HAMLET AND HIS PROBLEMS: A HORNEYAN ANALYSIS

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I

WHAT ARE HAMLET'S PROBLEMS? Why does he delay? Is he uncertain about the right course of action, unsure of the ghost, afraid of damnation, traumatized by disillusionment, excessively introspective, or paralyzed by inhibitions of which he is not himself wholly aware? I believe that Hamlet's delay results from his inability to cope with his particular situation, and that his introspection, disillusionment, and uncertainty are all explicable in psychological terms. His resolution is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" because he suffers from inner conflicts which prevent him from adopting any course of action or set of beliefs whole-heartedly.

Ernest Jones argues that Hamlet's difficulties center, in reality, "about a sexual problem":

On the surface, of course, this does not appear so, for, by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms, the depression, doubt, despair, and other manifestations of the conflict are transferred on to more tolerable and permissible topics, such as anxiety about worldly success or failure, about immortality and the salvation of the soul, philosophical considerations about the value of life, the future of the world, and so on.¹

Though I do not feel Hamlet's problems to be primarily sexual, I agree with Jones that his philosophical concerns are psychologically determined. I agree also, however, with Paul Gottschalk's objections to the generality of Jones' explanation and to the failure of psychoanalytic criticism to analyze the conscious material of the play:

Whether the more conscious themes of Hamlet coexist with the unconscious in a sort of interpretive plurality, as Freud suggests, or whether they are deriva-

¹Hamlet and Oedipus (Anchor Books edition: New York, 1954), p. 67. The present essay was written with the assistance of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.
tive, as Jones implies, they are worth studying. After all, the play takes place largely on the conscious level, and its philosophical, religious, and political content is considerable...we cannot fully appreciate the play, even from the psychoanalytic point of view, without understanding how Hamlet's inner problem...finds expression in these...ideas that body forth the deeper workings, of the mind. To my knowledge, such an interpretation has not been done.2

It is such an interpretation which I propose to offer here. I shall do so with the aid of Horneyan psychology. As I have tried to show in A Psychological Approach to Fiction, the theories of Karen Horney describe aspects of psychic life and behavior which are often the subjects of artistic representation; and they have, as a result, a remarkable capacity to illuminate literary texts. They are especially useful in analyzing the relationship between a character's psychology and his ideas, his values, his sense of the order of things, the nature of man, and the meaning of life; for they focus upon inter-personal and intra-psychic strategies of defense which have very clear connections with a person's conscious attitudes and beliefs. For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with Horney, I shall present a brief outline of her system before proceeding with my analysis of Hamlet.3

II

According to Horney, people respond to a pathogenic environment by developing three basic strategies of defense: they move toward people and adopt the self-effacing or compliant solution; they move against people and adopt the aggressive or expansive solution; or they move away from people and become detached or resigned. Each of these solutions carries with it "certain needs, qualities, sensitivities, inhibitions, anxieties, and, last but not least, a particular set of values."4 Each solution involves also a view of human nature, a sense of the world order, and a bargain with fate in which certain qualities, attitudes, and behaviors are supposed to be rewarded.

3For a fuller account of Horney's system, and for other applications of her theories to literature, see A Psychological Approach to Fiction: Studies in Thackeray, Stendhal, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, and Conrad (Bloomington, 1974). The account of Horney which follows stresses the relationship between belief systems and defensive strategies.
4Karen Horney, Our Inner Conflicts (New York, 1945), p. 49. Hereafter cited as OIC.
In the course of neurotic development, the individual will come to make all three of these defensive moves compulsively; and, since they involve incompatible character structures and value systems, he will be torn by inner conflicts. In order to gain some sense of wholeness, he will emphasize one move more than the others and will become predominantly self-effacing, expansive, or resigned. The other trends will continue to exist, but they will be condemned and suppressed. When the submerged trends are for some reason brought closer to the surface, the individual will experience severe inner turmoil; and he may be paralyzed, unable to move in any direction at all. When his predominant solution fails, he may embrace one of the repressed attitudes.

The person in whom compliant trends are dominant needs "to be liked, wanted, desired, loved; to feel... approved of, appreciated;... to be ...protected, taken care of, guided" (OIC, 51). His values "lie in the direction of goodness, sympathy, love, generosity, unselfishness, humility; while egotism, ambition, callousness, unscrupulousness, wielding of power are abhorred" (OIC, 54-55). He does not hold these values as genuine ideals, but because they are necessary to his defense system. He must believe in turning the other cheek, and he must see the world as displaying a providential order in which virtue is rewarded. His bargain is that if he is a good, loving, noble person who shuns pride and does not seek his private gain or glory, he will be well treated by fate and by other people. If his bargain is not honored, he may despair of divine justice, he may conclude that he is the guilty party, or he may have recourse to belief in a higher justice which transcends human understanding. He needs to believe not only in the fairness of the world order, but also in the goodness of human nature. In this area, too, he is vulnerable to disappointment. As a result, there is a "curious ambivalence" in his attitude toward his fellows: "a surface prevalence of 'naive' optimistic trust and an undercurrent of just as indiscriminate suspiciousness and resentment." This ambivalence characterizes his attitude toward life in general.

In the compliant person, says Horney, there are "a variety of aggressive tendencies strongly repressed" (OIC, 55). These

aggressive drives are repressed because feeling them or acting them out would clash violently with his need to feel that he is loving and good and would radically endanger his whole strategy for gaining love, justice, and approval. His compliant strategies tend to increase his hostility, for "self-effacement and 'goodness' invite being stepped on" and "dependence upon others makes for exceptional vulnerability" (OIC, 55-56). But his inner rage threatens his self-image, his philosophy of life, and his bargain; and he must repress, disguise, or justify his anger in order to avoid arousing self-hate and the hostility of others.

