shakespeare's tragedies is obviously not a Christian philosophy. This does not imply that the philosophy of the tragedies is unmoral. The tragedies deal almost exclusively with those mysterious forces of evil which compass man's destruction; they are notably reticent concerning a future state of happiness beyond the grave; they contain only vague references to the spiritual in the highest sense of the word; they often sound a note of disillusion with life, which seems to go beyond the dramatic occasion; and yet, by stressing that the wages of sin is death, they hold up a mirror to the moral order which rules in the universe. In Shakespeare's tragic world the theological element is subordinated to the moral. As contrasted with Dante, he is the poet of the Human Comedy. And in this sense there is a measure of truth in the criticism that, so far as their philosophy is concerned, the tragedies might have come down to us from classical antiquity. Some such thought must have been in the mind of Cardinal Newman when he bracketed Shakespeare as a moralist with three writers of ancient Greece, declaring that "he upholds the broad laws of moral and divine truth with the consistency and severity of an Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Pindar."

Of course, the exception is *Hamlet*. By reason of its theological content it is the Matterhorn of the tragedies, standing apart in solitary grandeur. In 1904 A. C. Bradley pointed out that the free use of current religious ideas in *Hamlet* helps to explain its perennial popularity. In our own day three penetrating English critics have gone out of their way

to underline the peculiar religious tone of the play. Harley Granville-Barker is of the opinion that "the play is much more deeply concerned with what will happen to the individual after death than with any question of the momentary pain and violence of the act of dying." C. S. Lewis declares that *Hamlet* differs from the other tragedies in that it keeps us thinking about being dead all the time. And J. Dover Wilson holds that the supernatural element bulks larger in *Hamlet* than in any other drama by Shakespeare.

However, the theological issues of the play are generally by-passed by modern critics. This attitude is understandable in those critics whom Karl Young styled the Shakespeare Skeptics, a school that explains everything in terms of Thomas Kyd's crude revenge play on which Shakespeare based his *Hamlet*. To them *Hamlet* is an enigma, "the Mona Lisa of literature," because in their view a psychologically consistent play could not be produced by grafting a highly reflective hero on a barbaric plot. This approach labors under the fundamental defect that it ignores the sweeping changes which Shakespeare introduced into his source material. For instance, J. M. Robertson, the father of the Shakespeare Skeptics, assuming that the dramatist took the revenge theme from the Kydian drama without changing its motivation, states that in reading *Hamlet* we never get the impression that revenge is forbidden by religion. But the whole point about revenge in *Hamlet* is that Shakespeare raised a soul from Purgatory to give it a religious sanction. It is "prompted by heaven," and consequently it is accepted by Hamlet as a sacred duty, not as a temptation to commit sin.

It is likewise true that many critics, who look upon *Hamlet* as a unified and artistic whole, tend to slur the theological issues of the play. The reason is not far to seek. Theology is no longer in vogue. It has been said that every

generation reads its own meaning into *Hamlet.* It remained for the twentieth century to read two diametrically opposed meanings into the tragedy, both, however, in keeping with an age which no longer believes in the unseen world of spirits. The modern stress on practical achievement as the measure of greatness has given us a "go-getter's" *Hamlet*, a play in which there is no mystery, no melancholy, and virtually no morality. The protagonist is depicted as an aggressive man of action, who is perfectly sane, who is firm of purpose, and who goes about the task of revenging his murdered father with a masterful dispatch. It is unnecessary to state that this interpretation dismisses the soliloquies, in which Hamlet explores his soul, as the mere byplay of a busy man's mind, and therefore as having no bearing on the action. The psychoanalysts, on the other hand, focus attention on the soliloquies, and thus they present us with a Freudian drama. We are told that at long last we can understand Hamlet's split personality—how consciously he resolves to obey the command of the Ghost, and how subconsciously he flinches from it. And, of course, his reaction to his mother's hasty marriage is labeled an Oedipus Complex. This business of dredging up suppressed impulses from the subconscious mind of Hamlet springs fundamentally from a desire to substitute a brand-new theory of sexual determinism for the time-honored theology on which the play is based. G. K. Chesterton made this point when he stated that the Freudian psychologist "gives Hamlet a complex to avoid giving him a conscience."

It is natural to interpret the past in terms of the present, but this approach is rightly anathematized by critics of the objective or historical school, who maintain that we should study *Hamlet* within the frame of the Elizabethan age. Here the aim is to recapture what the play meant to the dramatist and to his audience. We may agree with these critics that in

Hamlet Shakespeare achieved a psychological melodrama with a double level of significance, the one for the groundlings who went to the playhouse to be thrilled, and the other for the more intelligent spectators who liked to reflect. That Shakespeare put "subtler significances" into his tragedy was recognized from the very beginning, as is evidenced by Gabriel Harvey's comment that there was much in *Hamlet* "to please the wiser sort." The historical approach to *Hamlet* demands two things: first, that we look upon Shakespeare's masterpiece primarily as a stage play, which was written not to be read but to be produced in a theatre before a popular audience; and second, that we know something of the beliefs, tastes and social customs of that audience. Writing rapidly and under pressure, Shakespeare took advantage of the fact that his audience could not turn back the scenes of the play and check minor inconsistencies in characterization and plotting. No audience, for example, would be troubled by the problem of Hamlet's age, or by the difficulty presented by Horatio, who in some scenes appears to be at home in Elsinore, while in others he displays an ignorance of Danish affairs. These flaws appear only when the play is studied.

Critics of the historical school have solved many of the problems that puzzled the older commentators. And yet, when it is a question of the theological issues of *Hamlet*, they often fail to put themselves in the position of the original playgoers. The Ghost may be taken as a test case. One of the major changes that Shakespeare made in his source material was to Catholicize the Ghost, a change which has meaning only in terms of the doctrine of Purgatory. The Elizabethans, therefore, taking the Ghost in the context which Shakespeare provided, would not make the mistake of thinking that a soul came from Purgatory on a mission of blood-revenge. Today, it is difficult to view the Ghost through the

eyes of the Elizabethans, not only because ghosts are no longer fashionable but also because the full significance of the doctrine of Purgatory has become unfamiliar. Critics of the historical school exhort us to take the Ghost seriously, and yet most of them subscribe to the following statement of the basic premises of the tragedy: "As for the morality of personal vengeance, however abhorrent the concept, we must accept it in the play as Hamlet's sacred duty, just as we must accept the Ghost who urges it." Such a statement is valid only on the supposition that the dramatist and his audience were grossly ignorant of the doctrine of Purgatory.

All commentators recognize that the most radical change which Shakespeare made in his source material was in the character of the protagonist. For dramatic reasons it was necessary to postpone the killing of the King until the final scene; and, moreover, it was necessary to motivate the postponement. Shakespeare made the entire action turn on the character of the hero, who at the very outset is presented as a disillusioned idealist, highly sensitive to moral ideas, and religious-minded. Duty comes in a most dreadful form, and the conflict that ensues in the mind of Hamlet is mainly between duty and scruples which stem from theology. This conflict, which motivates his delay, is clearly presaged in the lines:

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

Hamlet doubts that the Ghost may be a masquerading demon, and he fears that in the act of killing the King he may lose his own life and die in sin. In the final scene, when the duty of avenging his father merges with the duty of self-defense, he feels that he can proceed with "a perfect conscience."

Hamlet is the most complex character that Shakespeare ever drew. That he was intended as a study in melancholia can hardly be doubted. The result is that, until the concluding scene when he regains complete control of himself, we are afforded only brief glimpses of the normal Hamlet. Nothing is more characteristic of his melancholy state than his outbursts of hysteria, which inevitably raise the question of his sanity. Is he temporarily deranged at one or more moments in the action? If Shakespeare intended to have him cross the borderline of sanity, there were incidents in the source material that were ready-made for this purpose. In the original story the girl was a courtesan who tempted the protagonist. Shakespeare changed this girl into the young and virtuous Ophelia, and yet he permits Hamlet to treat her as if she were a wanton. Of course, the wanton Ophelia exists only in Hamlet's imagination at a moment when his loathing of his mother's sensuality has thrown him entirely off balance. The prayer scene, in which Hamlet argues that he should delay his revenge until the opportunity of damning the King's soul presents itself, was also a part of Shakespeare's inherited material. If the dramatist wished to suggest that Hamlet's savage hatred of the King had become an obsession powerful enough to induce a state of temporary dementia, it is understandable why he retained the prayer scene with its diabolical sentiments.

In the papers that make up this book the writer argues that there is a formula that will explain *Hamlet*. The basic assumptions of this formula are that the main issues of the play are theological, and that Shakespeare retained barbaric elements of his source material with a definite purpose, and not simply because they were factors in the old melodrama of blood and violence. The tragedy belongs to the Renaissance but it strikes its roots in the Middle Ages. In outward

trappings the protagonist is a Renaissance prince, but fundamentally he is a medieval contemplative, who is more interested in the unseen world of spirits than in the visible world of sense, who is more concerned with saving his soul than with saving his life, and who, therefore, as Dr. Johnson notes, functions in the play as an instrument rather than as an agent. Judged by worldly standards, Hamlet is a failure. And yet no other character created by Shakespeare is so potent to bring home to us the dignity, the capabilities, the misery, and the eternal destiny of man.

Today no one can write even a single article on *Hamlet* without consulting a whole library of books and periodicals. The literature on the play is simply tremendous. It is impossible, therefore, to dispense with the use of footnotes. However, the footnote indicators in this book are not there to draw tears from the reader, who, if he be so inclined, need not give them a second thought. For permission to reprint "The Purgatorial Ghost," which, considerably abridged, appeared originally in the *Catholic World,* my thanks are due to the editor, the Reverend James M. Gillis, C. S. P. And for permission to reprint "The Theory of a Theological Controversy," I am indebted to Dr. Joseph C. Fenton, editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. The numbering of the lines in passages from *Hamlet* accords with that used in G. L. Kittredge's edition of the play (1939).

I

THE PURGATORIAL GHOST

It is probable that the Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was the first and only specter on an Elizabethan stage to rise from a region so unfashionable as Purgatory. In the Senecan tragedies of the time the revenge-ghost was a wooden figure burdened with the cumbersome machinery of pagan mythology and utterly devoid of spiritual significance. We can measure the greatness of Shakespeare's achievement by the lines which the unknown author of *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599) penned for his Induction, in which he holds up to scorn the traditional revenge-ghost of the Elizabethan stage:

> Then, too, a filthy whining ghost,
> Lapt in some foul sheet or a leather pilch,
> Comes screaming like a pig half sticked,
> And cries 'Vindicta! Revenge! Revenge!'

If we except a few picturesque details borrowed from the popular ghostlore of his time, Shakespeare went directly for the main outlines of his Ghost to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. That the Ghost comes from Purgatory is evident from his description of his abode in the other world as primarily a state of purification, consisting of "sulph'rous and tormenting flames," to which he submits himself temporarily, until the sins committed during his life on earth are "burnt and purged away." Later in the same scene this impression is confirmed when Hamlet, on the authority of Saint Patrick ("Yes, by Saint Patrick"), adjures Horatio to believe that

the apparition which they have just encountered is "an honest ghost." In the devotional literature of the Middle Ages Ireland's patron saint was constantly associated with Purgatory,[1] and even to this day one of his chosen retreats on the island of Lough Derg, in Donegal, is known as Saint Patrick's Purgatory.

Regarding three purgatorial details, the fire, the intensity of the pain, and the location, the Ghost is orthodox. Twice he specifies fire as the purifying medium of Purgatory; and, of course, this is in accord with the traditional belief of the Western Church. The intensity of the pain is another essential which is stressed by the Ghost, who declares that if he were allowed to reveal the secrets of Purgatory he could tell a tale whose lightest word would harrow up the soul of his son. Here he seems to be echoing St. Augustine's oft-quoted statement that the fire of Purgatory is more severe than any pain that can be felt, seen or conceived in this world.[2] The Ghost mentions his "prison house," but he does not locate it in words, because at the end of his interview with Hamlet he vanished from sight by descending through a trapdoor which led into the cellar beneath the stage, thus indicating that Purgatory was located somewhere in the bowels of the earth. The Elizabethan stage-convention governing ghosts, stemming from the miracle and the morality plays, conformed to the popular religious beliefs of the Middle Ages. Here we must distinguish between defined dogmas and what Cardinal Newman styles "floating religious opinions." Popular tradition, inspired by passages in the Old Testament describing the earth as opening and swallowing sinners alive, and also impressed by volcanic phenomena, placed Hell in the center of the terrestrial globe; and, moreover, influenced by the association of fire, constituted Purgatory a suburb of the infernal region.[3] In reality, Purgatory, the creation of divine mercy,

is a suburb of Heaven, such as Dante made it in the *Divine Comedy,* where his mount of purgation bridges the space between green earth and blue sky. An epic poet like Dante could run counter to popular tradition when his spiritual insight dictated, but Shakespeare the playwright was bound by the stage-conventions of his time.

Two other details in the speech of the Ghost—his horror of sin and his reverence for the sacramental means employed by the Church Militant to combat sin—are just what we should expect from a holy soul undergoing purgation. After telling Hamlet how he had been poisoned by his brother, he laments:

> Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
> Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched;
> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhous'led, disappointed, unaneled,
> No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head.[4]

Purgatory is the state of those who depart this life in venial sin. When, therefore, the Ghost refers to "the blossoms" of his sin, and, in an earlier line, to his "foul crimes," we are not to regard Hamlet's father as a great sinner. He is looking at his unforgiven venial sins *sub specie aeternitatis.* The climax of his lament is reached in the last three lines, in which he states that he died "Unhous'led" (without Holy Viaticum), "disappointed" (unprepared as by the Sacrament of Penance), "unaneled" (without Extreme Unction), "No reck'ning made" (unconfessed), and "With all my imperfections on my head" (unabsolved). This moving tribute to the supernatural power of the Church, as manifested in the administration of the last sacraments, recalls the stress placed on these sacraments in the morality play, *Everyman,* whose theme is how to prepare for a happy death.

The main objection to the Ghost in *Hamlet* is his motive for leaving Purgatory. The command laid upon his son— to revenge his father's murder—does not conform with St. Paul's injunction: "Do not repay injury with injury . . Do not avenge yourselves, beloved; allow retribution to run its course; so we read in scripture, Vengeance is for me, I will repay, says the Lord."[5] The Church has always condemned private revenge as morally wrong. As a matter of fact, blood-revenge had no legal standing in Elizabethan England, and it was constantly inveighed against by moralists.[6] Lord Bacon, for example, begins his essay, "Of Revenge," with this sentence: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out." The anomaly of a Catholic ghost from Purgatory urging blood-vengeance as a sacred duty may be explained in terms of the popular theory that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was based on a crude revenge play by Thomas Kyd, with a moral atmosphere akin to that of the original story by Saxo Grammaticus; but this is a counsel of despair, for it argues that, theologically speaking, Shakespeare was a muddled thinker, who mixed Christian and pagan elements in his play with an utter disregard for ethical fitness.

In Catholic literature and tradition the ever recurring motive for the return of souls from Purgatory is the asking of prayers from the faithful. Christopher Marlowe bears witness to Catholic belief, for when his invisible Faustus snatches food from the Pope's hands, the Cardinal of Lorraine exclaims: "My lord, it may be some ghost, newly crept out of Purgatory, come to beg a pardon of your Holiness."[7] That

Shakespeare was also acquainted with the main function of purgatorial ghosts is evident from the lines he gave to Horatio, who adjures the spirit of Hamlet's father to speak

> If there be any good thing to be done
> That may to thee do ease, and grace to me.[8]

However, the purgatorial ghost as a punitive agent is not entirely absent from medieval religious works. In a critical estimate of J. Dover Wilson's edition of Lewes Lavater's *Of Ghostes and Spirites walking by Nyght* (1929), a reviewer for *The London Times* suggested that Shakespeare's association of Purgatory with St. Patrick derives from passages in *The Golden Legend,* a book which "in Shakespeare's youth [was] still lying about in households which favoured the old religion."[9] This hagiographical work of Jacobus de Voragine, one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages, was translated into English by Caxton in 1483, and reprinted as late as 1527. If the *Times* reviewer had read the section which Jacobus de Voragine devotes to All Souls' Day, he might have suggested that *The Golden Legend* supplied Shakespeare with a prototype of the Ghost in *Hamlet.* Jacobus de Voragine narrates the story of a soldier, who, on setting out to fight the Moors, left his horse in charge of a kinsman on condition that if he died in battle the kinsman should sell the horse and give the price to the poor. The soldier perished in battle, but the kinsman kept the horse for himself. After some time the dead man appeared "more shining than the sun," announced that he was suffering in Purgatory, and predicted eternal damnation for the treacherous kinsman.[10] Of course, Jacobus de Voragine was not a critical historian, and his story of the soldier may be entirely legendary, but it does furnish a striking instance of a purgatorial ghost functioning as an agent of divine justice, and as such it may have influenced Shakespeare.

At any rate Shakespeare took pains to safeguard his Ghost by having him qualify the command to revenge by the following solemn injunctions:

> But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
> Taint not thy mind, 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.[11]

The words, "Taint not thy mind," forbid Hamlet to kill his uncle from motives of personal hatred. He is to be an executioner akin to the hangman appointed by the State—not a blood-avenger in the ordinary sense. He is not to do the thing in hot blood, nor is he to resort to deceit and treachery. If it were simply a matter of poisoning the King, or of stabbing him in the back, why does Hamlet in the last act of the play make the significant statement that he has been "in continual practice" with the rapier ever since he saw the Ghost? It is evident that his intention all along was to accuse his uncle of his crimes, give him a chance to defend himself, and then kill him in a fair fight. No other course of action would be in keeping with the command of the Ghost, or with his own noble and chivalrous nature. The Ghost, therefore, comes not as a vengeful soul, but as one sent by a higher power to sanction the punishment of a Machiavellian villain who is guilty of fratricide and regicide, adultery and incest, intrigue and usurpation—crimes which it seemed impossible for man to discover and which therefore could not be brought to judgment by a legal and public process.[12]

This interpretation of the Ghost's mission is in theological accord with the doctrine which St. Thomas Aquinas lays down regarding the agents of divine vengeance. St. Thomas does not deal directly with a soul from Purgatory on a mis-

sion such as is presented in *Hamlet,* but he does state that any separated soul appearing on earth must of necessity be God's agent. He writes: "That the dead appear to the living in any way whatever is . . . by the special dispensation of God, in order that the souls of the dead may interfere in the affairs of the living;—and this is to be accounted miraculous."[13] However, it is manifest that a soul from Purgatory appearing on a mission of divine vengeance would be governed by the same laws that apply to God's agents on earth. St. Thomas discusses these agents under the heading, Whether it is lawful for a private individual to kill a man who has sinned? He answers that only the lawfully constituted authorities are delegated by God to put evildoers to death, and he quotes a sentence from St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*: "A man who without exercising public authority, kills an evildoer, shall be judged guilty of murder, and all the more, since he has dared to usurp a power which God has not given him."[14] And then St. Thomas is confronted with the objection that in the past God actually gave this power to private individuals. The objection is based on the incident narrated in *Exodus* (XXXII, 27), when Moses commanded private individuals to kill the Hebrews who had worshipped the molten calf. His command took this form: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel . . . let every man kill his brother, his friend, and neighbour." St. Thomas meets the objection as follows: "Those who, at the Lord's command, slew their neighbours 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."[15] In other words, St. Thomas refuses to shorten the arm of God, who ordinarily delegates His power to the rulers of the community, but who, by way of exception, may delegate it to a private individual.

However, whether the agent of God's vengeance be an official of the State or a private individual, the law regarding his intention is the same. On this point St. Thomas is explicit: "Vengeance consists in the infliction of a penal evil on one who has sinned. Accordingly, in the matter of vengeance, 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 charity."[16] Moreover, declares the Angelic Doctor, the agent of God's vengeance in the execution of his task must banish hatred from his heart, even if the criminal has unjustly inflicted evil on him. This directive is identical with the Ghost's solemn warning to Hamlet, who has every reason to hate the King. In effect, St. Thomas Aquinas says to any and every agent of God's vengeance: "Taint not thy mind."

There are other indications in the play that the spirit of Hamlet's father did not come on a mission of personal vengeance. With A. C. Bradley we may ask: "Why does Shakespeare make the Ghost so *majestical* a phantom, giving that measured and solemn utterance, and that air of impersonal abstraction which forbids, for example, all expression of affection for Hamlet and checks in Hamlet the outburst of pity for his father?" Dr. Bradley answers that the Ghost was evidently intended to affect the imagination as "the messenger of divine justice."[17] The fact, too, that the Ghost appears as a warrior king, clad in complete steel, would seem to indicate that his visitation is connected not with a vendetta but with the welfare of the entire kingdom.[18] Nor can it be ignored that Shakespeare brings the scene in which the Ghost appears to Marcellus and Horatio to a climax with passages of exquisite poetry, and especially with a tender tribute to the

Christmastide. Here the poet recommends his Ghost to us with a religious association that encourages us to look upon him as a representative of a higher power. And finally, Hamlet's first words after the disappearance of his father's spirit clearly indicate that the duty which he has accepted is on a loftier plane than that of private revenge. He exclaims:

> O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
> And shall I couple hell? O fie![19]

In these lines Hamlet summarizes his motives for acting—the sanction of the Ghost (connoted by "host of heaven") and the prompting of his own higher nature to obey the Ghost (connoted by "earth"). Shall he add personal hatred prompted by his lower nature (connoted by "hell")? For the time being he rejects the temptation, but the key to his internal conflict is that his hatred of his uncle, which furnishes him with personal incentives to revenge, will not down; or, as a contributor to the *Quarterly Review* phrases it, "the hell, whose support he rejects, is for ever returning to his mind and startling his conscience." [20]

His interview with the Ghost leaves Hamlet in a state of feverish excitement. When Horatio and Marcellus rejoin him, his "wild and whirling words" are designed to balk their curiosity concerning the mission of the Ghost. For the moment he must share his secret with no one, although he does assure Horatio, by invoking the name of St. Patrick, that the apparition is "an honest ghost" from Purgatory, and not a masquerading demon. He asks his friends to swear on the cross of Christ (the hilt of his sword) that they will not reveal what they have seen, what they have heard, or what they know in case he should "put an antic disposition on." His threefold demand that they swear secrecy is echoed by the Ghost under the earth, where Purgatory was supposed

to be located. It is evident during the administration of the oaths that Hamlet seeks emotional relief in hysterical jesting, but why this hysterical jesting should take the form of flippant references to his father's spirit has puzzled commentators. Nothing could be more irreverent than the expressions—"this fellow in the cellarage," "truepenny," "boy," "old mole," and "worthy pioner." These expressions are charged with a topical significance, which stresses the actor playing the part of the Ghost rather than the Ghost himself. They shatter the dramatic illusion because they poke fun at a crude bit of stage business, which Shakespeare may have inherited from the old play by Kyd. The actor playing the part of the Ghost descended by a trap into the cellar, which lends meaning to Hamlet's reference to "this fellow in the cellarage." When Hamlet administers the oaths he shifts his position on the stage, and his movements are matched by the actor in the dimly lighted cellar, who moves about like a mole in the earth, or a miner in a shaft ("truepenny"), or a soldier in a deep trench ("pioner"). How did the Elizabethans react when they saw the Ghost, whom Marcellus describes as "majestical," suddenly drop from sight through a trapdoor, and when they heard his sepulchral voice from the cellar? John Gielgud thinks that the disappearance of the Ghost through a trap would be laughed at by modern playgoers, and he states that when he produced *Hamlet* in London the "Swears" under the stage often made the audience laugh.[21] In support of the opinion that the Elizabethans laughed at the stage business involving the Ghost, a passage from Arthur Colby Sprague's *Shakespeare and the Actors* (1945, p. 128) is to the point: "Aaron Hill writes, in *The Prompter*, June 13, 1735: 'There never rises a *Ghost,* but, instead of exciting our Horror, The Poor Shade is sure to be *laugh'd at*, from the Awkwardness of these Peoples Invention.' . . . The Ghost of Hamlet's

father is not named here, it is true, but since he was the best known of stage spirits I am afraid we must believe that he was laughed at." We may well believe, therefore, that the grotesque stage business required of the Ghost was a source of merriment to the spectators at the Globe. A. C. Bradley contends that the Elizabethans were indifferent to stage illusion, and hence that they would not consider the Ghost under the stage as grotesque.[22] It is arguable, however, that there were limits to the naiveté of the Elizabethans. Coleridge did not hesitate to declare that "the subterranean speeches of the Ghost are hardly defensible."[23] Because his audience laughed when the Ghost cried "Swear," Shakespeare deliberately shattered the dramatic illusion by putting jocular references in the mouth of Hamlet. It should be noted that Hamlet's levity bears only on the stage business; the matter of the cellarage scene, the solemn administration of the three oaths binding his companions to secrecy, is serious enough. And the scene ends on a serious note when Hamlet addresses the Ghost with his father's spirit only in mind: "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit."

The Ghost does not appear again until the fourth scene of Act III, the closet scene, when he shows himself to Hamlet but not to Queen Gertrude. From a remark dropped by Ophelia in the play scene we know that two months have elapsed since Hamlet saw the Ghost upon the battlements of Elsinore Castle. Up to the triumphal issue of the play scene, his delay in killing the King, as he himself informs us in the soliloquy with which Act II ends, is motivated by the doubt that the apparition which he has seen may be a devil that comes to damn him. After the play scene, in which the King betrays his guilt, Hamlet is convinced that he can "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound," but he still delays—now without justification. But we should note that both before

and after the play scene the hell of hatred which the Ghost had forbidden him and which he himself at first had rejected, returns to plague him. His hatred of his uncle and his disgust at his mother's sensuality become obsessions. Under the spell of his brooding melancholy he taints and tortures his mind, with the result that he seeks relief in outbursts of hysterical emotion, which bring him close to insanity. Hamlet himself is conscious of this flaw, for he admits to Horatio that he is "passion's slave," and to Laertes he speaks of his "sore distraction."

The closet scene opens with both mother and son in a state of tension. She is determined to rebuke him for his treatment of the King in the play scene, and he, in a mood of wild excitement, has come "to speak daggers to her." The Queen becomes frightened, and Polonius, concealed as an eavesdropper, cries for help, only to meet his death when Hamlet plunges his sword through the arras. Hamlet then proceeds to wring the heart of his mother, although the Ghost had commanded him to leave her to the stings of her conscience. He pictures her sensuality in words of withering scorn, but it is evident that his condemnation of her sin is based on the purely human motives that it is a shameful betrayal of her first husband and a disgusting affair in a woman of her years. His rage then vents itself in a denunciation of the King, which comes to a sudden stop with the appearance of the Ghost. Hamlet's words to the Ghost are a clear admission that he has shirked his duty because he has yielded to the temptation to unpack his heart in words of

futile passion—even as he was doing when the Ghost interrupted him. He cries out:

> Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
> That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
> Th' important acting of your dread command?[24]

The Ghost reiterates the command to revenge his murder and he also indicates why he remains invisible and inaudible to the Queen. He makes but one speech of six lines:

> Do not forget. This visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
> But look, amazement on thy mother sits.
> O, step between her and her fighting soul!
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
> Speak to her, Hamlet.[25]

The command to revenge as originally given by the majestical figure on the battlements was in truth a "dread command" compared with the mild exhortation contained in the first two lines of the above speech. The stern injunction of the first act has virtually become an entreaty. It is also noteworthy that the Ghost does not appear to the Queen. The lines which express his pathetic regard for her distress supply the reason—he wishes to spare her the shock. And in the line, "O, step between her and her fighting soul," he bids Hamlet aid her in her conflict with evil. He is still the minister of divine justice but with an added spiritual concern for his wife and his son. This explains why Hamlet sees him as a "gracious figure," clad not in armor but "in the habit as he lived," and with a "piteous" expression on his

countenance. It is clear that the Ghost is looking at Hamlet when his face is suffused with pity, for his son exclaims:

> Do not look at me,
> Lest with this piteous action you convert
> My stern effects.[26]

The agitation of the Ghost, so marked in his countenance, also extends to his manner of departure, for he "steals away" —as if in anguish.

This compassionate visitation with all its spiritual implications is explicable in terms of the Ghost's knowledge of what happened to Hamlet since the first visitation on the battlements. If the Ghost is cognizant of his son's melancholy, doubt, frustration, and hysteria bordering on insanity, it is understandable why he interrupts Hamlet in the midst of a frenzied outburst, why he comes in the "gracious figure" of a father and not as a warrior king, why he administers only a gentle reproof regarding Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius, why he exhorts Hamlet to bring spiritual aid to the Queen, and, above all, why he is so strangely agitated at the sight of his son. In a word, do the souls in Purgatory know what is happening to their loved ones on earth? St. Thomas Aquinas answers that by natural knowledge separated souls do not know what occurs on earth but that the affairs of the living can be made known to them by special revelations from God.[27] Francisco Suarez, Shakespeare's contemporary, is even more specific. He asserts "that the souls in Purgatory are holy and dear to God, that they love us with a true love and are mindful of our wants, and that they know in a general way our necessities and our dangers, and how great is our need of divine help and divine grace."[28] It would seem, therefore, that Shakespeare, whether he realized it or not, conformed to the teachings of these theologians when he represented the

Ghost in the closet scene as a compassionate visitant, mindful of the weakness of his wife and perturbed by the emotional instability of his son.

That the visit of the Ghost is not as futile as some critics assert is evinced in the closet scene itself by Hamlet's changed attitude toward his mother. He obeys the Ghost and "steps between her and her fighting soul." This time his hortatory approach is entirely spiritual, not unlike that of a priest in the confessional. He urges his mother to confess, to repent, and to lead a new life; he begs her to avoid the occasion of her sin; and he humbly instructs her on how to break a bad habit. He welcomes her show of repentance and his speech ends on a tender note. On his way to the door, however, he sees the body of Polonius. Recalling how his mother had permitted this man to spy on him, he feels that he can trust no one, and he returns to castigate her with biting irony. It is manifest that the second visitation of the Ghost does not cure Hamlet once and for all of his old temptation to indulge in hysterical tirades against the King and the Queen. His words to his mother on the difficulty of conquering a bad habit should have warned us not to expect an immediate and total conversion. However, it should be stressed that the brief flare-up with which the closet scene ends is his last, at least as far as the King and Queen are concerned. We should credit the Ghost therefore with helping him to rid his soul of this perilous stuff.

The Ghost of the battlements shocked and unnerved Hamlet; the Ghost of the Queen's closet restores his equilibrium. Although Hamlet does not mention the Ghost again, his second encounter with his father's spirit exercises an assuaging influence on him to the end of the [illegible] It is true that he loses all self-control at the grave of Ophelia when

he lashes out against Laertes, but, if we except this transitory relapse, he marches steadily forward to sanity, peace of mind, a new consciousness of power, and a feeling that he is in the hands of Divine Providence, until in the final scene the tortured soul whom we have known as Prince Hamlet becomes for the first time in the course of the action his noble and normal self.

II

THE THEORY OF A THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

In recent years the theory has been advanced that the ghost scenes in *Hamlet* mirror a theological controversy of the sixteenth century. In 1906 F. W. Moorman,[1] holding that Shakespeare "suffuses the ghost scenes of *Hamlet* with the local color of Catholic and Protestant doctrine," called attention to a translation of a Latin treatise by Ludwig Lavater, which was published in England in 1572, and reprinted in 1596, under the title, *Of Ghostes and Spirites walking by Nyght.* A Swiss Protestant reformer, Lavater wrote his book to uphold the orthodox Protestant opinion which rejected Purgatory and which looked upon ghosts as either good or bad angels. However, in arguing against the Catholic position on Purgatory, he was obliged to state it in detail. Moorman believes that Shakespeare, echoing this book, gave us a Catholic ghost from Purgatory and a Protestant Prince who fears that this ghost may be a devil in disguise. In 1930 Lily B. Campbell,[2] leaning heavily on Lavater, and also on Timothy Bright's *A Treatise on Melancholie* (1586), which explained apparitions as delusions produced by melancholy, asserted that *Hamlet* presents the problem of ghosts from three angles: the Ghost representing the Catholic view, Hamlet's doubt demonstrating the view of Protestants, and the inability of the Queen in the closet scene to see the Ghost illustrating the view of skeptics like Timothy Bright. Miss Campbell is convinced that "if a Papist and King James and

Timothy Bright had seen the play, as they all probably did, each would have gone home confirmed in his own opinion about ghosts."[3]

It remained, however, for J. Dover Wilson to develop this theory in three provocative studies,[4] which were published between 1929 and 1940. He maintains that Shakespeare's Denmark is Protestant, although "the Ghost *is* Catholic: he comes from Purgatory."[5] He draws support not only from Lavater's book, but also from Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), and from Pierre Le Loyer's *IIII Livres des Spectres*[6] (1586). Scot was a skeptic regarding ghosts, and his volume was burnt by the public hangman. Le Loyer was a scholarly Catholic lawyer who wrote his treatise to refute Lavater. In Dr. Wilson's exposition Hamlet is a Protestant disciple of Lavater, and hence his doubt that the Ghost may be a devil; Horatio, who takes a skeptical attitude toward the Ghost, is a Protestant disciple of Scot; and of course the Ghost, who comes from Purgatory, represents the Catholic viewpoint. Dr. Wilson argues that, since Shakespeare's audience would include disciples of Le Loyer, of Lavater, and of Scot, "it paid him dramatically to let all three schools of thought have their views considered."[7]

At the Globe Theatre the Protestants would be in the majority. That there was a minority group of Catholics is certain. Alfred Harbage[8] has recently called attention to a manuscript in the Folger Shakespeare Library, dated 1618, from which he adduces the testimony of an Elizabethan priest, Father Thomas Leke, who asserted that most of the principal Catholics in London, clerics and lay people, frequented the theatres. And, of course, Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, belonged to a family of outstanding recusants.