The person in whom aggressive tendencies are predominant has goals, traits, and values which are quite the opposite of those of the complaint type. He needs "to achieve success, prestige, or recognition" (OIC, 65). What appeals to him most is not love, but mastery. There are three aggressive types: the narcissistic, the perfectionistic, and the arrogant-vindictive. The narcissistic person seeks to master life "by self-admiration and the exercise of charm" (NHG, 212). The perfectionistic person "feels superior because of his high standards" (NHG, 196), through which he seeks to compel fate. The arrogant-vindictive person is extremely competitive; he must retaliate for all wrongs and triumph over all rivals. In his relations with others, he is at once ruthless and cynical. He believes that might makes right and that the world is a jungle in which the strong annihilate the weak. He wants to be hard and tough and regards all manifestation of feeling as a sign of weakness. He fears the emergence of his own compliant trends because they would make him vulnerable in an evil world, would confront him with self-hate, and would threaten his bargain, which is essentially with himself. He does not count on the world to give him anything, but he is convinced that he can reach his ambitious goals if he remains true to his vision of life as a battle and does not allow himself to be seduced by the traditional morality. If his expansive solution collapses, self-effacing trends may emerge quite powerfully.

The basically detached person worships freedom, peace, and self-sufficiency. In order to avoid being dependent on the environment, he tries to subdue his inner cravings and to be content with little. He believes, "consciously or unconsciously, that it is better not to wish or expect anything. Sometimes this goes with a conscious pessimistic outlook on life, a sense of its being futile anyhow and
of nothing being sufficiently desirable to make an effort for it” (NHG, 263). He does not usually rail against life, however, but resigns himself to things as they are and accepts his fate with ironic humor or stoical dignity. He tries to escape suffering by being independent of external forces, by feeling that nothing matters, and by concerning himself only with those things which are within his power. His bargain is that if he asks nothing of others, they will not bother him; that if he tries for nothing, he will not fail; and that if he expects little of life, it will not disappoint him. The detached person withdraws from himself as well as from others. “There is a general tendency to suppress all feeling, even to deny its existence” (OIC, 82). This is an effort not only to restrict wishes and to repress suffering, but also to escape from the conflict between his aggressive and compliant trends. He can never attain “real inner peace or freedom,” of course, “as long as the contradictory sets of values continue to exist” (OIC, 95).

While inter-personal difficulties are creating the movements toward, against, and away from people, and the conflict between these moves, concomitant intra-psychic problems are producing their own defensive strategies. To compensate for his feelings of self-hate, worthlessness, and inadequacy, the individual creates an idealized image of himself and embarks upon a search for glory. The creation of the idealized image produces a whole structure of neurotic strategies which Horney calls “the pride system.” Self-idealization leads the individual to make both exaggerated claims for and excessive demands upon himself. He takes an intense pride (“neurotic pride”) in the attributes of his idealized self, and on the basis of these attributes he makes “neurotic claims” upon others. He feels outraged unless he is treated in a way appropriate to his status as a very special being. His neurotic claims make him extremely vulnerable, of course, for their frustration threatens to confront him with his “despised self,” with the sense of worthlessness from which he is fleeing.

The individual’s pride in his idealized image also leads him to impose stringent demands and taboos upon himself (“the tyranny of the should”). The function of the shoulds is “to make oneself over into one’s idealized self” (NHG, 68). Since the idealized image is for the most part a glorification of the self-effacing, expansive, and resigned solutions, the individual’s shoulds are de-
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termined largely by the character traits and values associated with
his predominant trend. The shoulds are a defense against self-
loathing, but they tend to aggravate the condition which they are
employed to cure. Not only do they increase self-alienation, but
they also intensify self-hate, for they are impossible to live up to.
The penalty for failure is the most severe feeling of worthlessness
and self-contempt. This is why the shoulds have such a tyrannical
power.

III

Hamlet's problems begin before he encounters the ghost, learns
of his father's murder, and accepts his mission of revenge. He is
from the outset an angry, brooding figure, full of conflicts, who is
in an obvious state of psychological crisis. He is disgusted with life,
longs for death, and is seething with repressed hostility. He has
been traumatized by a devastating experience. The precipitating
event, as we learn in his first soliloquy, is Gertrude's desecration of
his father's memory by her hasty and incestuous marriage to a
man whom Hamlet reviles. The central problem of the play for T.
S. Eliot is why Hamlet reacts so intensely to his mother's behavior.
Shakespeare cannot make Hamlet's emotion intelligible, says
Eliot, "because it is in excess of the facts as they appear... his
disgust is occasioned by his mother, but... his mother is not an
adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her."
I believe that Hamlet's reactions are intelligible if we examine
them in the light of his character structure and of his relationship
with his father.

What kind of a person is Hamlet? Why is he so terribly vulnera-
able to disillusionment and despair, to confusion, turmoil, and
paralysis? The facts as they appear would be disturbing to almost
any man; but, as T. S. Eliot's remarks make clear, not everyone
would react as intensely as Hamlet does. To understand Hamlet's
feelings we must try to comprehend his character and enter into
his experience. We can do this, I think, without reconstructing his
childhood; but we shall have to use our imaginations somewhat
and infer from the evidence in the text the attitudes, beliefs, and

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expectations from life which Hamlet has held as a grown man and which have been so profoundly disrupted by the events following his father's death.

Before his father's death, Hamlet is a man who strives very hard to be good, who believes in the nobility of human nature and of the important people in his life, and who expects virtue to be rewarded, both here and hereafter. He values love, dutifulness, and constancy, and has faith that these qualities will win the devotion, loyalty, and esteem of others. He shuns pride, revengefulness, and ambition, embraces Christian attitudes, and has a religious dread of sin. In order to live up to his moral standards, he has repressed his sexuality. He is fearful of lust in himself and is disgusted by it in others. He has high expectations of himself and strives to be an exemplary human being.

In his personal relations, Hamlet is highly idealistic. He venerates his parents and wants their affection and approval. He sees them as a devoted couple and hopes to have for himself a love relationship similar to theirs. He tends to equate fair appearances with inner virtue and is proud of his mother's beauty, his father's distinction, and his own good looks. He idealizes women and is high-minded and pure in his dealings with them. He has warm relations with men and an ideal conception of friendship.