The theory that *Hamlet* reproduces a current theological controversy concerning ghosts imposes logical demands on

Shakespeare. First, it would not do for him to misrepresent the doctrinal position of any group in his audience. Second, it would not do for him to present the doctrinal view of any group in such a hazy manner that it would not exclude the views of the other groups. And third, and above all, it would not do for him to take sides. And yet, this theory, especially as expounded by J. Dover Wilson, asks us to believe that he did all these things.

The Catholic playgoers, for instance, would be pleased with the Ghost from Purgatory, provided that the portrayal of the Ghost was in conformity with Catholic doctrine. A careful analysis of the passages in which the Ghost describes his abode in the other world reveals that Shakespeare understood the doctrine of Purgatory. Elizabethan Catholics would experience some misgivings when they heard the Ghost command Hamlet to revenge his murder, and they would have taken offence if the Ghost had not qualified this command by a second command, "Taint not thy mind," which forbids his son to act from the personal motives of a private avenger. In a word, Shakespeare poises his Ghost before us as an agent of divine retribution who comes to demand punishment for heinous crimes that were undiscoverable by human agency, and hence could not be brought before the bar of human justice. Such is the interpretation of modern Catholic commentators like H. S. Bowden,[9] Maurice Francis Egan,[10] and S. A. Blackmore.[11] Both F. W. Moorman and Lily B. Campbell conform in general to this view, and thus they safeguard Shakespeare's exposition of the doctrine of Purgatory. But J. Dover Wilson refers the command, "Taint not thy mind," to Hamlet's mother, *i.e.*, Hamlet must not taint his mind with evil thoughts about her; and he states categorically that the Ghost tells Hamlet nothing as to how he is to achieve his revenge[12] An unqualified command to revenge could mean

only blood-vengeance; and, of course, it is theologically inconceivable that a soul would come from Purgatory to urge as a sacred duty what the Church condemns as mortally sinful.

In his explanation of the cellarage scene with which the first act ends, Dr. Wilson would also have Shakespeare offend the Catholics in his audience. At the conclusion of his interview with Hamlet, the Ghost vanished by descending through a trapdoor into the cellar beneath the stage, thus indicating that he was returning to Purgatory, which was supposed to be located in the bowels of the earth. When Horatio and Marcellus rejoin Hamlet, he swears them to secrecy with a threefold oath. As he asks them to swear each oath the voice of the Ghost is heard from beneath the stage, enforcing his son's request with the command "Swear." This cellarage scene is puzzling, because during the administration of the oaths Hamlet addresses his father's spirit in a flippant manner. Dr. Wilson interprets this scene as a conspiracy on the part of Hamlet and the Ghost to persuade Marcellus that he has sworn secrecy at the bidding of an underground demon, and thus to terrify him into holding his tongue." In other words, Hamlet, in order to hoodwink Marcellus, addresses the Ghost as if he were a devil; and the Ghost lends his support to this deception. By way of parenthesis we should state that Dr. Wilson regards Marcellus as a Catholic, mainly because Marcellus describes the Ghost as of "the air invulnerable," which expression seems to echo the opinion of St. Thomas Aquinas that a separated soul appears on earth not with a real but with an aerial body.[14] Even if we admit with Dr. Wilson that Hamlet gives a diabolic twist to his jocular references to the Ghost, we find no evidence in the text to support the theory that the Ghost coöperates with Hamlet in palming himself off as a demon. There is nothing specifically diabolic in what the Ghost says or does

His subterranean cries and movements prove that he is a spirit—not necessarily an evil spirit. Moreover, theologically speaking, the view that a soul from Purgatory, confirmed in grace and enjoying the friendship of God, would coöperate in an imposture of any kind, is untenable. We may also question whether Marcellus, on Dr. Wilson's assumption that he is a Catholic, would hold his tongue "to his dying day," because he thought that he had sworn an oath in the presence of a fiend. As a Catholic he would know that such an oath is invalid and that it would be his plain duty to report the matter to the proper authorities. The Church has always abhorred conjuring practices. On January 5th, 1586, Pope Sixtus V issued his famous constitution, *Coeli et terrae Creator,* in which he ordered the bishops of Christendom to proceed against conjurers and to impose the severest canonical penalties. A conspiracy of the kind described by Dr. Wilson, postulating on Shakespeare's part a misrepresentation not only of the doctrine of Purgatory but also of the practical behavior of Catholics, would be profoundly distressing to the Catholic group in his audience.

We also doubt if the Protestant playgoers at the Globe would be satisfied with Shakespeare's presentation of the Protestant position on Ghosts, assuming of course that he actually dramatized the controversy. They would not be pleased with a presentation of their case which did not at the same time exclude the Catholic viewpoint, and they certainly would resent having the issue decided against them. The proponents of this theory hold that Hamlet, in his attitude toward the Ghost, consistently exhibits himself as a Protestant of the Lavater type, *i.e.,* a believer in the doctrine that

all specters are either angels or demons. At the first mention of the Ghost he declares:

> If it assume my noble father's person,
> I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
> And bid me hold my peace.[15]

It is argued that these lines label Hamlet a disciple of Lavater, because his first thought is that the Ghost may be a devil— "though hell itself should gape." However, the argument is not conclusive, because these lines do not bar the interpretation that Hamlet speaks as a Catholic who believes that apparitions may be angels, saints, souls from Purgatory, or devils, and who in his determination to face the Ghost envisages the worst possibility. The point stressed by these lines is his resolve to speak to the Ghost come what may, not a specific hypothesis concerning the nature of the Ghost.

The words which Hamlet addresses to the Ghost when he sees his father's spirit for the first time are also cited to prove that he adopts a distinctly Protestant view toward specters. Hamlet speaks as follows:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou comest in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee.[16]

These lines can be interpreted in favor of the orthodox Protestant doctrine that ghosts are either angels or devils, but to assert that they absolutely exclude the Catholic viewpoint is to misunderstand the doctrine of Purgatory. The souls in Purgatory died in the state of grace, they are saved, they are confirmed in good. Purgatory, therefore, is a vestibule of Heaven; and the souls in Purgatory, though still in a state

of suffering, nevertheless belong entirely to the society of the saints. Such is the teaching of Bellarmine and Suarez, the two great theologians of Shakespeare's day. Bellarmine[17] describes the love of the suffering souls for God and their intimate union with Him, and Suarez[18] dwells on their holiness and the love of God for them. Therefore, the expressions, "spirit of health" and "airs from heaven," can refer not only to angels and saints but also to the suffering souls. They are spirits of health, and if they return to earth they bring with them the airs of heaven.

Of course, the main argument for the theory that Hamlet seeks a refuge in the Protestant doctrine concerning ghosts is based on the following lines of the soliloquy with which Act II ends:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil; and the devil hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me.[19]

This doubt has a sound theological basis: in the sixteenth century both Catholic and Protestant theologians advised the utmost circumspection in the matter of dealing with specters. Moreover, this doubt, which is manifestly rooted in a religious outlook, is strictly in character; for in his first soliloquy Hamlet displays a profound reverence for both the divine and the ecclesiastical law. Because the Almighty has established a canon against self-slaughter, Hamlet rejects the temptation to commit suicide. And because the Church had labeled the union of a woman with her deceased husband's brother as incestuous, he is filled with horror at the thought of his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. However, Dr. Wilson, in his eagerness to prove that Hamlet doubts as a Protestant,

leaves the impression that Elizabethan Catholics explained virtually all specters in terms of souls from Purgatory. For instance, he writes concerning the traditional belief of Catholics in ghosts: "Before the Reformation the belief in their existence, which was of course much older than Christianity, had offered little intellectual difficulty to the ordinary man, since the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory afforded a complete explanation of it in theological terms, though thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas might indulge in speculation which anticipated in a measure later Protestant theory."[20] The fact is that neither in the Middle Ages nor in Shakespeare's day did Catholics look upon the doctrine of Purgatory as affording "a complete explanation . . . in theological terms" of their belief in the existence of apparitions. The Church has always fully recognized the possibility of specters caused by diabolic agency. Dr. Wilson mentions St. Thomas Aquinas as speculating on demonic illusion. But the words of the Angelic Doctor do not suggest that he is theorizing on the subject; on the contrary, they constitute a clear and dogmatic statement. Discussing how a demon can cause the body of a dead man to return to life, he states that this transformation is not real but only a semblance of reality, and that it can be produced in two ways: "First, from within: in this way a demon can work on man's imagination and even on his corporal senses, so that something seems otherwise than it is. . . . Second, from without: for just as he can make from the air a body of any form or shape, and assume it so as to appear in it visibly; likewise, in the same way he can clothe any corporal thing with any corporal form, so as to appear therein."[21] Nor was belief in diabolic illusion the exclusive monopoly of theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas; it is repeatedly enforced by the religious books which were read by medieval and Elizabethan Catholics. A popular work like

The Golden Legend records so many cases of diabolical illusion that its theme might be stated in the words of St. Paul's classic text: "Satan himself can pass for an angel of light."[22] Of course, Elizabethan Catholics would draw the obvious lesson: when dealing with an apparition of any kind the only safe course is to doubt until proper assurances are forthcoming. This lesson is also one of the commonplaces in the writings of the two great Spanish contemporaries of Shakespeare, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

Since, therefore, Hamlet's doubt that the Ghost may be a devil is not dependent on current Protestant theology, it can hardly be advanced as an argument to prove that the ghost scenes in the play harbor a controversy. Of course, educated Protestants in the audience would harmonize this doubt with their own doctrine, but they would also know that it could be harmonized with Catholic teaching. In other words, they could not find a controversy where none was intended. Moreover, on the assumption that there is a controversy, imagine the feelings of the Protestant majority when they discovered that the dramatist had decided the controversy in favor of the Catholic position; for, as E. E. Stoll[23] points out, both Hamlet, who is supposed to be an orthodox Protestant of the Lavater type, and Horatio, who is supposed to be a skepical Protestant of the Scot type, are converted to the belief that the Ghost comes from Purgatory.

The theory that *Hamlet* mirrors a theological controversy of Elizabethan England suffers from additional handicaps. First of all, the play as a whole reflects a pre-Reformation Denmark with a distinctly Catholic setting. The keynote to this milieu is struck by the Ghost in the first act, who comes from Purgatory and who laments that he died without the consolation of receiving Extreme Unction. This impression is confirmed by Hamlet, who speaks familiarly of the

association of St. Patrick with Purgatory, who thinks of a nunnery for Ophelia "as the safest haven of refuge from a corrupt world,"[24] and who drops a casual remark about "shriving time" as if he were to the manner born. Then, too, Ophelia's funeral in the last act seems to follow the Roman Catholic rite for the burial of a person whose death was doubtful. Shakespeare represents the clergy as fearful that Ophelia had committed suicide, and hence as following the usage for doubtful cases which permitted the tolling of the bell, the procession to the grave, and burial in sanctified ground, but no Requiem Mass. Richmond Noble[25] points out that Shakespeare took the pains to be accurately informed on the Roman Catholic practice, and he refers the reader to Canon 1240, Par. 2, in the *Codex Juris Canonici.* He further notes that the Elizabethan Anglican liturgy made no provision for refusal of Church benefits to suicides; the present rubric was added in 1662.

In fine, Shakespeare laid his scene in Catholic Denmark, which rules out the hypothesis of an Elizabethan controversy in the ghost scenes. It is logical to conclude that, since Catholic theology supplied him with a purgatorial ghost, the same source inspired Hamlet's reflections on diabolic illusion. That the dramatist was able to do all this without antagonizing the Protestant majority in his audience is due to the fact that he represents the action of his play as taking place in a foreign country and at a distant time. We must remember that his manuscripts were censored by the Master of Revels, who was forbidden by law to license plays dealing with matters of religion or the government of the State. It was only by removing all suspicion that he was concerned with contemporary England that he could introduce Catholic doctrine and practice into his plays. Then, too, he made some concessions to his Protestant playgoers. It is noticeable, for instance, that,

although Purgatory bulks large in the action of *Hamlet,* the term *Purgatory* is never mentioned. Likewise, it cannot be ignored that both Hamlet and Horatio studied at Wittenberg, Luther's university. Furness[26] is of the opinion that Shakespeare could have learned of this university from a multitude of publications of the period. At any rate, Wittenberg was popularized in literary works like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller.*

Finally, the theory of a theological controversy in *Hamlet* presupposes a knowledge of highly specialized works on the part of both Shakespeare and his audience, without which knowledge the ghost scenes could not be written or understood. It is difficult to imagine a busy dramatist like Shakespeare blasting his way through the theological treatises of Pierre Le Loyer, Lewes Lavater, and Reginald Scot. Le Loyer's French work, the first book of which was not translated into English until 1605, runs to over one thousand pages. And as far as the audience is concerned, the comment of Alfred Harbage is to the point: "The difficulty is that we cannot consult the spectators at the Globe and make sure they had read the right books."[27] The truth is that most of the theology in *Hamlet* could have been gleaned from a popular hagiographical book like *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, with its exposition of Purgatory, with its allusions to St. Patrick as the keeper of a purgatory, with its apparitions produced by the devil, and even with a purgatorial ghost on a mission of divine justice.[28]

III

THE PRAYER SCENE

The prayer scene in *Hamlet* is generally listed among the perplexing problems of the play. Hamlet, who has been summoned to his mother's room, unexpectedly comes upon the King kneeling in prayer and unaware of his presence. At long last the opportunity to avenge his father's murder has arrived, and yet he sheathes his half-drawn sword not because he is reluctant to attack a defenceless man, but because he feels that if he kills the King at prayer his enemy will escape eternal damnation. He communes with himself in these words:

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
> And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven,
> And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
> A villain kills my father; and for that,
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
> Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge!
> He took my father grossly, full of bread,
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
> And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
> But in our circumstance and course of thought,
> 'Tis heavy with him; and am I then revenged,
> To take him in the purging of his soul,
> When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
> No.
> Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
> When he is drunk asleep; or in his rage;
> Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed;

> At gaming, swearing, or about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't—
> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damned and black
> As hell, whereto it goes.[1]

The revolting sentiments of this soliloquy provoked Dr. Johnson's oft-quoted comment that they are "too horrible to be read or to be uttered."[2] Of course this speech would be understandable in the mouth of a Machiavellian villain. But Hamlet was evidently projected as a noble and virtuous prince. The soliloquy, therefore, seems entirely out of character. How are we to explain its inclusion in the drama?

Some critics, believing that Hamlet does not mean what he says, maintain that in these lines he does not reveal his real reason for sparing the King but merely offers a pretext. For instance, A. C. Bradley[3] states that Hamlet's reluctance to act is due to a melancholic paralysis of the will, and consequently that the motive advanced in the soliloquy is only "an unconscious excuse for delay." He admits that his interpretation places a difficult burden on the actor. Hamlet here is talking directly to the audience, *i. e.*, he is thinking out loud; and hence he must be taken at his word. A. J. A. Waldock,[4] who points out that the speech is simple and clear, with a plain and obvious meaning, contends that Bradley sets not a difficult but an impossible task for the actor. The playgoers can receive only what the actor can give; assuredly, the view that Hamlet is providing himself with "an unconscious excuse for delay," however intriguing to a psychologist in his study, would never present itself to an audience in a theatre. In a sense Shakespeare anticipated this theory, and, as a contributor to the *Quarterly Review*[5] remarks, guarded against it

by having Hamlet speak the following lines just before he enters the King's closet:

> 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
> When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on.[6]

Other critics, who hold that *Hamlet* is based on a crude revenge play by Thomas Kyd, blame Shakespeare's source for Hamlet's anti-Christian sentiments. Thus J. M. Robertson asserts: "Shakespeare would never have *planned* a play on such lines and with such a thesis, any more than he would have invented the prayer-scene and the motive that there withholds Hamlet."[7] However, it matters little whether or not Shakespeare invented the prayer scene, because this episode has all the earmarks of being written (or rewritten) with great gusto; and in the final analysis the responsibility is the dramatist's. If we assume that Shakespeare deliberately introduced a jarring element into the characterization of the hero, it would seem that he lacked an artistic conscience. This some critics admit, because in their opinion his paramount concern was stage effect and not absolute consistency of character portrayal. Robert Bridges did not hesitate to write: "To sustain surprise in a worthy hero Shakespeare has sometimes had recourse to devices which are intended to baulk analysis. In order to attain the surprising he will risk, or even sacrifice, the logical and consistent."[8] In this view, the *raison d'être* of the prayer scene is the spinal thrill, or shock of horror, which Shakespeare wished to give the audience, and to produce this macabre effect he makes Hamlet say things which are not in keeping with what has gone before. Of course, it is argued that the playwright could do this because he relied on the limitations of a stage perform-

ance, which do not permit the playgoers to turn the scenes back as they would the pages of a book, and check the contradictions. There can be no question that we are treated to a surprise in the prayer scene, but the difficulty is that the spectators would hardly find it necessary, even if they could, to turn back the scenes in order to check the disagreeable inconsistency which makes the surprise possible. When they saw Hamlet preoccupied in the prayer scene with what J. Q. Adams styles "the business of devils,"[9] they would have to be endowed with phenomenally short memories to forget that in the preceding scenes he had been poised before them as a chivalrous, likeable, and even religious-minded prince. The discrepancy is too glaring even for a stage performance. This being the case, it is the part of wisdom to explore other avenues of interpretation before we accept the view that Shakespeare in the prayer scene sacrificed both character and meaning to the demands of theatrical effect.

We are told that *Hamlet* was written for Elizabethans, and that the diabolical sentiments of the hero's soliloquy would not have shocked them. Robert Bridges, who refers to the "iron nerves" of Shakespeare's audience, lays down a second principle of interpretation for perplexing episodes like the prayer scene: "Hence it would appear that a knowledge of Shakespeare's audience would be the best key to many difficulties . . . [we may] argue that certain scenes which offend our feelings so that we cannot endure to see them in representation . . . did not offend Shakespeare's audience."[10] It is true that the Elizabethans in their daily life were accustomed to public spectacles of blood and violence. Heretics and witches were burnt at the stake. Criminals and traitors were racked, hanged, cut down while still alive, disemboweled and quartered. But the tortures were for the body only. The condemned persons were exhorted by the

clergy to prepare their souls for the next world by prayer, confession, and repentance. During the trial of Father Robert Southwell on Feb. 20th, 1595, as reported by Father Thomas Leake, who witnessed it, a striking incident occurred. When the priest complained that Topcliffe the informer had tortured him ten times, the following dialogue ensued:

> *Toplif*: "If he weir rackt, let me die for it."
> *F. S.*: "No: but it was as evill a Torture, of late devise."
> *Toplif*: "I did but set him against the wall."
> *F. S.*: "Thou art a bad man."
> *Top.*: "I would blow you all to dust, if I could."
> *F. S.*: "What, all?"
> *Top.*: "Ey, all."
> *F. S.*: "What soule and body too?"[11]

Here it is not a question of sending a soul to Hell but of blowing it to dust. And yet the tough-minded Topcliffe, the Himmler of his day, dared not answer the last question. He promptly changed the subject. We may conclude, therefore, that the idea of devising means to damn a man's soul was just as horrifying to the Elizabethans as it is to us. Alfred Harbage, who adduces facts and figures to show that the audience at the Globe Theatre was made up of all classes of society, including the virtuous and religious elements, infers as much when he writes: "Nothing we can discover from examining their daily routine, their frugal expense accounts, and their quiet and sensible letters suggests that Elizabethans, individually or collectively, were vastly different from us."[12]

Today, many critics explain the inhuman sentiments of Hamlet's soliloquy in terms of a literary convention with regard to adequate revenge. They distinguish between the Elizabethans in daily life, who, as we have seen, would be

averse to the sentiments, and the Elizabethans in the playhouse, who would be familiar with the revenge code as developed in plays and novels, and who would, therefore, make the proper allowances. In other words, the avenger at some point in the story was supposed to plot the destruction of his enemy's soul, and the audience, aware of this time-honored custom, would not take it too seriously.

To establish the convention as a fact, passages are cited from Shakespeare's plays, from the plays of other dramatists, and from Thomas Nashe's novel, *The Unfortunate Traveller.* J. Dover Wilson,[13] for instance, refers us to three passages in *Hamlet.* The first of these occurs in the Hecuba soliloquy, in which Hamlet threatens the King with bodily dismemberment. These are the lines:

> for it cannot be
> But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
> I should have fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal.[14]

Dr. Wilson thinks that the soliloquy of the prayer scene is "scarcely more barbarous" than the above lines. Theologically speaking, the difference between the two passages finds apt expression in the Scriptural text: "And there is no need to fear those who kill the body, but have no means of killing the soul; fear him more, who has the power to ruin body and soul in hell."[15] The distinction is not one of degree but of kind; killing the body may fall within the range of human activities as in war, but killing the soul is a demonic function. Moreover, in the Hecuba soliloquy Hamlet makes it plain to the audience that he is disgusted with himself for thus unpacking his heart in words of futile execration. The second passage adduced by Dr. Wilson is the conversation between Laertes and the King,[16] in which they agree that

Laertes would be justified in cutting Hamlet's throat in the church. The sentiment is barbarous enough, but we should note, first, that it is the expression of two dastardly intriguers who at the moment are plotting Hamlet's death, and second, that, like the passage in the Hecuba soliloquy, it postulates absolutely nothing about killing the soul. The third passage quoted by Dr. Wilson involves a curious mistake on his part. He says: "Hamlet, too, takes good care that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shall be allowed no 'shriving-time'."[17] G. L. Kittredge, who denies that the expression, "not shriving-time allowed," was actually a part of Hamlet's missive dooming his classmates to death, comments as follows: "It would be absurd to take this passage literally, and to infer that the services of a priest were denied to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern . . . Hamlet merely emphasizes the idea of immediate death—of 'giving the men short shrift'."[18] It is clear, therefore, that the three passages cited by Dr. Wilson from *Hamlet* are not analogous to the soliloquy of the prayer scene, and hence that they cannot be used to establish a literary convention which would explain the sentiments of that soliloquy.

Passages, which are supposed to parallel the soliloquy of the prayer scene, are also quoted from several other plays by Shakespeare. They generally consist of a line or two, the most notable occurring in *2 Henry VI,* when Alexander Iden addresses the dying Jack Cade as follows:

> Die, damned wretch, the curse of her that bore thee!
> And as I thrust thy body in with my sword,
> So wish I, I might thrust thy soul to hell![19]

Iden is a Kentish gentleman and a virtuous character, but he speaks the above lines after he has slain the rebel Cade, when he is still laboring under the strong emotion engendered by a personal combat. We may admit that a virtuous person in a white heat of anger may consign his enemy's soul to

hell, but there is a vast difference between an ejaculatory wish of this kind and the meditative soliloquy in which Hamlet plans the thing and gloats over it.

When recourse is had to the works of other dramatists for passages paralleling Hamlet's soliloquy, lines can be quoted from Marston's *The Dutch Courtezan,* Webster's *The White Devil,* and Shirley's *The Cardinal,* but it should be noted that these plays were written after 1603, and probably show the influence of *Hamlet.* In this connection J. Q. Adams writes: "How deep an impression it [Hamlet's soliloquy] made upon other Elizabethan dramatists is shown by almost countless allusions to or parodies of the lines."[20] Of course, *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd is an exception. It was the first play to popularize revenge as a tragic motive on the Elizabethan stage, and undoubtedly it exercised an influence on Shakespeare. The following couplet is adduced in support of the theory of a literary convention:

> This hand shall hale them down to deepest hell,
> Where none but Furies, bugs and tortures dwell.[21]

These lines are spoken by an abstract character, Revenge, who is raised from the pagan Hades, to the ghost Andrea, who rejoices at the prospect of having his enemies punished in the same pagan Hades. Kyd's use of classic myths to describe the punishments of the underworld lends such an air of fantastic unreality to the whole affair that the analogy with the lines in *Hamlet* breaks down.

Finally, Thomas Nashe's tale of roguery, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), is used to bolster the theory of a literary convention. The latter part of this novel is crowded with harrowing scenes of cruelty, lust and murder, and Nashe brings his horrors to a climax and a conclusion with the story of Cutwolfe, who avenges the murder of his brother by

killing Esdras the murderer after the manner of what he styles a "notable new Italianism." Esdras begs Cutwolfe to spare him in order that he may repent his heinous sins. Cutwolfe promises to spare his defenceless victim on condition that he sell his soul to the devil and blaspheme God. When Esdras is in the midst of his horrible blasphemies, Cutwolfe suddenly shoots him through the throat so that he will have no chance to repent. Thus he kills both the body and the soul of his mortal enemy.[22] We may concede that a lurid episode of this kind may have started a literary convention which would pertain to monsters of iniquity, but it is obvious that such a convention would be meaningless when applied to the high-minded Prince Hamlet.

The convention with regard to revenge which was recognized both by the dramatists and the audiences of the Elizabethan age, while it did not conform to the views of moralists and lawgivers, was based on an instinctive sense of justice. F. T. Bowers[23] claims that the revenger of the drama started with the sympathy of the audience, first, if his cause was good, *i.e.*, if he opposed a treacherous adversary who could not be punished by a legal process; and second, if he acted according to the English notions of fair play. And he would retain this sympathy as long as he remained, in the words of Sister M. Bonaventure Mroz, "the avenger of justice and did not vitiate that justice by personal malice or passion."[24] In short, there was a tacit understanding between dramatists and audiences that an avenger of the heroic type should not adopt Cutwolfe's "notable new Italianism."

In attempting to solve the contradiction in the character of Hamlet, we may start with the assumption that, since the drama is a popular work and not a psychological puzzle, the play scene would be intelligible to an Elizabethan audience. The possibility that this scene presents a hero who is tempo-

rarily deranged, and who therefore is not responsible for what he says, has never been adequately explored by reputable critics. The a priori objection advanced by A. C. Bradley[25] that if Hamlet were really mad at any time in the story he would cease to be a tragic character, may have meant nothing to Shakespeare. Guy Boas, in his *Lays of Learning*, good-humoredly suggests that the dramatist would merit a failure if tested on a kindred point developed by Dr. Bradley·

> I dreamed last night that Shakespeare's ghost
> Sat for a Civil Service post.
> The English paper of the year
> Contained a question on King Lear,
> Which Shakespeare answered very badly
> Because he had not read his Bradley.

It is only fair, however, to add that Dr. Bradley, who describes Hamlet's state as melancholia, does make the following admission: "That Hamlet was not far from insanity is very probable."[26] J. Dover Wilson,[27] who also regards Hamlet as a melancholic, brings him as close to the brink of insanity as is possible without administering the final push. And L. L. Schücking,[28] who agrees with Bradley and Wilson that the character is a study in melancholia, holds that Hamlet remains in a "borderline state," and that at certain moments in the play as at the grave of Ophelia his condition is definitely pathological.

To assert that Hamlet is "mad at times" is not to maintain that Shakespeare painted the portrait of a maniac or an idiot. Fundamentally Hamlet is sane, and with the exception of a few brief moments in the action he is morally responsible. That he was conceived as a noble character of heroic mould is evident from the impression that he makes on the

other persons in the drama. Thus do we glimpse him through the eyes of Ophelia:

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th' observed of all observers—[29]

The King confesses that he is "most generous, and free from all contriving"; and Horatio, who should know, speaks of his "noble heart" and calls him "sweet prince." And in what are virtually the last lines of the play, Fortinbras, who here gives us Shakespeare's own summing-up, declares:

> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royally.[30]

But in the play Hamlet is not his normal self until the final scene, where he regains his self-control. Up to that point we know the normal Hamlet only for brief moments, as in his conversation with the Players when he reveals himself as a charming and aesthetic Prince, kindly and democratic in his treatment of these social outcasts of the Elizabethan age, and intensely interested in their art. This noble and gentle Hamlet is shadowed by an identical twin, who is sardonic, harsh and vindictive. Just how vindictive he can be we know from the prayer scene. The truth is that the Hamlet who holds the center of the stage for most of the action is a tortured being, to whom duty has come in a most repulsive form; for what other meaning can we attach to the lines:

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right?[31]

Disillusioned by the sensuality of his mother and shocked by the revelations of the Ghost, he becomes the prey of melan-

cholia, which vents itself in outbursts of hysterical emotion. That these moods of ranting and raving are a new development induced by his melancholia is evinced from his advice to the Players, when he tells them that it offends his soul to hear an actor "tear a passion to tatters." Here the normal Hamlet speaks, and we may be certain that what he loathes on the stage he would not willingly adopt in the theatre of life.

Of course, the matter is complicated by the fact that when he feigns insanity the feigning sometimes merges with a passionate outburst. However, as a general rule it is evident when he is feigning madness, for, as Polonius asserts, "there is method in't." It is also apparent when his frenzy stops short of real madness. The Hecuba soliloquy with which Act II ends is a good example. Here we have a crescendo of wild excitement which exhausts itself in a scream of rage:

> Bloody, bawdy villain!
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
> O, vengeance![34]

Then of a sudden he brings his denunciation of the King to a dead halt, and in disgust exclaims, "Why, what an ass am I!" It is obvious that he is conscious of what he is doing. This is virtually the test which he proposed to his mother in the closet scene, when she thought that he was out of his mind:

> It is not madness
> That I have utt'red. Bring me to the test,
> And I the matter will reword; which madness
> Would gambol from.[35]

In fine, when the occasion demands that he reword the matter of a particular scene, and he is unable to do this, we

may conclude, as L. L. Schücking[34] suggests, that he was deranged at the time of the scene in question.

Now there are two episodes in the play to which this test applies perfectly: Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia and his soliloquy in the prayer scene. He never rewords the matter of these scenes, not even when the occasion demands that he should do so. His brutal treatment of Ophelia is one of the enigmas of the play. She is a virtuous young girl, full of maidenly reserve, and yet he treats her as a wanton, advising her to enter a house of ill-fame and insulting her before the assembled court with obscene remarks. John Gielgud, the foremost Hamlet of our time, admits his bewilderment when he writes: "The scene with Ophelia has never really been explained to my satisfaction in any book I have read or performance I have seen. I have certainly never been able to decide positively for myself its general meaning or the particular meaning of many of its lines."[35] In the last act Hamlet displays an appalling want of feeling at the grave of Ophelia. All he can say is, "What, the fair Ophelia," and his raving over the grave when he grapples with her brother is, as he explains later to Horatio, merely an attempt to outdo the bombastic language of Laertes. Of course, the occasion demanded that he should remember his outrageous treatment of this young girl whom he professed to love, and that he should show some feelings of remorse. But of this there is not a sign. He cannot reword the matter of these earlier scenes with Ophelia, because at the time he was not a responsible agent.

The same is true of the horrible sentiments which he expresses in the prayer scene. He never refers to them again. In the final scene the occasion arises when he should reword them. He is his normal self, and he is calmly summing up

his motives for killing the King. These are his words to Horatio:

> Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—
> He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother;
> Popped in between th' election and my hopes;
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect
> To quit him with this arm?[36]

Not a word about his father dying "with all his crimes broad blown"; not a doubt as to how his father's audit stands; not an allusion to the need of holding the King responsible for the punishment meted out to the Ghost in the other world; in short, not the slightest remembrance of the motive for killing the King which he alleged in the prayer scene. His memory is an absolute blank, which argues that in the prayer scene he had overstepped the bounds of sanity.