Life is going well for Hamlet before his father's death. He has a secure place in his parents' affection, he is loved by the multitude, and he is "the expectancy and rose of the fair state" (III, i). He has good friends, is happy at Wittenberg, and is the object of universal admiration. He has great pride in his father, a strong sense of his own worth, and a firm confidence in the triumph of right. His kind of people are in power, his values are being honored, and the future looks bright.

The death of his father and the events which follow upset this situation and threaten Hamlet in a number of ways. His father's death is a severe blow. It is a shocking, untimely death which deprives Hamlet of a loved parent and sets him brooding on mortality and the "base uses" to which even the greatest of men

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7I am using, with a few exceptions, the Hardin Craig text of Hamlet. I prefer "solid" to "sullied" in I, ii, 129; and I read III, iv, 169 as "curb the devil." Act and scene numbers will be indicated after quotations unless they are obvious from an earlier reference or from the context.
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may return (V, i). When Claudius becomes king, Hamlet is further alienated from the world in which he was formerly so much at home. His own noble qualities have been passed over, and the crown has been given to a man who is the opposite of both his father and himself. Claudius is untrustworthy, undeserving, a disgrace to the state. While this man has been elevated, Hamlet’s own position has been diminished. He does not dwell upon his political frustrations because he has taboos against ambition; but others assume that he is brooding about them; and no doubt he is, in a repressed way. His whole demeanor shows that he is feeling abused. At a more conscious level, his faith in the political order has been profoundly disturbed, and he cannot help feeling that life is unjust. His fair visions of the future have been mocked by events.

The most devastating blow to Hamlet is, of course, his mother’s marriage to Claudius. Her disloyalty to his father’s memory makes him question the constancy of woman’s love, and her attraction to Claudius makes him feel that women are utterly capricious in their sexual choices (see III, iv, 63–81). Hamlet had not been disturbed by his mother’s sexual attraction to his father; for it was sanctified by love and marriage; and Hamlet looked forward to receiving such affection from his own wife. But her attraction to Claudius is unholy. He cannot believe that she loves this vile creature, and their marriage is an incestuous union. Her guilty sexuality arouses so much disgust partly because it violates his moral standards and is a blow to his family pride and partly because it threatens his own repression of lustful feelings:

O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn
And reason pandars will. (III, iv)

His mother’s guilt undermines his lofty conception of women, shatters his confidence in fair appearances, and diminishes his hope of finding for himself a pure, faithful, and loving wife. His distrust of her increases his sense of alienation and makes him feel
all the more an outcast in the world. His hostility makes him afraid of his own violent impulses. He would hate himself terribly if he acted out his rage and violated his taboos against filial impiety.

However important the preceding factors may be, the major reason why his mother's behavior fills Hamlet with such rage and despair is that, because of his powerful identification with his father, he feels the wrongs which Gertrude has done to the dead king as though they had been done to himself. Hamlet is angry with his mother on his father's behalf. His grievances against Gertrude in his first soliloquy are very similar to the sentiments which are expressed later by the ghost:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—  
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power  
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen:  
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!  
From me, whose love was of that dignity  
That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
I made unto her in marriage, and to decline  
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
To those of mine!  
But virtue, as it never will be moved,  
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,  
Will sate itself in a celestial bed,  
And prey on garbage. (I, v)

Both speeches stress the nobility of King Hamlet, the sexual depravity of Gertrude, and the gross inferiority of Claudius to his brother. There is in both a sense of outrage that this faithful, loving husband, this radiant angel, this Hyperion, has been betrayed by his wife and replaced in her affections by the lewd, bestial Claudius. Both express profound disillusionment about Gertrude, this seeming virtuous queen, who posts "with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (I, ii). The similarity of these speeches reveals quite vividly the extent to which Hamlet is reacting to his mother's behavior from his father's perspective.

Hamlet's identification with his father may be in part the effect of mourning. But the main reason for his identification is that he has modeled himself upon his father and glorified those qualities
in himself which he shares with him. He and his father are similar psychological types. They have similar idealized images, similar claims, and similar shoulds. They both strive to be noble, good, and loving; and they both expect these qualities to be rewarded. They are conscientious, dutiful, religious men who exalt women, are faithful to their oaths, and place a high value upon sexual purity. They have lived up to their shoulds, but their claims have not been honored, and their bargain is in ruins.

The king, instead of receiving fair treatment, is betrayed by his wife, murdered by his brother, and prematurely forgotten by everyone except his son. Virtue is not rewarded. Instead, the evil Claudius is triumphant. He has committed the most heinous of sins, but instead of being punished, he has gained through his villainy both queen Gertrude and the throne.

Both Hamlet and his father revile Claudius so because he is the opposite psychological type. He is a wily, lecherous, underhanded schemer. His very looks are the opposite of theirs and show him to be a gross and cunning man. For the Hamlet type of man it is unbearable for the Claudiuses of the world to gain the love, power, and recognition which should be the reward of virtue. If the Claudiuses are triumphant and the Hamlets are ignominiously treated, then the world is "an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely."

There is something more, I think, to the repugnance which Hamlet feels toward Claudius. Claudius represents the sexual and aggressive drives which Hamlet represses in himself. He is what Hamlet is afraid of becoming. Hamlet's father is an external embodiment of his idealized image; Claudius symbolizes his despised self. When Claudius's successes undermine his solution, Hamlet's repression is threatened and he becomes all the more afraid of his forbidden impulses. He cannot help doubting the efficacy of virtue (what has it done for his father?); and he is enraged by Gertrude, by whom he feels betrayed. His taboos are still in operation, however; and he is afraid of becoming a monster. His attacks on Claudius are in part an externalization of his loathing for those parts of himself against which he is struggling and in part a reaffirmation of his own nobility. They reinforce his pride in his virtue and assure him that he can never become like the bestial creature he so thoroughly condemns.
The disgust with life and the longings for extinction which Hamlet expresses in his first soliloquy are the reactions of a man whose most cherished beliefs have been shattered and whose strategy for dealing with the world has proven to be totally ineffective. He is obsessed with the injustice of life and is full of rage, anxiety, and despair. His father was the kind of man that Hamlet has aspired to be, and his memory has been foully dishonored. What promise does life hold for Hamlet in such a world? Will he, too, be mocked by the objects of his affection, betrayed by the people to whom he has been faithful, abandoned for base creatures by those from whom he deserves loyalty and appreciation? This is not a world with which his kind of person can cope or in which he sees much hope of reward. He wants to escape by melting away into nothingness. Hamlet still believes in God, but he had expected justice on earth, and he has been cruelly disappointed.