We are told that, in attempting to solve the problem presented by the prayer scene, we should not take stock of the whole play at once. This objection is valid when it is a question of evaluating the reaction of an audience to the prayer scene. The playgoers would have only the preceding scenes on which to form a judgment. In other words, does the dramatist prepare the audience for the interpretation which we have advanced? In the first act there is a curious passage in which Horatio warns Hamlet not to follow the Ghost, lest the apparition assume some horrible form

> Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
> And draw you into madness.[37]

If Shakespeare planned to present a Hamlet "mad at times," he could not have inserted a more striking fingerpost. Then, too, the cumulative effect of Hamlet's moods of frenzied emotion should be given due weight. A Hamlet addicted to hys-

teria would unquestionably suggest to the audience the idea of incipient insanity. Moreover, they could not ignore his harsh treatment of Ophelia, which would be just as inexplicable to them as it is to John Gielgud and ourselves. They would likewise note that the soliloquy of the prayer scene climaxes a spell of feverish excitement, whose keynote is "Now could I drink hot blood."

Finally, in the soliloquy itself there is evidence which would not be lost on the audience. The process of reasoning by which Hamlet convinces himself that he should delay his revenge until he can kill the King in the act of committing some sin, is manifestly based on a false premise. In the following lines he virtually regards his father's spirit as a lost soul:

> He took my father grossly, full of bread,
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
> And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?[88]

In fact, the whole point of his soliloquy is destroyed if his father's spirit is not in Hell, and yet the Ghost plainly stated that he was in Purgatory. The punishment of Purgatory being temporary, there can be no doubt how the audit, or final account, of the Ghost stands—he is saved. It is absurd to argue that here Shakespeare relied upon the inability of his audience to turn the scenes back and check this contradiction. The doctrine of Purgatory was a burning issue of the age, and neither the Catholics nor the Protestants in the audience would be likely to forget the solemn pronouncement of the Ghost. Far from wanting them to forget, the dramatist relied upon them remembering what the Ghost had said, in order that they might be impressed with the utter illogicality of Hamlet's mental process. The obvious falsity of the premise, the low cunning with which the argument is de-

veloped, and the ghastly vindictiveness of the conclusion would strike them as emanating from an unbalanced mind.

The actor would experience no difficulty in making this interpretation intelligible to the audience. Of course, he would be helped if he appeared in the disorganized costume as described by Ophelia in the second act. There can be little doubt that on the Elizabethan stage Hamlet's disheveled appearance was an important factor in suggesting a mind that had lost its equilibrium. Today, the actor does not look the part in the prayer scene, for generally he appears as spick and span as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. It is difficult for the audience to associate a disordered mind with his meticulous costume and make-up; and hence the "wild and whirling words" of Hamlet's soliloquy fail to register their true meaning.

IV

ORTHODOXY VERSUS SKEPTICISM

In recent years it has been argued that Shakespeare's philosopher-prince is a typical Renaissance skeptic. Oliver Elton,[1] for instance, claims that Hamlet, in his weighing of pros and cons, in his doubts about the afterlife, and in his disregard of consistency, is a freethinker of the Montaigne type, *i. e.*, a thinker that nothing can stop. At the very outset it should be emphasized that this view labors under the handicap of explaining why Shakespeare in the first act of his drama presented his hero not only as an orthodox Christian but also as a religious-minded person. Lines can be quoted to prove that Hamlet is a believer in Heaven, Hell and Purgatory, in angels and demons, and in the immortality of the soul. He is familiar with the traditional association of St. Patrick with Purgatory; he knows that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light; and he insists that his friends swear an oath of secrecy on the Cross of Christ (the hilt of his sword). When he is tempted to commit suicide he is restrained by the divine law; and when he labels the marriage of his mother with his uncle as incestuous he has the ecclesiastical law in mind. In fact, he poses as a champion of orthodoxy, for he rebukes the skeptic Horatio in these words:

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.[2]

The first argument advanced to prove that Hamlet is a skeptic is based on the famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be."[3] It is claimed that this soliloquy is steeped in the phi-

losophy of agnosticism. Hamlet begins by posing a question which he asserts cannot be answered unless we know the answer to a second question. He philosophizes as follows:

> To be, or not to be—that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep—
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished. To die—to sleep.
> To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub!
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause.

Roughly speaking, there are two schools of thought regarding the meaning of the above lines. The majority of critics look upon them as a meditation on suicide, in which Hamlet professes himself an agnostic with respect to the future life. Some assert that he even speculates on the prospect of annihilation, when he declares that the sleep of death is a highly desirable consummation. It is pointed out that these lines afford a close parallel to the following passage from Montaigne's summary of the Apology of Socrates: "If it [death] be a consummation of ones being, it is also an amendment and entrance into a long and quiet night. Wee finde nothing so sweete in life, as a quiet rest and gentle sleepe, and without dreames."[4]

There are two a priori objections to the theory of suicide: first, Hamlet, as we have seen, has already rejected self-slaughter as opposed to the divine law; second, he is engaged at the time in the momentous project of staging a play to catch the conscience of the King, and hence he would hardly

be dallying with the idea of taking his own life. And it is needless to state that the agnosticism which is attributed to him contradicts the Christian sentiments which, as we have noted, he expressed in the first act. These are weighty considerations, and little wonder is it that some commentators follow the lead of Hazelton Spencer,[5] who, regarding Hamlet as a man of action, explains the soliloquies as so many "elocutionary arias," which were intended to cater to the audience's love of fine language, and which consequently need not be strictly in character.

A second school of critics, who keep to the main highway of Shakespearean interpretation, and who therefore look upon the soliloquies as organic, believe that to interpret Hamlet's words in terms of suicide and agnosticism is to do violence to his train of thought. They maintain that by "the question" Hamlet means: "Is my present course of active resistance to evil to be, or not to be?" In their opinion Hamlet expects to lose his life in the act of killing the King, and therefore he is concerned with what may happen to his soul in the next world. Dr. Johnson[6] championed this view. In recent years it has been developed with telling cogency by Irving T. Richards,[7] who declares that the contrast in the passage which we have quoted is not between patient endurance and suicide but between distasteful patient endurance and a destructive active resistance that may bring the stain of mortal sin; and hence that Hamlet is stayed by the thought that he may die in sin and be punished in the next world. Professor Richards contends that "it is not his life but his soul that he is chiefly concerned to preserve."

It is evident that this second interpretation hinges on the explanation which is given to the lines in which Hamlet compares death to a sleep. These lines echo Montaigne, but they cannot be claimed for the pagan attitude toward death, because

Shakespeare altered what he borrowed. The pagans had no monopoly on death pictured as a sleep. It is a Christian image. St. Paul refers to the dead as to "them that are asleep."[8] The same image is found in the ancient liturgies of the Church and in the inscriptions on the walls of the catacombs. In the popular medieval work, *The Golden Legend,* which was still in circulation during Shakespeare's youth, we read that St. Bernard of Clairvaux "compared sleep to death, saying that as, in the sight of God, dead men were as those asleep, so in the sight of men, sleeping men were as the dead."[9] The sleep of death spells the end of "the thousand natural shocks" of human life, and in this sense Hamlet regards it as "devoutly to be wished." It is straining these lines to read annihilation into them. In the passage quoted from Montaigne, Socrates longs for the sleep of death but "without dreames." Hamlet harbors no delusion regarding the "dreams"; for he has already asserted that he could be bounded in a nutshell and yet count himself a king of infinite space, were it not that he has "bad dreams." The "dreams" which he fears are "bad dreams," which can only mean the punishments of sin. Here, it would seem, that his father's spirit hovers in the background, for the Ghost minced no words in stressing the pains of Purgatory. And of course there are the eternal punishments of Hell to be considered. Hamlet thus answers the question which he asked in the opening lines: "Is active resistance to evil to be, or not to be?" He decides in the negative, because he feels that a policy of active resistance would demand that he incur the risk of a sleep of death, which in reality would be no sleep at all but a nightmare of "bad dreams."

In the second part of his soliloquy Hamlet speaks in general terms. He is thinking of the average man when he utters the following lines:

There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death—
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns—puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

It is evident that Hamlet is thinking of mankind in general, because most of the afflictions which he lists are meaningless when applied to himself. In these lines he argues that the average man bears the ills of life because of "the dread of something after death." He sees an analogy between his own case and that of the average man. Just as he hesitates to adopt a policy of active resistance because he fears that he may die in sin and thus incur the penalties of the next world, so the average man rejects suicide as a means of escape from the evils of life because of the punishment that would follow. The main difficulty in this passage resides in the lines in which Hamlet refers to the other world as

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns.

It would seem that he has forgotten the Ghost. However, Coleridge's gloss, "that no traveller returns to this world as to his home, or abiding-place,"[10] removes the apparent contradiction. It is likely that these lines were inspired by the contrast between the Elizabethan explorers who returned

from the New World and the souls who return to earth. The former could settle down in their homes in England and write books about the strange places which they had visited. The latter are unable to live a second life on earth or to describe in detail the unseen world of spirits. It should be recalled that the visitations of the Ghost were of brief duration and that he was extremely reticent in referring to the secrets of Purgatory, for he declared to Hamlet:

> But this eternal blazon must not be
> To ears of flesh and blood.[11]

Relatively speaking, therefore, the other world remains an "undiscovered country," because human words, which are the counters of sense-data, simply break in pieces when used to picture spiritual states. Even St. Paul,[12] who was "carried up into the third heaven," found it impossible to explain to others just what he had experienced.

In the concluding portion of the soliloquy Hamlet drops the analogy between himself and the average man and returns to the personal consideration with which the speech opened. These are his words:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.—Soft you now!
> The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remembered.

It is obvious that these lines have nothing to do with the refusal of the average man to plunge a stiletto into his heart. Suicide is not only a sin, but it is the sin, and therefore the conscience that prevents a man from committing suicide can-

not be said to make a coward of him, nor can suicide be listed among "enterprises of great pith and moment" The Elizabethans expressed their horror of the suicide by burying him at the crossroads, with a stake driven through his body. The conscience that makes a coward of a man is not a normal conscience but a scrupulous conscience in the theological sense of the term; *i.e.*, a conscience which is led by insufficient motives to imagine sin where none exists, or to dwell on the consequences of an act until the will becomes paralyzed by irresolution. Hamlet is thus explaining the origin of the motives which he assigned for preferring passive endurance to active resistance. Why should he fear that he will lose his life in the act of killing the King? He is not a coward, nor is he afraid of death; as a matter of fact, we have his word that in the performance of duty he does not set his life "at a pin's fee." And why does he fear that he will die in the state of sin? He has the sanction of the Ghost for killing the King, and the Ghost functions in the drama as the agent of divine justice. In the pursuance of this act he had been forbidden to taint his mind with hatred; therefore, all other things being equal, he would commit sin only if he dispatched his enemy *ex animo malo*. In other words, it lies within his power to fulfill the command of the Ghost without contracting sin. It is at this point that he parts company with the man contemplating suicide, who cannot act without commiting sin. Up to the beginning of his soliloquy he has delayed because of his doubt that the Ghost may be a devil who comes to damn him. We cannot quarrel with this motive because it can be justified on theological grounds. But the additional motives for delay which he advanced in the first section of the soliloquy have all the earmarks of being prompted by scrupulosity. This Hamlet himself recognizes in the passage under discussion, when he speaks of a conscience that makes a

coward of a man, of the irresolution produced by "the pale cast of thought," and of "enterprises of great pith and moment" that are stillborn. We should remember that the entire soliloquy is evoked by a mood of profound melancholy. Scrupulosity, therefore, is just what we would associate with this mood, particularly in Hamlet who has been depicted in the earlier scenes as a religious-minded person. Like most people prone to scrupulosity, he rationalizes his motives at one moment and condemns them at another.

Hamlet's reflections are interrupted when he discovers Ophelia in the act of perusing a prayer book. His reaction is definitely religious, for he says to her: "Be all my sins remembered." It is precisely because he has been meditating on sin and the terrible consequences of sin that he instinctively asks her to pray that his sins may be forgiven. The final line of the soliloquy does not suggest a Renaissance skeptic who rejects suicide because the penalties of the other world are unknown; on the contrary, it is a simple but eloquent testimonial to Hamlet's orthodoxy.

A second argument adduced in favor of the thesis that Hamlet is a Renaissance skeptic stems from passages which are interpreted as exhibiting an anti-Christian attitude toward the fact of death. Hamlet is accused of reveling in the macabre thought that it is the fate of all mankind to be eaten by worms; and, of course, it is implied that he regards the decomposition of the body in the grave as the end-all of human existence. Moreover, it is asserted that in these passages Shakespeare uses Hamlet as his mouthpiece, and it is customary to quote the lines from Sonnet LXXI:

> No longer mourn for me when I am dead
> Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
> Give warning to the world that I am fled
> From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell.

That these lines do not tell the whole story regarding Shakespeare's attitude towards death is manifest when we turn to Sonnet CXLVI, in which the dramatist, addressing his soul, writes in glowing words of hope and triumph:

> Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
> Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
> Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
> And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
> Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross:
> Within be fed, without be rich no more.

However, it is probable that when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* the thought not so much of death but of what happens after death was vividly present in his mind. What is the real theme of the play? C. S. Lewis asserts that the protagonists of Shakespeare's other tragedies "think of dying: no one thinks, in these plays, of *being dead*"; but that in *Hamlet* "we are kept thinking about it all the time."[13] The soliloquy which we have analyzed is a good example of a passage in which Shakespeare keeps us thinking about the soul's destiny; and in the passages which are cited to prove that Hamlet is obsessed by a morbid horror of death he keeps us thinking about the body's destiny.

When Hamlet is brought before the King and questioned concerning the whereabouts of the body of Polonius, he answers in this vein: "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That's the end."[14] Again we are reminded that Shakespeare was influenced by Montaigne, for the French skeptic wrote in his *Essays*: "The heart and life

of a mighty and triumphant Emperor, is but the breakfast of a seely little Worme."[15] Here it should be stressed that Hamlet is a character in a play and not an essayist like Montaigne. To wrench his speech from the situation in which it occurs is to do violence to it. What are the facts? He has killed Polonius by mistake, and he has thereby put himself in the power of the King, who is preparing to ship him to England. He is led before Claudius under close guard, and in this helpless situation he falls back upon the only weapon at his disposal, his mordant wit, to strike back at the "fat king," who is notorious for his hard drinking and heavy eating. His imagery is all the more devastating because it is macabre.

The graveyard scene in the last act is on a different footing. Here we have Prince Charming, "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," musing on what happens to the body after death. He and Horatio are watching the sexton exposing the skulls of persons long dead, as he goes about the business of digging a grave for Ophelia. Hamlet exchanges remarks with Horatio and the sexton, but in reality the scene is a long meditation, a companion piece to the soliloquy, "To be, or not to be." He allows his melancholy mood to unburden itself on the themes that death equalizes the lots of all men from Yorick, the court jester, to Alexander the Great, the conqueror of the world, and that the grave is an acid commentary on the pomp and circumstance of life. In fact, he derives satisfaction from the thought that death writes *finis* to the tricks of the wily politician, the sycophantic courtier, the vain society matron, and the knavish lawyer. We can hardly quarrel with these sentiments, because they have been the staple of moralists from time immemorial. On Ash Wednesday the Church bids us remember that man, compounded of dust, returns to dust;

and the disillusion of the author of *Ecclesiastes* with worldly wisdom, power, fame and luxury finds apt expression in the refrain, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." In Hamlet's reflections there is no suggestion that he reacts to death as did the hedonists of the ancient world: *Mors autem velleus, Vivite, ait, venio*— "Death plucks my ear, and says, 'Live,' for I come." Nor is there any indication that he seeks a refuge in the pessimistic creed of the stoic. The dissolution of the body confirms him in the belief that man is "the quintessence of dust," but nowhere does he intimate that man whom he has also styled a creature of godlike faculties, "the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals," perishes utterly in the grave. In this connection it is impossible to ignore the noble words which he uttered when he was urged not to follow the Ghost:

> Why, what should be the fear?
> 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?[16]

It is true that when Hamlet allows his imagination to dwell on the base uses to which the dust of Alexander the Great may be put, he introduces a strain of morbidity into his reflections. It is significant that at this point Shakespeare permits Horatio to remark: " 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so." There is an implied rebuke in Horatio's comment. In other words, a meditation over an open grave is good for the soul, but it can be carried too far.

Finally, some critics point to the last scene of the play, in which they claim that Hamlet sloughs his Christian beliefs in favor of a philosophic creed more congenial to him. G. F. Bradby[17] holds that his mind is "obsessed with the idea of Fate and human impotence"; and L. L. Schücking[18]

declares that he goes to his death fortified by the neo-stoicism of the Renaissance.

There can be no question that the Hamlet of the final scene is a changed man, calm, collected, resolute, noble, "the captain of his soul." He has regained his self-control, for not once does he unpack his heart in words of uncontrollable emotion. In contrast to the tormented and frustrated creature of the earlier scenes, he is his normal self. How are we to account for this change? Although he does not mention his father's spirit, the second visitation of the Ghost may be listed as a remote cause It should be recalled that when the Ghost appeared in the Queen's closet he came not only to whet his son's "almost blunted purpose," but also to exercise an allaying influence of a spiritual nature. An important immediate cause is the fact that Hamlet has come to terms with his conscience. We have seen that in the soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," he was held back by scruples of conscience as indicated by the line, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all." And just before he boarded the ship for England, in the soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me," he again implied that his delay was motivated by a perplexed conscience, when he referred to

> some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on th' event.[19]

In the final scene he uses the term *conscience* twice, but now without any derogatory allusions to scrupulosity. In explaining how he sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death, he assures Horatio that they are not near his conscience; for, inasmuch as "they did make love to this employment," he acted in self-defence. When Horatio warns him that, since the return of the ship from England will mean his own execution, there is little time left for him to fulfill

his task, he answers with the utmost assurance that the interim is his and that he can dispatch the King with one thrust of his rapier. Here, too, it is a question of self-preservation, and therefore he feels that he can kill his murderous enemy with a "perfect conscience." Having banished his scruples, he no longer fears that the slaying of the King will bring the stain of mortal sin. In other words, the revenging of his father's murder has now merged with self-defence. This consideration engenders peace of mind and a firm resolution to perform his duty. Hamlet's references to conscience carry not even the remotest suggestion that he has jettisoned the Christian outlook which characterized him in the preceding scenes.

Another immediate cause of the change in Hamlet, and the most significant of all, is his profound conviction that he is in the hands of Divine Providence. This conviction is forced on him by the outcome of recent events. When he boarded the ship for England he took stock of his situation in his last great soliloquy, in which, calmly meditative, he frankly admitted his failure and resolved anew for the future. On board the ship when his case appeared hopeless, he was alert and resourceful in foiling the treacherous plot of the King, but his return to Denmark was the result of a chance meeting with the pirate ship. That Hamlet regards this "accident," to quote A. C. Bradley,[20] "as the very reverse of accidental" is evident from his words to Horatio:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.[21]

His faith in Divine Providence persists to the end. He has a presentiment of evil regarding the fencing-match with Laertes, but, when Horatio suggests that the match be canceled, he dismisses his foreboding in these words: "Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a 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."[22] The attempt to interpret these lines in terms of fatalism and stoicism bogs down when Hamlet's quotation from the Gospel is restored to the passage from which it is taken. He is thinking of his task, and even of his own death, with these words of Christ clearly present in his mind: "And there is no need to fear those who kill the body, but have no means of killing the soul; fear him more, who has the power to ruin body and soul in hell. Are not sparrows sold two for a penny? And yet it is impossible for one of them to fall to the ground without your heavenly Father's will. And as for you, he takes every hair of your head into his reckoning. Do not be afraid, then; you count for more than a host of sparrows."[23] Hamlet expects to die in the act of killing the King, but he is ready to go. The time is short, but he is convinced that in the designs of Divine Providence he will not die before he is given the opportunity to fulfill his task. The opportunity does come in the fencing-match, and when he kills the King it is with a perfect conscience; for, as G. L. Kittredge[24] suggests, "his vengeance is to all intents and purposes, self-defence."

It is significant that when Hamlet dies Shakespeare introduces a reference to the reward of the soul in the next world, as is evident from the words which he puts in the mouth of Horatio: "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." Shakespeare thus tells us that there is another act to his drama, an act which is laid in the next world, and which is in accord with the Christian creed. Compared with Fortinbras, the man of deeds, who acts first and thinks afterwards, Hamlet is a failure, but only to those who measure success in proportion as they are able to pluck the plums of this world.

V

THE RENAISSANCE ELEMENT

The Renaissance ideal of education is an important key to the understanding of *Hamlet*. The following lines in which Ophelia describes the Hamlet that she once knew, the normal Hamlet, are taken by educators as a perfect expression of the aims of humanistic culture:

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue,
>   sword,
> Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th' observed of all observers.[1]

Here we have the concept of a many-sided training in beauty, learning and manliness, which prepares for leadership in the affairs of the state and for the discharge of social duties with grace of manner.

This educational ideal stems chiefly from Renaissance Italy, and its textbook was Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), which, translated into English as *The Courtier* (1561), became in Elizabethan England the standard authority on the training of a gentleman. It has been asserted that "without Castiglione we should not have Hamlet."[2] Another treatise on the training of a gentleman, Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governour* (1531), was also instrumental in propagating the educational ideal of the Italian Renaissance. Both books exercised an important influence on Elizabethan educators.

Roger Ascham, for instance, in his treatise, *The Scholemaster* (1570), recommends Castiglione's book in the highest terms, while at the same time he enforces many of Elyot's views.

In Castiglione's book the characters debate whether arms or letters should come first with the Courtier. Count Lewis opens the discussion by deciding in favor of arms: "I judge the principall and true profession of a Courtier ought to bee in feates of armes."[3] Master Pietro Bembo, however, voices the following objection: "The which [letters] without other addition, are in dignitie so much above armes, as the mind is above the bodie: because the practising of them belongeth properly to the minde, even as the practising of armes doth the bodies."[4] Count Lewis then points out that the question has been debated for a long time by wise men, and he adds: "but I count it resolved upon armes side, and we will have our Courtier . . . thinke thus also."[5] And Shakespeare would have us "thinke thus also" regarding Hamlet, for in the final lines of the play he puts these words into the mouth of Fortinbras:

> Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royally; and for his passage
> The soldier's music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him.[6]

It should be remembered that both *The Courtier* and *The Governour,* and for that matter, *Hamlet,* are frankly aristocratic in outlook. Castiglione expresses the viewpoint of all three, when he writes: "I will have this our Courtier therefore to bee a gentleman borne and of a good house."[7] Gentle birth, with the privileges attached, imposes the obligation of high-minded principles and noble actions; and hence the first

duty of a gentleman is to be a leader in battle. In thus stressing arms as the principal profession of a gentleman, the Renaissance educators were powerfully influenced by the ideals of the medieval knights, whose high oaths bound them to military service and valor.

In time of peace, therefore, a gentleman should prepare himself for the profession of arms by schooling himself in courage and by engaging in physical exercises which harden the body. Castiglione demands that a gentleman should possess "an invincible courage, and that he alwaies shew himself such a one."[8] That Hamlet has the courage of a soldier who is willing to face death in battle, is evinced by the lines which are prompted by Horatio's warning regarding the Ghost. Hamlet brushes aside the warning with these words:

> Why, what should be the fear?
> 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?[9]

Since mere outward acts of courage do not make a man brave in the moral sense, the courage that becomes a gentleman must proceed from the virtue of courage, which is defined by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas as a habit in accord with reason, enabling a man to subdue fear and to conquer rashness in the face of the greatest dangers. Both Castiglione and Elyot insist, therefore, that courage is a virtue which is acquired by conviction, discipline and example, that it is motivated by the moral beauty of the act itself, and consequently that it is synonymous with a sense of honor and fine behavior. That a brave man must follow the dictates of reason and that he must reproduce a likeness of his noble habit in a given situation, are the lessons which

Hamlet draws in his meditation on courage in the following lines:

> Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,
> When honour's at the stake.[10]

Rashness is barred by the moral virtue of courage, and consequently, with reference to quarrels and personal combats, Castiglione makes this point: "Neither let him runne rashly to these combats, but when he must needes to save his estimation withall . . . But when a man perceiveth that he is entred so far that hee can not draw back without burthen, hee must . . . be utterly resolved with him selfe, and alwaies shew a readinesse and a stomache."[11] This passage is echoed by Polonius in his advice to Laertes:

> Beware
> Of entrance to a quarrel: but being in,
> Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee.[12]

The Renaissance educators waxed eloquent in support of a program of physical training. They valued sports as a means to promote health and strength of body, to provide relaxation after hard study, to occupy the mind with pleasant and sinless pastimes, but chiefly to prepare for the profession of arms. Thomas Fuller declared that "manly sports are the grammar of military performance."[13] We are not surprised, therefore, when Hamlet informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that of late he has "foregone all custom of exercises." What some of these exercises were may be gleaned from the following passage by Roger Ascham:

> Therefore, to ride comely, to run fair at the tilt or ring, to play at all weapons, to shoot

> fair in bow or surely in gun, to vault lustily, to run, to leap, to wrestle, to swim, to dance comely, to sing and play of instruments cunningly, to hawk, to hunt, to play at tennis and all pastimes generally which be joined with labour, used in open place and on the daylight, containing either some fit exercise for war or some pleasant pastime for peace, be not only comely and decent but also very necessary for a courtly gentleman to use.[14]

Castiglione lists most of the above exercises, but he lays stress on the ability of a courtier to handle "those weapons that are used ordinarily among Gentlemen."[15] It is to be noted that Shakespeare's play comes to a dramatic climax in a fencing-match, in which Hamlet and Laertes display skill in the use of a gentleman's weapon. Both Castiglione and Elyot demand that a gentleman be a perfect horseman. In fact, Elyot declares that in his opinion the most honorable of all exercises is to ride well "on a great horse and a roughe."[16] Elyot's statement explains the enthusiasm of King Claudius for the horseman whom he describes in the following lines:

> Two months since
> Here was a gentleman of Normandy.
> I have seen myself, and served against, the French,
> And they can well on horseback; but this gallant
> Had witchcraft in't. He grew unto his seat,
> And to such wondrous doing brought his horse
> As had he been incorpsed and demi-natured
> With the brave beast.[17]

Of course, the Renaissance educationists warned that physical exercises should not interfere with study. John Lyly voices the common view: "Yet are their labours and pastimes so to be tempered, that they weaken not their

bodies more by play, than otherwise they should have done by study, and so to be used that they addict not themselves more to the exercise of the limbs than the following of learning."[18] And some sports were banned as unbecoming a gentleman. We can be certain, for instance, that Hamlet never played football. King James I styled the game "a laming exercise not to be used by a Prince."[19] And Sir Thomas Elyot held that there are certain rough and disorderly games which should be utterly rejected by all noble men, among which he included "foote balle, wherin is nothinge but beastly furie and exstreme violence; wherof procedeth hurte, and consequently rancour and malice do remaine with them that be wounded; wherfore it is to be put in perpetuall silence."[20]

Both Castiglione and Elyot take a firm stand against those who, believing that arms is the proper profession of a gentleman, regarded scholarship as a necessary evil to be relegated to clerks. Castiglione, arguing against a school of Frenchmen who overemphasized the profession of arms, states his position in these words: "But beside goodnesse the true and principall ornament of the minde in every man (I believe) are letters."[21] And Elyot was outspoken in his condemnation of those persons, "which, without shame, dare affirme, that to a great gentleman it is a notable reproche to be well lerned and to be called a great clerke."[22] There is a faint echo of this controversy in Hamlet's apology for his ability to pen a document in a legible script like that of a trained clerk. Regarding the letter which he forged and substituted for the King's commission, he tells Horatio:

> I sat me down;
> Devised a new commission; wrote it fair.
> I once did hold it, as our statists do,

A baseness to write fair, and laboured much
How to forget that learning; but, sir, now
It did me yeoman's service.[23]

It is true that Hamlet's words bear on penmanship only, but the view that the ability "to write fair" is beneath the dignity of a gentleman was extended by ardent militarists to include learning in general.

The Renaissance educators prescribed the study of the Latin and Greek masterpieces as the proper intellectual training of a gentleman. It was the hallmark of a well-educated person to be able to read, write and converse in Latin, and to know something of Greek. Elyot recommends that the student read the poets, the orators and the historians of ancient Greece and Rome, and then proceed to Aristotle's *Ethics,* Cicero's *De Officiis*, the works of Plato, and the Bible. Castiglione lays down a similar curriculum when he demands that the courtier be "well seene at the least in those studies, which they call Humanitie and to have not onely the understanding of the Latin tongue, but also of the Greek, because of the many and sundrie things that with great excellencie are written in it." And he adds by way of postscript: "Let him much exercise him selfe in Poets, and no lesse in Oratours and Historiographers, and also in writing both rime and prose, and especially in this our vulgar tongue. For beside the contentation [*i.e.*, enjoyment] that hee shall receive thereby him selfe, hee shall by this meanes never want pleasant intertainements with women which ordinarily love such matters."[24] In *Hamlet* the subject-matter of the Renaissance curriculum is brought to the attention of the reader whenever it is necessary for a character to display his learning. Horatio is labeled a scholar, and he discourses on the omens that heralded the death of Julius Cæsar. Polonius is labeled a university graduate, and he poses as an authority on Seneca

and Plautus. Hamlet is labeled a scholar, and not only does he continually interlard his speech with allusions to classical history and mythology, but he also expresses a preference for a current play with a classical theme, from which he selects a passage for declamation—Aeneas' tale to Dido. During the course of the action Hamlet enters in the act of perusing a book. He meets Polonius, who asks, "What do you read, my lord?" Hamlet's reply suggests that he is reading a passage on old age in Juvenal's *Satires* (X, 188ff.).[25] It is also thought that the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy is prompted by what Hamlet is reading in a book. T. W. Baldwin identifies this book as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputationes* (Disp. I, passage dealing with Socrates).[26] And that Hamlet did not neglect to practice versification in the vulgar tongue, one of the accomplishments listed by Castiglione as guaranteed to please the ladies, is evident from his riming epistle to Ophelia:

> Doubt thou the stars are fire;
> Doubt thou the sun doth move;
> Doubt truth to be a liar;
> But never doubt I love[27]

Hamlet as a product of Renaissance training is not a pedant, a narrow specialist, or a dull plodder, but a scholar in the best sense of the word, that is, a man with a trained mind and a refined taste, who as a result of his humanistic studies has achieved not only knowledge but also wisdom, which is the perfection of knowledge, and which bears on human life and conduct. Possessing the reflective, philosophic mind of a scholar, he is impatient with facts as such, and he constantly strives to unify them and to make them tell him a story. His uncle's habit of hard drinking, for example, furnishes him with a peg on which to hang a general and abstract

train of thought with heredity as the theme. And in matters of literary taste he displays the critical and fastidious outlook of an intellectual who has been molded by the poets and orators of classical antiquity. He is interested in a play that is "caviare to the general"; he values one judicious critic above "a whole theatre of others"; he despises the low taste of the groundlings; and, when Polonius protests that the First Player's declamation is too long, he dismisses the old man with withering contempt: "He's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps."