Hamlet's oppression is the result not only of his disillusionment, but also of his repressed hostility. He is full of bitterness and rage, but he cannot express his feelings directly to Claudius and Gertrude. He mutters asides, quibbles with words, and accuses them with his display of mourning and melancholy.

The wish for death with which Hamlet's first soliloquy opens has several sources. It is partly a desire to escape from a world in which he despairs of receiving love and justice and partly a desire to throw off the burden of his inner conflicts. It is also a product of turning against the self, a frequent defense in the self-effacing solution where there is a powerful taboo against violence, especially toward a parent. In this defense "an impulse unacceptable if directed toward some object in the outer world is turned inward against the self, as a child in a rage will suddenly start striking himself, tearing his own hair, or throwing a tantrum." Hamlet's suicidal fantasies provide both an outlet for his destructive impulses and a defense acting them out. He harbors murderous impulses towards his mother, but he cannot permit himself even to feel them. What he is aware of is that he wants to die. One object of suicide is to make others feel guilty, and this is surely a motive for Hamlet. But self-murder is also a sin. Hamlet can no longer believe that goodness will be rewarded in this world; but he

Hamlet still expects evil to be punished, both here and hereafter. The penalty for suicide is eternal damnation. If he could only melt away without any act of his own, he would at once escape his pain, retain his virtue, and show others how they have destroyed him.

As his death wishes indicate, Hamlet is already in an impossible position for his kind of person. His encounter with the ghost intensifies the pressure on him both to be aggressive and to be good. The wrongs done to his father are far greater than Hamlet had imagined. He has been murdered in his sleep by his own brother. The manner of his death denied him the opportunity to purify his soul; and he must suffer, therefore, the purgatorial torments whose horror he suggests to Hamlet so vividly. Not only that, but Gertrude had betrayed him while he was alive, having been seduced by the lewd Claudius. The ghost puts Hamlet under a terrible pressure to be his avenger. The ghost's outrage feeds Hamlet's already seething indignation; and he is prompted to his revenge by both heaven and hell, by a righteous desire for justice and a murderous craving for retaliation.

Hamlet cannot help feeling ambivalent, however, about being an avenger. It is a matter of love, of loyalty, and of manliness for him to carry out the ghost's commission; and he swears to do so. But there is both in Christianity and in Hamlet's self-effacing defense system a strong taboo against aggressive behavior. "I could accuse me of such things," he tells Ophelia, "that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, and ambitious..." (III, i). The ghost himself is not a single-minded revenger. He is protective toward Gertrude and fearful of his son's damnation:

But, however thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught... (I, v)

Hamlet is supposed to be aggressive, but also to be good; to avenge his father, but not to taint his mind; to stop the incest, but not to contrive anything against his mother. The ghost's conflicting messages correspond to Hamlet's own inner conflicts and contribute to his paralysis.

The ghost's sufferings, moreover, reinforce Hamlet's fear of sin and of punishment in the after life. His father was a good man, a
man upon whom Hamlet has molded himself; but his spirit is nevertheless doomed to undergo horrible torments until the “foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purged away.” If these are his father’s sufferings, what might Hamlet’s be if he commits a sin greater than any of which his father has been guilty? He will not be a good son if he does not secure revenge; but vengeance is the law of the jungle, the motto of the aggressive types; and to behave in this way, with whatever sanction, cannot help but arouse profound anxiety in a man like Hamlet. To be an avenger is to descend into the arena with the Claudiiuses of the world, to become like them, and to experience intense self-loathing and fear of divine retaliation.

When the ghost first announces that he has been murdered, Hamlet is most “apt” in the acceptance of his mission, and after the ghost departs, he is still breathing fire. He soon shows signs, however, of inner stress. In the swearing scene he addresses the ghost with a strange levity which can only be understood as a release of tension. He quickly seizes upon the device of assuming an antic disposition. This has dubious value in his revenge scheme (Hamlet is almost totally inept as a plotter); but it permits him to manifest his inner turbulence and to release a good deal of aggression without being held responsible for his behavior. As the first act ends, Hamlet is no longer “apt.” Rather, he is oppressed that he is expected to take action:

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

He is once again longing for escape. He wishes he did not exist, that he had not been born. Hamlet wants to be loved, recognized, taken care of, rewarded for his goodness. He abhors the moral disorder of life and resents having to cope with the harsh realities of the historical process. He wants to receive justice, not to be burdened with the task of setting things to right.

At the end of Act I, then, Hamlet is in deep psychological trouble. Both his inter-personal and his intrapsychic strategies are breaking down. He despairs of having his claims honored, and he despairs of living up to his idealized image. He is filled, as a consequence, with the rage which is his dominant emotion in Act I.
and the self-hate which becomes so prominent in Act II. He is losing faith in justice, in other people, and in himself.

It is important to recognize that Hamlet is engaged in a search for glory and that he aspires to a super-human standard of goodness. He wants to live without sin; that is, without the taint of pride, revengefulness, and ambition and of coarse or illicit sexuality. He wants to fulfill all of his roles to perfection, to be an ideal son, prince, friend, and lover. His bargain is that if he lives up to his idealized image, he will receive love, justice, and recognition. Both his search for glory and his bargain are threatened by the fate of his father, the man upon whom his own idealized image has been fashioned. His father has lived up to his shoulds, but he has not received glory, either from fate or from other people.

Hamlet's search for glory and his bargain are threatened also by his disillusionment with other people. If other people are evil, if they are all really Claudiuses or Gertrudes, then Hamlet has no chance of receiving the love and honor which are his due. If he is to believe in his own nobility, moreover, mankind in general must have the capacity to be highminded and pure, to throw out the devil, or at least to curb him. It is difficult for him to maintain the possibility of his own innocence when he seems to be surrounded by human corruption.