Ophelia links the courtier's eye with the scholar's tongue and the soldier's sword. In a word, a gentleman must have an eye for the beautiful in nature, in man, and in art. Thus does Castiglione hymn the beauty of the visible creation: "Beside other things therfor it giveth a great praise to the world, in saying that it is beautifull. It is praysed, in saying, the beautifull heaven, beautifull earth, beautifull rivers, beautifull woodes, trees, gardens . . ."[28] Again he exclaims: "Behold the state of this great Ingin [*i.e.*, fabric] of the worlde, which God created for the health and preservation of every thing that was made. The heaven rounde besette with so many heavenly lights: and in the middle, the earth environed with the Elements, and upheld with the waight of it selfe . . ."[29] Hamlet discourses in a similar vein when he speaks of "this goodly frame, the earth . . . this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire . . ."[30] And of course, the beauty of the macrocosm is paralleled and surpassed by the beauty of the microcosm, as both Castiglione and Hamlet point out. Castiglione writes: "Thinke now of the shape of man, which may be called a little world: in whom every parcell of his bodie is seene to be necessarily framed by arte and not by happe, and then the forme altogether most

beautifull."[31] And lest he be accused of dwelling exclusively on the physical beauty of man, he hastens to add: "And it may bee saide, that Good and beautifull be after a sorte one selfe thing, especially in the bodies of men: of the beautie whereof the nighest cause (I suppose) is the beautie of the soule."[32] Hamlet exalts man in like fashion: "What a piece of work 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."[33] It should be noted, however, that this stress on the beauty of the rational soul is not an original contribution of the Renaissance. It goes straight back to St. Thomas Aquinas, who writes: "Beauty consists in a certain clarity and due proportion. Now each of these is found radically in the reason; because both the light that makes beauty seen, and the establishing of due proportion among things belong to reason. Hence since the contemplative life consists in an act of reason, there is beauty in it by its very nature and essence."[34] And as far as the beauty of the body is concerned, he states: "All natural things were produced by the Divine art, and so may be called God's works of art. . . . Now the proper end of the human body is the rational soul and its operations; since matter is for the sake of form, and instruments are for the action of the agent. I say, therefore, that God fashioned the human body in the disposition which was best, as most suited to such a form and to such operations."[35]

Castiglione regarded the visible creation as "a noble and great painting, drawne with the hand of nature and of God: the which who so can follow [*i.e.*, imitate], in mine opinion he is worthie much commendation."[36] Art copies nature, and hence Castiglione and Elyot demand that a gentleman should have some knowledge of the fine arts, especially of music and

painting. We can understand, therefore, why Polonius sends word to Laertes that he should ply his music, and why Hamlet discourses on the recorder as if it were an instrument on which every Elizabethan gentleman should be able to play. And it would seem that painting fell within the range of Hamlet's interests, for he vividly describes the two portraits that hang on the walls of the Queen's chamber, in the speech beginning with the lines:

> Look here, upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.[37]

Since the fine arts occupy the mind with objects naturally noble, their cultivation was recommended by Renaissance educators not only as a relaxation from study but also as an ideal way for a gentleman to solve the problem of leisure. In Renaissance Italy the stress was on music and the plastic arts; in Renaissance England, if we credit the testimony of Shakespeare, drama and acting were activities which even a prince of the blood royal could encourage and cultivate. Why didn't Renaissance Italy produce a flowering of drama akin to that of the Elizabethan age? According to Jacob Burkhardt,[38] the Italians of the Renaissance were chiefly interested in the spectacular appeal of elaborate scenery, costumes, music and ballet, which is fatal to drama and acting; whereas in Elizabethan England, the popular stage being nothing more than a bare platform, the focus was on the play and the actors. At any rate, for a considerable portion of the action, Shakespeare brings Hamlet before us in the engaging role of a patron and critic of the arts of the theatre; and, moreover, as a Prince Charming in his relations with the strolling Players who visit Elsinore. It is evident that the dramatist exerts himself to honor the twin professions of playwriting and acting.

In his celebrated advice to the Players, Hamlet bids the actor aim at an easy, natural, rapid delivery, and at appropriate movement and gestures. He warns against tameness, but the greater part of the passage is a condemnation of mouthing, ranting, sawing the air, and strutting This is good advice not only for actors but also for gentlemen, especially when they appear in public as orators. It is instructive to read Hamlet's speech to the Players in the light of the following passage by Castiglione:

> And this doe I say, as well of writing as of speaking, wherein certain things are requisite that are not necessarie in writing, as a good voice, not too subtill or soft, as in a woman: nor yet so boistrous and rough, as in one of the countrie, but shril, cleare, sweete and well framed with a prompt pronunciation, and with fit maners, and gestures, which (in my minde) consist in certaine motions of all the bodie, not affected nor forced, but tempred with a manerly countenance and with a moving of the eyes that may give a grace and accorde with the wordes, and (as much as he can) signifie also with gestures, the intent and affection of the speaker.[39]

Hamlet preaches artistic restraint to both actors and playwrights. Since the main function of acting is the representation of the emotions, he counsels the Players that not even a whirlwind of passion will absolve them from the duty of begetting "a temperance that may give it smoothness"; for, he assures them, the purpose of playing is to hold "the mirror up to nature." By "nature" he means, as he has previously explained, "the modesty of nature." The mirror of their acting will reflect a false and extravagant image, if they overstep the modesty of nature. It is to be noted that he uses the term "modesty" when he discusses the art of

the playwright in connection with the drama which was "caviare to the general." He praises this play because the scenes were set down "with as much modesty as cunning." It would seem that Shakespeare is using the word "modesty" in the sense assigned to it by St. Thomas Aquinas, as that virtue which is subordinate to temperance, and which moderates the activities of everyday life so that they will be performed with decorum, with a freedom from all extravagance.[40]

Of course, the virtue of modesty governs a gentleman in such matters as deportment and dress. In manners the normal Hamlet is "most like a gentleman," but at times, when he feigns madness or when he unpacks his heart with words of hysterical emotion, he breaks all the rules of the courtesy books. We can be certain that the various excuses which are proffered by commentators to explain his shocking rudeness to Ophelia would hardly satisfy Castiglione, who writes: "And I believe every one of us knoweth, that it is meete the Courtier beare verie great reverence towarde women, and a discrete and courteous person ought never to touch their honestie neither in jeast, nor in good earnest."[41] And he bars those "that be filthie and baudie in talke, and that in the presence of women," from every gentleman's company.[42] Hamlet's contemptuous reference to women who paint themselves is on a different plane from the indecent remarks which he addresses to Ophelia. His observation, "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another," is directed not so much at Ophelia as at Elizabethan ladies in general; and, moreover, it echoes the following passage by Castiglione: "Doe you not marke how much more grace is in a woman, that if she doth trimme [*i.e.*, paint] her selfe, doth it so scarcely and so litle, that who so beholdeth her, standeth in doubt whether she bee trimmed or no: than in an other so bedawbed, that a man would wene she had a viser on her face."[43]

In dress the normal Hamlet is "the glass of fashion," but again, when he invades Ophelia's room in the disordered attire which she so graphically describes, he violates the conventions. His "inky cloak" and "solemn black" match his melancholy mood, but even here he has the approval of Castiglione, who, discussing what a gentleman should wear, states: "Moreover I will holde alwaies with it, if it bee rather somewhat grave and auncient [*i.e.*, sober] than garish. Therfore me thinke a blacke colour hath a better grace in garments than any other, and though not throughly blacke, yet somewhat darke, and this I meane for his ordinarie apparrell."[44] In another passage Castiglione declares that, since dress is an index of character, a gentleman is judged by what he wears. Such also is the argument of Elyot: "So is there apparaile comely to every astate and degree, and that which excedeth or lackethe, procureth reproche, in a noble man specially. For apparaile simple or scante, reprovethe hym of avarice. If it be always exceding precious, and often tymes chaunged, as well in to charge as strange and newe facions, it causeth him to be noted dissolute of maners."[45] This doctrine Polonius sums up in three lines:

> Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
> But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
> For the apparel oft proclaims the man.[46]

It is needless to state that these rules governing a gentleman's dress were not invented by Renaissance educators; they were formulated in almost the same words by St. Thomas Aquinas under the heading, "Of Modesty in Outward Apparel."[47]

Did the Renaissance educators who influenced Shakespeare neglect the moral training of a gentleman? It would seem not, if we judge from Hamlet, who is described by the other characters in the play as "noble," "generous," "sweet,"

and "free from all contriving." Both Elyot and Castiglione require that a gentleman should practice the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. These virtues are in accord with right reason, which explains the viewpoint of Polonius as expressed in his advice to Laertes regarding courtly behavior:

> This above all—to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.[48]

It is true that the appeal in these lines is only an appeal from man's lower nature to his higher nature, and not an appeal to a law which is outside of man and higher than man. It should be remembered, however, that the four cardinal virtues were taken over from the Greeks by Christianity and given a supernatural motivation. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example. accepts Aristotle's principle that moral virtue is a good, and as such an end, but he distinguishes between proximate and remote ends. Polonius states the proximate end of moral virtue, but there is nothing to prevent a Christian from also having a remote end, a supernatural end, the ultimate end of human existence, God Himself. Like Elyot and Castiglione, Shakespeare, who in *Hamlet* portrays a Christian world with the moral virtues incorporated into the catechism, often takes the supernatural motivation for granted.

In analyzing the Renaissance ideal of education as reflected in *Hamlet,* it is necessary to distinguish between the pagan Renaissance and the Christian Renaissance. The early Renaissance in Italy was frankly naturalistic in outlook, but Castiglione and the Tudor educationists saw no reason why the courtier's eye, the scholar's tongue and the soldier's sword should be trained apart from the doctrines and practices of Christianity. Castiglione, for instance, held a Chris-

tian conception of humanism, for when one of his characters asserts that Eve brought sin into the world, another answers that the offence was repaired by a woman, and then he adds:

> But I purpose not now to tell you, how much in dignitie all humanе creatures bee inferiour to the virgin our Lady, for meddling holy matters with these our fond reasonings: Nor rehearse how manie women with infinite stedfastnesse have suffered cruel death under Tyrants for the name of Christ: nor them that with learning in disputation have confuted so many Idolaters.
>
> And in case you will answer mee, that this was a miracle and the grace of the holy Ghost, I say unto you that no vertue deserveth more prayse, than that which is approved by the testimony of God.[49]

In England the most typical representative of the Renaissance was St. Thomas More, and he harnessed humanistic studies in the service of the Church. Practically all the Tudor educationists added the sanction of religion to the demands of moral virtue and humanistic culture. Sir Thomas Elyot, who was a friend of More, outlines in *The Governour* the training which is proper for a Christian gentleman. Roger Ascham rails at Englishmen who go to Italy to acquire the vices of the pagan Renaissance, and he quotes what Italians say of those Englishmen: *Englese Italianato è un diavolo incarnato*[50]— "An Italianated Englishman is a devil incarnate." It is no accident, therefore, that Hamlet is projected as an orthodox Christian. Shakespeare's play, in so far as it mirrors the educational program of Elizabethan England for the training of a gentleman, is a work of the Christian Renaissance.

VI

THE MEDIEVAL ELEMENT

Hamlet is a play of Renaissance court life with a colorful background of Renaissance cultural activity, but its cosmic philosophy is that of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Middle Ages. Historians point out that the English Renaissance was a full century behind the Italian, and that the transition from the medieval to the modern world was gradual. Then, too, it is important to remember that the English leaders of the new learning did not break with the ancient Christian tradition. In spite of the pagan Renaissance, which exalted human interests at the expense of the supernatural, and in spite of the Reformation, which did break with the Church of the Middle Ages, the medieval view of life was a potent factor in Elizabethan England. Theodore Spencer claims that it was still the popular pattern of belief in the sixteenth century, thus constituting "so important a part of Shakespeare's intellectual and emotional inheritance."[1] In the Middle Ages the dominating interest was with life in the next world. And this is precisely the dominating interest in *Hamlet*, the question as to what will happen to the individual after death outweighing all other questions. Like the Schoolmen, Shakespeare's philosopher-prince is interested in problems that go to the heart of things, in the ultimate verities, in "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls."

In *Hamlet*, the macrocosm, or the great world outside of man, is pictured in the same cosmological terms as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The universe is geocentric, with God looking

down from above. In 1543, when the celebrated treatise of Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium,* was sent to the press, the foundation was laid for the new heliocentric system of astronomy. But it was not until Galileo perfected the telescope and published his discoveries in 1610, that the hypothesis of Copernicus could be accepted as proved beyond doubt. The shift from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican system was being made in the sixteenth century, but Shakespeare, like many other writers and thinkers of his age, remained unaffected. In *Hamlet*, the earth is a fixed center, around which the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars revolve in crystalline and concentric spheres. Both the King and the Ghost refer to this system, the former when he asserts that "the star moves not but in his sphere," and the latter when he declares that a description of the pains of Purgatory would make his son's eyes "like stars, start from their spheres."

The cosmos described by Hamlet as "this goodly frame, the earth . . . this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire,"[2] is theological in its implications. The words "frame," "canopy" and "roof" picture a structure of order and design, with man as the chief tenant. Here there is nothing to bewilder the imagination, no suggestion of countless suns whirling in the vastness of space. On the contrary, we are asked to visualize the earth as a spacious dwelling, the air as a pleasant screen, the firmament as a protective roof, and the stars as twinkling lamps set out to gladden the darkness. This theological concept of man as the favored younger son and of the visible creation as his Father's house, was the gift of the Middle Ages to Shakespeare.

That the Copernican system would have made no difference in Hamlet's view of the universe, is evident from his lines to Ophelia:

> Doubt thou the stars are fire;
>   Doubt that the sun doth move
> Doubt truth to be a liar;
>   But never doubt I love.[3]

Of course, his argument is that even if the sun is the physical center of the cosmic system, this fact will not alter human relationships; in other words, the earth as man's home is still the planet of most concern to human beings, and hence the moral center of the astronomical world.

Nor would Hamlet have been staggered by the vastness of the material universe as revealed by the modern telescope. It is manifest that mere space did not interest him, for he exclaims: "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."[4] Man can have bad dreams because he is intelligent, and by the side of the dreamer a material universe, however spacious, is meaningless. By anticipation, therefore, Shakespeare answers some modern scientists who argue as if the discoveries of the telescope have changed spiritual values. But he was under no necessity of having Hamlet weigh intelligence in the scales against an unmeaning material universe, because the cosmic scheme which he presents in the play postulates meaning even with reference to the lower forms in the totality of creation.

The Schoolmen, arguing that a visible creation made for man should teach man, went to nature as to an inexhaustible storehouse of "frozen theology." Taking his cue from these medieval thinkers, Shakespeare ransacked nature for illustrations which would enforce moral lessons. Animals, flowers

and plants supplied him with images of the virtues and the vices. In *Hamlet*, to cite only a few examples, the Nemean lion stands for courage, the pelican for self-sacrifice, the female dove for patience, a fawning dog for sycophancy, a "nasty sty" for sensuality, thorns for the stings of conscience, the primrose for *joie de vivre,* the slimy water-reed for sloth, and an unweeded garden for a corrupt world. In the Middle Ages no symbol played a more prominent role than the rose, which, pre-eminent among flowers, was employed to represent pre-eminence of any kind, but especially of virtue. The rose is mentioned three times in *Hamlet*. Ophelia styles Hamlet "the rose of the fair state"; Laertes addresses his sister as the "rose of May"; and Hamlet speaks of his mother's sensuality as substituting "a blister" for "the rose" on "the fair forehead of an innocent love." In all three instances it is the symbol of pre-eminence, and in the last, of pre-eminence in purity and love.

It is noteworthy that Hamlet's description of the macrocosm is followed immediately by the passage which begins with the line, "What a piece of work is a man," and in which he defines the position of man in the chain of being that extends up to God like a gigantic ladder, whose rungs are minerals, plants, beasts, men and angels. Man, a compound of soul and body, is by reason of his body "the paragon of animals," and by reason of his soul "like an angel in apprehension." He is thus the microcosm, and for two reasons. Because he is the link between the world of sense and the world of spirit, the highest in the order of animality and the lowest in the order of intelligence, he has something in common with every other creature. And because he is like an angel in apprehension, he can sum up the universe in his mind, for his ideas are the likenesses of things. This famous passage has been interpreted as a Renaissance challenge to "the whole conception of

human character and destiny voiced from a thousand pulpits."[5] As a matter of fact, the entire passage is virtually out of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen, a point which is stressed by E. M. W. Tillyard, who, holding that Hamlet's speech on the dignity of man is in the purest medieval tradition, asserts: "It also shows Shakespeare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts. It was what the theologians had been saying for centuries."[6]

The keynote to man's greatness is sounded by Hamlet in his exclamation of reverent awe, "how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties." To discover the nature of any being, it is necessary to know its operation. The operation proper to man is intellectual knowledge, by which he surpasses in dignity all other animals; and therefore we find St. Thomas Aquinas specifying this operation as the act which is human in the strict sense of the word, and which consequently is shared in no way by any other being on earth.[7] Since insanity spells the dethronement of reason, Ophelia likens deranged faculties to "sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh"; and the King compares the possessors of these faculties to "pictures or mere beasts." The best commentary on the expression, "how infinite in faculties," is supplied by St. Thomas, who writes: "The intellectual soul as comprehending universals, has a power extending to the infinite; therefore it cannot be limited by nature to certain fixed natural notions, or even to certain fixed means whether of defence or of clothing, as is the case with other animals, the souls of which are endowed with knowledge and power in regard to fixed particular things."[8] It is man's ability to think that constitutes him the lord of the animal kingdom, the master of inanimate nature, and the captain of his soul. Intelligence, therefore, is supreme, which explains why both Horatio and Ophelia, when they speak of reason, use the terms "sovereignty" and "most sovereign."