The greatest threat to Hamlet's sense of innocence is, of course, his own rage. He is afraid of acting out his violent impulses and forever sacrificing his claim to glory. He represses himself severely and turns his destructive impulses inward to prevent them from escaping. He would rather die than do anything that would destroy his idealized image. He dreads becoming his despised self—that is, like Claudius; and he projects upon his uncle the self-hate and self-condemnation which are generated by his own forbidden feelings.

Hamlet's encounter with the ghost makes it impossible for him to maintain his self-approval. His rage is intensified; and although it is also to a certain extent sanctified, he can never enact the ghost's commands without terrible guilt and anxiety. Once he incorporates the ghost's demand for revenge into his idealized image, it becomes inevitable that he will hate himself no matter what he does. It is no wonder that he wishes that he had never been born.
When we meet Hamlet again, he is in a state of psychological torment. He has sworn to avenge his father, but two months have passed, and as yet he has done nothing. His failure to act violates both his self-effacing and his aggressive shoulds; it makes him feel disloyal, unloving, and cowardly. He is tortured by self-hate. To escape his self-accusations he tries to stir up his passions to such a pitch that he can override his scruples and take his revenge. Any approach to action, however, heightens his fears of being sinful and incurring damnation; and he delays again, thinks up a new plan, or longs to withdraw into stoical patience or the oblivion of death. Each retreat from action generates new self-hate, which pushes him once more toward violence. He loathes himself for his disloyalty and ineffectuality; but he is afraid that he will hate himself even more, and incur divine wrath as well, if he becomes a murderer. Hamlet is hopelessly trapped in this situation. He oscillates from one defensive strategy to another, but nothing will satisfy his contradictory needs and permit him to escape the hell of his own self-hate. Each side of him accuses and inhibits the other. He is damned whatever he does. We can see the dynamics which I have just described very clearly at work in his encounter with the players and in his second and third soliloquies.

Hamlet asks the First Player to recite the description of Priam’s murder and the grief of Hecuba in order to stir, to express, and to justify his own emotions. The contents of the recitation, combined with the player’s passion in reciting it, have a profound effect upon Hamlet, as we see when he is left alone. His second soliloquy is primarily a series of self-denunciations. He is a “rouge,” a “peasant slave,” a “dull and muddy-mettled rascal,” a “coward,” an “ass,” a “whore,” a “drag,” a “scullion” (II, ii). There is a massive release of self-hate here. Hamlet’s self-accusations are a form of self-punishment, an expression of his profound sense of his own ignobility, and a part of his effort to escape his despised self by rousing himself to action.

Hamlet attacks himself by comparing himself to the player. It makes him feel “monstrous” that the player is so moved by the woes of Hecuba:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
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That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general air with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

This is what Hamlet has been wanting to do ever since his mother's marriage, but something has forced him to hold his tongue.

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made.

Hamlet has not, of course, been unpregnant of his cause; he is obsessed with it and with his inability to act. But his description of himself here suggests that he has tried to escape from his inner torments by a process of withdrawal, by a blunting of consciousness which leaves him dull and stuporous.

Can it be, Hamlet wonders, that he is a coward? This is partly self-accusation and partly a search for an explanation of his delay. Hamlet experiences his conflicts; but he does not understand them; and he keeps trying, as we all do, to make sense of his behavior. The accusation of cowardice is most effective and brings him to the pitch of passion at which he has been aiming. No one treats him like a coward; but if they did, he

should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villian!
O, vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon't! foh!
Hamlet's pride is now stirred up, and he attacks himself for being content with mere verbal violence, like the scum of the earth, instead of acting courageously, like the son of a king.

His bloodthirsty mood quickly gives way, however, to more cerebral activity as he reverts to the plan which he had already set in motion to trap Claudius with the play. The play is another device for being aggressive in an indirect way, for torturing Claudius without making an overt assault, either verbal or physical, upon him. Hamlet excuses himself for this further delay by questioning the reliability of the ghost. His doubts are in keeping with contemporary doctrines concerning ghosts; but Hamlet recalls these doctrines at this time because something within him is reacting against his earlier clamoring for vengeance, and he is once again troubled by fear of damnation.

The next time we see Hamlet he is once again subdued by his inner conflicts. His third soliloquy is a rather confused meditation in which three possible alternatives are being considered: compliance, aggression, or withdrawal. Hamlet begins by asking himself whether it is better to be or not to be; but he immediately shifts to the consideration of another 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? (III, i)

This is the question by which Hamlet is most deeply tormented and which he cannot resolve. He wishes above all to be noble, but does this mean submitting to fate or attacking the evils of life in an attempt to correct them? Hamlet longs to escape from the buffetings of fortune and the agony of his dilemma by withdrawing into the oblivion of death, but suicide would be a sin and he has a dread of the afterlife.

Hamlet cannot come to rest in any solution. Submission will not work because he has sworn to avenge his father's murder and to stop the incest. He is too full of outrage, moreover, to accept the injustices of life; and he has a need to live up to his culture's conception of manliness. Aggression will not work because it violates his taboos against attempting to master fate (which is pride...
and rebellion) and exposes him to fears of sinfulness and damnation:

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 pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Hamlet is very much drawn to detachment as a defense; he would dearly love to attain a stoical independence of fate. He envies and admires Horatio:

for thou has been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks... (III, ii)

But Hamlet is much too tormented by outrageous fortune and by his own inner turbulence to achieve such philosophic calm.

Since he cannot become invulnerable by self-mastery, such as Horatio's, Hamlet's detachment takes the form of a longing for death. In death he could escape both his inner conflicts, with their accompanying self-hate, and the injustices of life:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despired love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

These wrongs are very largely those which "good" people suffer at the hands of the aggressive types. Hamlet is "patient merit"; Claudius is "the unworthy."

Hamlet's fantasy of dying is generated not only by his craving for escape, but also by his self-effacing trends. When confronted with the ineffectiveness of his solution, the self-effacing person may be attracted to self-destruction. It provides an outlet for his aggression, shows others what they have done to him, and pre-
serves his moral superiority. As Horney observes, "going to pieces under the assault of an unfeeling world appears to him as the ultimate triumph. It may take the conspicuous form of 'dying at the offender's doorstep'... Suffering per se appears as the proof of nobility. What else can a sensitive person in an ignoble world do but go to pieces! Should he fight and assert himself and hence stoop down to the same level of crude vulgarity?" (NHG, 236). Hamlet cannot commit suicide, however, because of his fear of the afterlife. It is clear that Hamlet fears damnation should he either kill himself or die in the pursuit of vengeance. Conscience, which binds him to this weary life, also prevents him from carrying out his great enterprise; and he finds himself paralyzed, unable to submit, to act, or to escape.

V

This is the last time that we see Hamlet as a moody, inert, strangulated figure. His encounter with Ophelia and the Mousetrap scene release his anger, and he becomes capable of both verbal and physical assault. His self-effacing trends remain in evidence; and he develops a more and more profound sense of resignation; but his aggression is henceforth liberated; and he becomes, at times, a stereotypic avenger.

Hamlet is not angry with Ophelia when he encounters her at the end of his third soliloquy.

HAM. Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.

Hamlet has been preoccupied with thoughts of conscience, sin, and the afterlife; and he regards Ophelia as a pure, spiritual being whose prayers he has need of. The situation changes, however, when Ophelia wants to return his gifts. Hamlet will not accept them and denies that he gave her any:

OPH. My honour'd lord, you know right well you did;
And with them words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich: their perfume lost,
Take these again; for to the noble mind

54
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.

There, my lord.

HAM. Ha, ha! are you honest?

This is the turning point in Hamlet’s attitude toward Ophelia. She has been immensely important to him as a source of reassurance. He needs her goodness to help him cling to his faith in human nature. Her withdrawal has frustrated Hamlet, but it has not embittered him; for she acted in obedience to her father and has proved, thereby, her dutifulness. Her present behavior, however, is false. Hamlet has not been unkind. Hamlet’s immediate reaction is to feel that Ophelia, too, is a betrayer. Her fair appearance, too, hides a reality of evil. Ophelia is, in short, another Gertrude. All of Hamlet’s negative attitudes toward women, to which she has been the sole antidote, are now projected onto her.

Hamlet’s sense of his own goodness is profoundly threatened by his loss of faith in Ophelia. As long as he idealized her and their relationship, he maintained his belief in the possibility of a pure and noble love. Now that he sees her as a bawd, he becomes bawdy-minded himself and loses faith in his own purity. With the undermining of his idealized image, his despised self emerges; and he turns upon himself savagely:

Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where’s your father?

This attack is not simply upon himself, of course, but upon human nature generally. Even its best specimens, such as Ophelia and himself, are irremediably depraved. Men are all arrant knaves, and the only way that women can remain virtuous is to go to a nunnery.

It is a traditional piece of staging that after Hamlet says “Go thy ways to a nunnery,” he catches a glimpse of eavesdropping Polonius, which leads him to ask, “Where’s your father?” My reading of the play supports this bit of business, which seems essential if we are to understand what follows. Ophelia replies with a lie—
"At home, my lord"—and Hamlet's next remark is clearly intended for Polonius's ear: “Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool no where but in's own house.” Hamlet now feels that Ophelia is totally false, and he is so enraged that for the first time in the play he makes a direct assault upon the object of his anger:

If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

Ophelia's pious exclamation—"O heavenly powers, restore him!"—only angers Hamlet the more and brings on a further assault:

I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough; God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nick-name God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live: the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go.

This is not an act put on for the benefit of the eavesdroppers. Hamlet is not feigning madness here. He is expressing at last grievances which have been rankling in his bosom for months. He has been chaste as ice, but he has not escaped calumny. Women are light, deceptive, wanton creatures who make fools of the men who love them. There is in the self-effacing person, says Horney, a "pervasive suppression of resentment," though "reproaches will occasionally be expressed in mitigated form. Only when he feels driven to despair will the locked gates break open and a flood of accusations rush out" (NHG, 232). This is what is happening to Hamlet here. In his belief in Ophelia, in her purity and love for him, lay his last hope that he could both maintain his own nobility and escape the fate of his father. When Hamlet says that "we will have no more marriages," what he means is that he will never marry. He will not let any woman do to him what Gertrude has done to his father. His tirade ends with a threat against the life of Claudius which so alarms the king that he determines immediately to send Hamlet to England.
This explosion of hostility seems to relieve Hamlet’s oppression, to lift his spirits, and to fill him with energy. He is no longer brooding, indecisive, or sullen; and, for a while at least, his death wishes disappear. In his dealings with others he becomes vigorous, articulate, and combative. His speech to the players is brisk and authoritative; he declares his admiration for Horatio in a very forthright manner; and he seems eager for the play. When the court enters, he puts on his antic disposition and takes great pleasure in jabbing at everyone. He is much more daring than he has ever been before.

KING. How fares our cousin Hamlet?

HAM. Excellent, i’ faith: of the chameleon’s dish: I eat the air, promise-crammed: you cannot feed capons so. (Ill, ii)

He does not obey his mother when she bids him sit by her, and he turns Ophelia scarlet with his newly released bawdiness. Hamlet is tormenting everyone with great success; his jokes are brilliant. He has been suffering; now it is time for them to squirm. The play is another expression of his accusations, and he drives its points home with his sarcastic and bellicose remarks. It is his needling, as much as the play itself, which forces Claudius to lose his composure.

When the king rises, distraught, and flees the scene, Hamlet becomes gay:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away.

He has had a great vindictive triumph. He has been oppressed with impotent rage; but now he has broken through the defenses of this “smiling, damned villain”; and it is Claudius who is stricken. The tables are turned. In his manic state, Hamlet is able to make light verse of the subject upon which he has so long been morbidly brooding:

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself; and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock.
He disposes of the inquiries of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with great wit and energy ("though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me"); and he makes a fool of Polonius when the latter comes to summon him to the queen.