These expressions echo the following passage by St. Thomas: "Man in a certain sense contains all things; and so accordingly as he is master of what is within himself, in the same way he can have mastership over other things. Now we may consider four things in man: his *reason,* which makes him like the angels; his *sensitive powers,* whereby he is like the animals; his *natural forces,* which liken him to plants; and *the body* itself, wherein he is like to inanimate things. Now in man reason has the position of master and not of subject."[9]

To live on the plane of an animal or a plant, in a word, to permit the sovereign reason to grow rusty, is to sin against the entire chain of being and to insult the Maker of that chain. So declares Hamlet in one of the most significant passages in the play:

> What is a man,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
> 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 unused.[10]

In these lines Hamlet refers to the Giver of man's characteristic gift, and again he insists that reason is "godlike," repeating the idea which he had expressed in the words, "how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god." Here the intention is to stress man's communion with the angelic and the Divine, and, by implication, man's supernatural destiny. Hamlet's insistence on a man using his reason to live a supersensible life should be interpreted in the light of the play as a whole, in which a number of passages enforce the idea that reason aided by grace can attain God, who, in the words of Dante, is *il ben dell' intelletto.*[11] In *Hamlet* the next world

is mapped out on exactly the same lines as in the *Divine Comedy;* and the concept that intelligence is the true source of man's greatness because it alone of all things on earth is destined for union with God by means of the beatific vision, is shown by the part which the next world plays in the thoughts and desires of the characters. The Ghost is undergoing purgation in preparation for his entry into Heaven; the King has his eternal destiny in mind when he bows his stubborn knees in prayer; Ophelia uses an old Catholic formula to pray for her father's soul; Laertes is certain that his sister is a ministering angel; Hamlet, who believes that his soul is as immortal as any spirit from the world beyond, fears that the devil abuses him to damn him; and Horatio speaks the final word in the beautiful prayer over his friend, "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

The theologians of the Middle Ages never tired of inculcating that man, a compound of flesh and spirit, is capable of a twofold activity, and hence that it is necessary to view him from two contrasting standpoints—that of his greatness and that of his littleness. They pointed out that man alone of all creatures on earth faces the universe with a divided soul, that he is torn by an inner conflict between flesh and spirit, and that this inner conflict explains why he appears throughout his history as an enigma, a winged animal, who can soar aloft like an angel and who can wallow in the mire like a beast. Hamlet himself, noble in reason and infinite in faculties, and yet "passion's slave," is an incomparable exemplar in literature of the contrast between man's greatness and his littleness. It is thus that Theodore Spencer explains the secret of the tragedy's perennial appeal. He writes: "Shakespeare puts an awareness of this contrast into the character of Hamlet and his having done so is one of the main reasons for Hamlet's greatness."[12] Hamlet's inner conflict

between duty, on the one hand, and weakness, perplexity and his hatred of the King, on the other, mirrors the struggle that goes on in every human breast, and thus takes on a universal aspect.

Not only does Hamlet exemplify the inner conflict in his own person, but he also discusses it in the light of its theological bearings. He knows that this conflict began with the great refusal which shipwrecked the human race, for he asserts that "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it." When he speaks of "our old stock," he has in mind our fallen human nature inherited from Adam. Original sin darkens the intellect and weakens the will, with the result that, to quote St. Thomas Aquinas, "man's natural inclination to virtue is diminished."[13] Hamlet expresses the same idea when he underlines the difficulty of grafting virtue on "our old stock." In fact, he is haunted by what happens when the natural inclination to virtue is diminished to such an extent that the passions are no longer controlled by reason, and man by indulging his gross appetites sinks lower than the beasts themselves. In referring to the drinking habits of the Danes he uses the epithet "swinish," and he pictures the sensuality of the King and Queen in terms of a "nasty sty." His ideal is Horatio, who emphatically is not "passion's slave." In all this he seems to be the mouthpiece of St. Thomas Aquinas, who discusses gluttony and sexual excesses in the following passage: "Intemperance is most disgraceful for two reasons. First, because it is most repugnant to human excellence, since it is about pleasures common to us and the lower animals. . . . Second, because it is most repugnant to man's clarity or beauty; inasmuch as the pleasures which are the matter of intemperance dim the light of reason from which all the clarity and beauty of virtue arises: wherefore these pleasures are described as being most slavish."[14]

Hamlet's contempt for a life lived on the animal plane, as well as his hatred of sham, finds an outlet in his musings on death in the graveyard scene. It is part of the littleness of man that, as a penalty of original sin, his body decays, grows old, refuses to function, and is laid in the earth to become the prey of worms. Hamlet's reaction to the dissolution of the grave is not a Renaissance revolt against the physical horror of death, but a medieval stressing of the wretchedness and insufficiency of life here and now as compared with the blessed vision promised by the Christian faith. In commenting on Hamlet's meditation over the open grave of Ophelia, Willard Farnham states that "these musings are legitimate secular descendants of the religious musings" to be found in a number of popular medieval works, including a Latin treatise by Pope Innocent III, entitled *De Contemptu Mundi,* which was translated into English in 1576.[15]

Hamlet is acutely sensitive to man's misery, but he never loses sight of man's potentialities. Man can become the master of himself, because reason aided by grace can triumph in the inner conflict between flesh and spirit. His oft-quoted dictum that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," is not only a recognition that man can color his physical surroundings with his moods, but also a perfect summary of the scholastic doctrine regarding freedom of choice in the moral order. The Schoolmen teach that the practical intellect, or conscience, is the lantern of the will in matters of action; for we will only what we know as good—*nihil volitum nisi cogitum.* The priority of thought to an act of the will is meaningless, unless man is free to choose. Although Hamlet makes due allowance for the elements of heredity and fortuity in human affairs, as in his speech on the battlements when he describes a particular fault in a man as being "nature's livery, or fortune's star," he always assumes that man

is free to decide upon a course of action. For instance, his advice to his mother on how to conquer a bad habit postulates that a human being, unlike the leopard, can change his spots. Emphasizing will-power and mortification, he says to her:

> Refrain to-night,
> 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,
> And either [master] the devil, or throw him out
> With wondrous potency.[16]

Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, who claims that in *Hamlet* "the idea of an ulcer or tumour, as descriptive of the unwholesome condition of Denmark morally, is, on the whole, the dominating one," argues that to Shakespeare's pictorial imagination the problem is not one of will and reason, but of "a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the cancer which strikes and devours him."[17] It is true that the King uses images of disease to describe dangers threatening himself, but it is evident that his pictorial imagination also carries an image of himself as a surgeon who is able to perform the necessary operations. Likewise, Hamlet uses images of disease, notably with reference to his mother's sensuality, which he compares to a blister on the "fair forehead of an innocent love," and to an ulcer, "mining all within." Assuredly, when he employs these images there is nothing in his pictorial imagination to suggest "a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible"; for in his next breath he bids his mother confess, repent, and resolve for the future. In fact, his use of these images to depict the hideous effects of sin is in the best medieval tradition, as witness Dante, who symbolizes the

ravages of sin by punishing falsifiers with loathsome diseases of every description.[18]

If it is possible to sum up the Middle Ages in a sentence, by saying that during those centuries men were preoccupied with life in the next world, then *Hamlet* is fundamentally medieval in outlook. In the background of the action functions the Church, which marshals the characters in a pilgrimage (*via*) toward the true fatherland (*patria*), which has meaning only in terms of that season, "wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated," which observes liturgical feasts like those of St. Patrick and St. Valentine, which bans a marriage that falls within the forbidden degrees of relationship or affinity, which preaches that the eternal destiny of the soul depends on its intrinsic condition at the moment of death, which prepares its members for the day of final decision by administering the sacraments of Penance, Viaticum, and Extreme Unction, which sings a Requiem Mass for the repose of departed souls, and which prescribes "maimed rites" for those whose death was doubtful.

In *Hamlet* the Church is the visible representative of the supernatural; but the invisible representatives are also present. We are not allowed to forget that there is a world of spirits as well as a world of sense; and, moreover, that the world of spirits, though unseen, is not far distant. Nothing brings us closer to the medieval pattern than the attitude of Hamlet toward those pure intelligences, whose nine ascending choirs constitute the uppermost rungs in the ladder of being. The Schoolmen, arguing from reason, held that the perfection of the universe demands beings possessing neither matter nor bodies. If there were no angels, there would be a manifest gap in the cosmic scheme. Since these pure spirits transcend the entire order of the material and visible world, and thus are imperceptible to the senses, it is necessary to explain how they

can be seen and heard when they appear to human beings. St. Thomas Aquinas solved the difficulty as follows: "Although air as long as it is in a state of rarefaction has neither shape nor colour, yet when condensed it can be both shaped and coloured as appears in clouds. Even so the angels assume bodies of air, condensing it by Divine power in so far as is needful for forming the assumed body."[19] And he offers the same explanation for the bodily form assumed by souls from Purgatory. His views are reflected in the comment of Marcellus when he asserts of the Ghost: "For it is as the air, invulnerable."

It is evident that Hamlet's profound reverence for the angels springs from the consideration that in the chain of being they are higher than man and closer to God. He invokes them on two occasions. When he comes face to face with the Ghost on the battlements of Elsinore, he exclaims, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us"; and when he sees the Ghost in the Queen's closet he cries out:

> Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,
> You heavenly guards!

The expressions, "ministers of grace" and "heavenly guards," denote the two main functions of the celestial hierarchy. The Schoolmen taught that the ministry of the angels included attendance on God's throne, the carrying of messages to mankind, and the execution of the divine laws regarding the physical universe. This third ministry meant that the nine choirs of angels moved the nine spheres of the heavenly bodies, and thus from the planets and the stars influenced bodily substances on earth. The doctrine of the guardian angel explains Hamlet's prayer to the "heavenly guards." In expounding this doctrine St. Thomas Aquinas argues that, since man is beset by the snares of demons, he needs a guardian angel; and

he pictures the guardian angels wrestling with the demons that "are in this dark atmosphere for our trial."[20] It is fitting, therefore, that angels should conduct the souls that have been snatched from the snares of demons to that state which Hamlet styles "felicity." Horatio's line, "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," is the theological equivalent of the fairy-tale flourish, "And they lived happily ever afterwards." That it is in the great medieval tradition is evinced by the *Divine Comedy,* which represents the angels as singing an entrancing melody whenever a soul wings its way from the Mount of Purgatory to Heaven, and also by the morality play, *Everyman,* which closes on this note:

> Now hath he made ending;
> Methinketh that I hear angels sing
> And make great joy and melody,
> Where Everyman's soul received shall be.

All three literary works, in representing the angelic choirs as convoying the soul to Heaven, echo the Church's prayer in the burial service—*In Paradisum deducant te angeli.*

NOTES

I. THE PURGATORIAL GHOST

[1]*Vide The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine,* 2 vols., translated by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York, 1941), Part I, pp. 191-192
[2]*Vide The Golden Legend, op. cit.,* Part II, p. 649
[3]*Vide The Golden Legend, op. cit.,* Part II, pp. 649-650
[4]I, 5, 74-79
[5]*Rom.,* XII, 17-19
[6]*Vide* Lily B. Campbell's "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England," *Modern Philology,* 1930-31, vol. XXVIII, p. 281; and F. T. Bower's *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940), pp. 11-12
[7]*Doctor Faustus,* III, 1, 72-74
[8]I, 1, 130-131
[9]*The Times Literary Supplement,* Jan. 9, 1930, p. 24
[10]*The Golden Legend, op. cit.,* Part II, p. 657
[11]I, 5, 84-88
[12]*Vide* H. S. Bowden's *The Religion of Shakespeare* (London, 1899), p. 300
[13]*Sum. Theol.,* I, Q, LXXXIX, A. 8, Rep. Obj. 2
[14]*Sum. Theol.,* II-II, Q. LXIV, A. 3
[15]*Ibid.,* Rep. Obj. 2
[16]*Sum. Theol.,* II-II, Q. CVIII, A. 1
[17]*Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1910), p. 174
[18]*Vide* Maurice Francis Egan's *The Ghost in Hamlet and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1906), p. 30
[19]I, 5, 92-93

[20]March, 1847, vol. LXXIX, p. 335
[21]*John Gielgud's Hamlet* (New York, 1937), pp. 47-48
[22]*Op. cit.*, p. 412
[23]*Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare*, Everyman's Library, p. 147
[24]III, 4, 106-108
[25]III, 4, 110-115
[26]III, 4, 127-129
[27]*Sum. Theol.*, I, Q, LXXXIX, A. 8, Rep. Obj.1
[28]*De Poenitentia*, Disp. XLVII, S. 2, N. 9

II. THE THEORY OF A THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

[1]"Shakespeare's Ghosts," *Modern Language Review* (1906), vol. I, pp. 192-201
[2]*Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, England, 1930), pp. 84-128
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 128
[4]Lewes Lavater, *Of Ghostes and Spirites walking by Nyght* (1572), edited by J. Dover Wilson and May Yardley (Oxford, 1929), with Introduction by Wilson, "The Ghost-Scenes in *Hamlet* in the Light of Elizabethan Spiritualism," pp. vii-xxxi; *Hamlet* (Cambridge, England, 1936), pp. i-liii; *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1940), pp. 60-78
[5]*What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 70
[6]*Vide* May Yardley's Appendix to reprint edition of Lavater, *op. cit.*,—"The Catholic Position in the Ghost Controversy of the Sixteenth Century with special reference to Pierre Le Loyer's *IIII Livres des Spectres*," pp. 221-51
[7]*What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 84
[8]*Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941), pp. 71-72
[9]*The Religion of Shakespeare* (London, 1899), p. 300

[10]*The Ghost in Hamlet and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1906), pp. 30-39

[11]*The Riddles of Hamlet and the Newest Answers* (Boston, 1917), pp. 138-39

[12]*What Happens in Hamlet,* p. 45

[13]*Ibid.*, pp. 78-83

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 67

[15]I, 3, 244-246

[16]I, 4, 40-44

[17]*De Purgatorio*, Lib. II, XV

[18]*De Poenitentia,* Disp. XLVII, S. 2, N. 9

[19]II, 2, 626-631

[20]*What Happens in Hamlet,* p. 61

[21]*Sum. Theol.*, I, Q.CXIV, A.4, Rep. Obj. 2

[22]*II Cor.*, XI, 14

[23]*Shakespeare and Other Masters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), p. 420

[24]J. Q. Adams, *Hamlet* (Boston, 1929), p. 259

[25]*Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (New York, 1935), pp. 84-86

[26]*Variorum Hamlet*, vol. I, p. 40

[27]*Op. cit.*, p. 148

[28]*The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, 2* vols., translated by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York, 1941). *Vide* "The Commemoration of All Souls," Part II, pp. 648-57

III. THE PRAYER SCENE

[1]III, 3, 73-95

[2]*Johnson on Shakespeare,* edited by Walter Raleigh (Oxford, 1916), p. 193

[3]*Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1910), pp. 134-135

[4]*Hamlet* (Cambridge, England, 1931), pp. 40-41

[5]March, 1847, vol. LXXIX, p. 333

[6]III, 2, 406-410

[7]*The Problem of Hamlet* (New York, 1920), p. 68

[8]*Collected Essays* (London, 1927), p. 16

[9]*Hamlet* (Boston, 1929), p. 275

[10]*Op. cit.*, p. 4

[11]*Publications of the Catholic Record Society*, vol. V (London, 1908), p. 335. Father Leake's account of the trial is taken from an original manuscript, now at Stonyhurst College.

[12]*Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941), p. 139

[13]*Hamlet* (Cambridge, England, 1936), p. 211

[14]II, 2, 603-607

[15]*Matt.*, X, 28

[16]IV, 7, 128-130

[17]V, 2, 47

[18]*Hamlet* (Boston, 1939), p. xvi and p. 285

[19]IV, 10, 83-85

[20]*Op. cit.*, p. 275

[21]IV, Chorus, 27-28

[22]Percy Reprints, No. 1, edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford, 1920), pp. 114-123

[23]*Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940), pp. 37-40

[24]*Divine Vengeance: A Study in the Philosophical Backgrounds of the Revenge Motif as It Appears in Shakespeare's Chronicle History Plays* (Washington, 1941), p. 141

[25]*Op. cit.*, p. 14

[26]*Ibid.*, pp. 120-121

[27]*What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1940), pp. 205-227

[28]*The Meaning of Hamlet* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 27-34

[29]III, 1, 158-162

[30]V, 2, 408-409

[31]I, 5, 189-190

[32]II, 2, 607-610

[83]III, 4, 141-144
[84]*Op. cit.*, p. 34
[85]*John Gielgud's Hamlet* (New York, 1937), p. 56
[86]V, 2, 63-68
[87]I, 4, 73-74
[88]III, 3, 80-82

IV. ORTHODOXY VERSUS SKEPTICISM

[1]*A Sheaf of Papers* (London, 1922), pp. 32-33
[2]I, 5, 166-167
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