What we see here is the energy of liberated aggression. With the final collapse of his hopes for love and innocence, his angry self has risen to the fore and has swept away the constraints which have paralyzed him hitherto. His initial plan has worked: his doubts about the ghost have been resolved and he has discompossed his enemies. He is no longer helplessly trapped by fears and conflicts. He is no longer tortured by self-hate. He feels powerful, on top of things, capable of violence. He has no developed plan, but he longs to strike another blow:

"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. (III, ii)

It is in this frame of mind that he encounters Claudius praying. I believe that Hamlet is now capable of killing Claudius and that he does not do so in the prayer scene for exactly the reasons which he gives. He is in the grip of his vindictive shoulds which demand not only Claudius's death, but a revenge which is in keeping with the nature of the offense. Claudius took his father "grossly, full of bread," and now "'Tis heavy with him." According to his present logic, it would hardly be revenge to take Claudius "in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season'd for his passage."

No!  
Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in the 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 damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. (III, iii)

"This speech," says Dr. Johnson, "in which Hamlet is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the..."
man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be
uttered."9 "These diabolical sentiments," Kittredge hastens to as-
sure us, "are not Hamlet's sentiments. . . . The speech is merely a
pretext for delay." The sentiments are diabolical and they are
Hamlet's. This speech is not an isolated event. Hamlet was pro-
claiming his readiness moments before to "drink hot blood"; and
when he speaks of his schoolfellows at the end of Act III, he
sounds very much like an Iago:

... they must sweep my way,
   And marshal me to knavery. Let it work;
   For 'tis sport to have the engineer
   Hoist with his own petar: and 't shall go hard
   But I will delve one yard below their mines;
   And blow them at the moon: O, 'tis most sweet,
   When in one line two crafts directly meet.

Hamlet sends them to their deaths, no "shriving-time allow'd,"
and then assures Horatio that they "are not near [his] conscience"
(V, ii). He concludes his last soliloquy by exclaiming, "My thoughts
be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV, iv).

It is difficult to integrate all this with the picture of Hamlet built
up in the first half of the play, to believe that the tender-minded
prince has turned into a fiendish avenger. His task no longer
seems a heavy burden but a source of malicious delight. We must
remember that beneath his tender-mindedness there has been an
enormous sense of injury and a rage so intense that its repression
has produced severe neurotic symptoms. The Machiavellian mon-
ster that Hamlet has fought so hard to keep locked inside is now
free. Hamlet still has inner conflicts, as we shall see; but the ag-
grressive side of him now seems to operate independently at times,
as though it were a separate personality.

What we see in Act III is Hamlet becoming aware of the
dangerous part of himself. For the most part, he exults in it; but
he is afraid of it in relation to his mother. Before he goes to her
closet, he struggles to bring his matricidal impulses under con-
trol:

*Quoted in The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, edited by George Lyman Kittredge,
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her, but use none...

(III, ii)

When he enters his mother's chamber, he is so aggressive in both word and manner that the queen is shocked ("Why, how now Hamlet!... Have you forgot me?"); and when he forcibly sits her down, she becomes afraid for her life:

What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?
Help, help, ho! (III, iv)

Hamlet strikes out at the hidden Polonius in a discharge of the murderous impulses which have been thwarted by Claudius's praying and by his own taboos, as well as the ghost's injunction, against harming his mother. Whether it could have been the king or not (there is internal evidence to support both contentions), Hamlet clearly wishes that it had been. He is in too fierce a state to feel concern at this time for what he has done. He must pour out all the bitterness which has been festering within him before he can register the implications of his rash and bloody deed.

The closet scene is a cathartic experience for Hamlet. He unleashes at last, in a torrent of words, the accusations upon which he has been brooding incessantly. Except for the murder of Polonius, the closet scene goes very well for Hamlet. He not only releases his pent-up feelings, but his words achieve their desired effects. He catches the conscience of the queen and makes her share his revulsion at what she has done. The closet scene releases Hamlet from his obsession with the queen. We do not see him brooding about her hereafter. He has asserted his moral superiority, and the queen has accepted his rebuke. This assuages his anger, feeds his pride in both his potency and his virtue, and gives him a sense of having completed an important part of his mission. His rage is henceforth directed exclusively against Claudius. The greatest part of his triumph is his winning Gertrude's loyalty to his cause:

Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou has said to me.
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His deepest grievance against her has been her abandonment of the good Hamlets for the bad Claudius. This has now been reversed.

VI

From the end of Act III to the conclusion of the play, the different sides of Hamlet's personality assert themselves in turn, as well as, at times, simultaneously. He still has inner conflicts and a need to reconcile his various shoulds; but his compliant, aggressive, and resigned trends seem to be compartmentalized sometimes and to manifest themselves in relatively pure forms.

Having settled his account with the queen, Hamlet is able to react to his killing of Polonius. He repents and promises to “answer well the death I gave him” (III, iv). A few moments later, however, he is relishing the thought of hoisting his enemies with their “own petar”; and he treats Polonius's corpse most unceremoniously—“I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room.” In Act IV we hear that “he weeps for what is done” (IV, i); but he is fiercely aggressive in his few appearances on stage. He calls Rosencrantz a “sponge” (IV, ii); he tells Claudius that if his messenger does not find Polonius in heaven, he should “seek him i' the other place” himself (IV, iii); and he accuses himself, in his final soliloquy, of not having been bloody-minded enough (IV, iv).

In this soliloquy Hamlet is in the grip of his aggressive shoulds. He attacks his detached and compliant trends and accuses himself, once more, of delay:

Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,
A thought which, quartr'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward, I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do't. (IV, iv)

His self-accusations are, in part, irrational. His revenge is not dull, and it needs no spurring. Hamlet has delayed, it is true; and for very much the reasons which he gives. But he is not delaying now;
though, knowing his past record, he may be fearful of lapsing once more into paralysis. He no longer has the “means/ To do’t,” at least not immediately. The Mousetrap has set in motion a plot against him, and the murder of Polonius has put him on the defensive. The king is on guard, and Hamlet’s energies are taken up by his efforts to parry the moves against him. Hamlet is a revenge play in which the obstacles which delay the revenge are at first within the hero and then outside of him. Once Hamlet becomes capable of action, no suitable occasion arises, until the end. After the play and the murder of Polonius, he is swept along by events which he has little power to control. What we see in his self-accusations is a new set of unrealistic shoulds. It is no longer perfect innocence, but aggressive potency which Hamlet demands of himself, whatever the obstacles.

Hamlet is not only attacking himself for his inaction, he is also justifying his intended violence by making it seem a matter of reason and honor. The celebration of man’s “large discourse,/ Looking before and after” is both an assault upon his own mental paralysis (it fusses in him unused) and an elevation of his bloody thoughts into a manifestation of “god-like reason.” It is not rationality which Hamlet is displaying here, of course, but his capacity for rationalization. The example before him is hardly one which Hamlet in his Christian frame of mind would find admirable. Twenty thousand men are prepared to

fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain . . . .

In his present mood Hamlet sees this as glorious and Fortinbras as a great man. His “spirit with divine ambition puff’d,” Fortinbras is ready “to find quarrel in a straw/ When honour’s at the stake.” This glorification of bellicosity, ambition, and honor, and of a readiness to die, is the expression of Hamlet’s aggressive shoulds which are punishing him for his own lack of a fiery spirit. His dominant emotion is shame, which is what we feel when we have violated our shoulds and injured our pride. These people are ready to fight and die for “a straw,” “an egg-shell,” whereas he, whose honor is so much more at stake, has “let all sleep.” In order
to restore his pride and to gain some measure of glory for himself, Hamlet must think from this time forth nothing but bloody thoughts.

In Act V, Hamlet returns from England, after a considerable absence from the stage. In the first scene he violently proclaims his love for Ophelia, which he can afford to feel now that she is dead; and in scene two he describes how he has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, "Not shriving-time allow'd." He assures Horatio that they are not near his conscience; but his next speech suggests that he may be protesting too much:

Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (V, ii)

It is evident that Hamlet still has a strong need to justify his behavior and to assure himself that he will not incur damnation by carrying out his revenge. He defends his past and intended violence by citing all the wrongs which have been done to him. The plot against him, which he has done so much to bring about, justifies his own plotting and assuages his guilt. He may have needed to create a situation in which he is forced to act in self-defense in order to feel that it is "perfect conscience" to kill the king. He is still worried about damnation; but now that Claudius is an active antagonist, he can assure himself that he will be damned if he does not act to stop the spread of evil. His inner conflicts are still operating, but he has found a way to reconcile his aggressive and his self-effacing shoulds. The only way to be good is to be aggressive.

What is most striking about Hamlet in Act V is his sense of himself as being in the hands of Providence. The success of his rash invasion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's cabin shows that

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will . . . . (V, ii)
The fact that he had his father's signet in his purse shows once again that heaven is "ordinant." He has profound misgivings about the fencing match with Laertes, but he ignores his premonitions and resigns himself to what will be:

...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: since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. (V, ii)

This speech shows also Hamlet's readiness to die. He expects heaven to direct him to his revenge (he still has no plan); but he also expects to die himself and does not wish it otherwise.

These attitudes are the expression of a defensive posture which begins to develop at the end of Act III, when Hamlet reacts to the death of Polonius:

For this same lord,
I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him. So, again, good night.
I must be cruel, only to be kind:
Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.

By killing Polonius, Hamlet has irrevocably violated his self-effacing shoulds and destroyed his claim to innocence. This liberates his aggressive shoulds, which manifest themselves powerfully, as we have seen. But Hamlet also has a need to assuage his guilt and to reconcile the new state of affairs with his self-effacing side. He does this in several ways.

According to the logic of the self-effacing solution, worldly misfortune is a sign of guilt, a penalty for sin. Hamlet sees his killing of Polonius not only as a sin in itself, but also as a punishment for his basic guilt, a sense of which emerges whenever his pride in his goodness is undermined. It is an act by which he pays for past transgressions and for which he must be punished in the future if his own shoulds and divine justice are to be affirmed. Hamlet has a need to die in payment for the death which he has given. He is self-protective in the interests of his mission, but he is content to
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die in the enactment of it, and he acts in a way which courts his own destruction.

With the collapse of his idealized image, Hamlet defends himself against total despair and unbearable self-hate partly by switching to an aggressive value system which glorifies toughness and violence, and partly by seeing himself as an agent of the divine plan. His pride in his goodness having been crushed, Hamlet clings to a posture of humble submission, of acquiescence to the demands of a higher justice. He no longer tries to control his fate or to transcend the limitations of human nature: he acknowledges his sinfulness, accepts the fact that he must dirty his hands, and trusts in God to bring about a just resolution of all issues.

There is in Hamlet, from the closet scene on, a strong element of resignation. He has reacted to the shattering of his dreams with terrible cries of pain; but after he assimilates the meaning of his rash and bloody deed, there is nothing left to hope for but the completion of his mission. His fate is settled: he must purge the world of evil and be punished himself for the crimes which he commits in so doing. He becomes immune to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune by developing not only a wish for death, but an indifference to life—“what is’t to leave betimes?”

The ending is like a wish-fulfillment dream conceived from Hamlet's point of view. It satisfies his needs for punishment, revenge, vindication, and escape. The plotters against him are hoist with their own petard. Claudius inadvertently kills the queen and then is despatched himself with the instruments which he has aimed at Hamlet. Evil does not triumph, after all. Laertes is “justly killed with [his] own treachery.” The queen and Hamlet are also punished. Hamlet gets his wish for his own death and for that of his mother, but he is guilty neither of matricide nor of suicide. Providence has arranged all. He is forgiven by Laertes for his death and for that of Polonius, and his own death at once justifies and pays for the murder of Claudius. He is still concerned with his nobility, his reputation; and his friend Horatio is there to save his “wounded name.” He chooses the next king with his dying breath and then goes to “felicity,” while Horatio lives on “in this harsh world . . . / To tell [his] story.” He receives tributes from Horatio and from Fortinbras which testify both to his spirituality and to his manliness:
HOR. Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!
FORT. Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal....

He was fit, after all, to be the son of his father.