Hamlet's Alternatives
Author(s): JAY L. HALIO
Source: Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 1966), pp. 169-188
Published by: University of Texas Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40753894
Accessed: 01-11-2016 13:39 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Texas Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Texas Studies in Literature and Language
Hamlet's Alternatives

Much recent criticism of Hamlet, influenced by a study of Christian doctrine, has explored the means by which Hamlet's dilemma might be more fully understood, and with it the entire tragic action of the play. Sister Miriam Joseph's article, "Hamlet: A Christian Tragedy," is one of the most penetrating investigations undertaken so far. In it the author considers how Hamlet could have taken revenge upon Claudius without violating the sanctions of Holy Writ, which, as the Prince realizes, dictate against such an act. She concludes that only by dispassionately playing the role of God's avenger on earth could Hamlet rightly have killed his uncle and escaped the danger to his own soul. Of course, Hamlet fails to do this. His intense hatred for his victim becomes, in Christian terms, his tragic flaw, and in the Prayer Scene his wish that Claudius' soul might be damned represents the "interior peripety" of his character. This in turn leads directly to the "exterior or structural peripety" of the tragedy in the next scene, when Hamlet kills Polonius. There is much to recommend this view of the action, but I should like, nevertheless, to pursue further the alternatives open to Hamlet—including the alternatives to revenge—which Sister Miriam fails to mention and, so far as we can tell, Hamlet himself fails in part to perceive. These alternatives are both implicitly and explicitly written into Shakespeare's play. His sources clearly suggest them, and his contemporaries dramatized them in plays of their own.

In his most famous soliloquy Hamlet ponders at least two of these alternatives to killing Claudius. The first one, suicide, he contemplates only to reject it again, as he did in his first soliloquy, for different reasons. Since this alternative has been so widely discussed, we need not dwell upon it here. The second alternative is also explicitly contemplated, but until recently less critical attention has been paid to it. It is the course of Christian forbearance, or suffering, which Hamlet contrasts to any form of active resistance:

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 take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them.

(III. i. 56-60; italics added)

This alternative is particularly attractive to Hamlet if we consider not only his "humane recoil" from a murderous revenge, but also the place of these lines in the dramatic structure of the play. They almost immediately follow the soliloquy at the end of Act II, where after two months of lethargy Hamlet whips himself into his first true piece of premeditated action—the staging of The Murder of Gonzago. Although the historical time of this passage is the next day, the acting time—in the uninterrupted flow of Elizabethan staging—is a few moments later. Characteristically, we see Hamlet cooling off here, debating whether any action is, indeed, appropriate to the "noble mind," or whether total forbearance is preferable. Note the essential condition—nobility of mind—upon which Hamlet wishes to base his decision. It is a phrase that recurs frequently throughout the play and derives not only from generalized classical values, but directly from Shakespeare's sources in Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest. (For example, in both versions, despite his assumed madness, Amleth refuses to distort the truth in anything he says, though he gives it somewhat cryptic utterance.) Nor is Hamlet's debating in this soliloquy merely a resumption of his feelings of impotence with which his first soliloquy ended: though he returns to thoughts of suicide, and though, as Miss Mahood has shown, they here reveal a weaker religious conviction than earlier, such thoughts may

2 All quotations are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1936).
4 The first quarto reverses the order of these soliloquies, giving us a swifter and more direct line of action, in which Hamlet successfully enlists the aid of his mother in his revenge against Claudius. But this order completely ruins the rhythm of vacillation preserved in the dramatic sequence of both authoritative versions of the play, however much these versions may actually have had to be cut for performance. See J. G. McManaway, "The Earliest Prompt Books of Hamlet," Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, XLIII (1949), 288-320. Also compare J. J. Lawlor ("The Tragic Conflict in Hamlet," Review of English Studies, n.s., I [1950], 100): "Hamlet nowhere explicitly calls in question his duty to Revenge." If my analysis of the dramatic structure is correct, then surely one sense of "To be or not to be" must be whether action (revenge) is to take place or not. Revising and expanding his earlier essay for The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare (London, 1960), Professor Lawlor recognizes that "To be is to be the avenger; so all other questions fall into place" (p. 67).
5 As in his pun on "devoutly"; see M. M. Mahood, "The Fatal Cleopatra: Shakespeare and the Pun," Essays in Criticism, I (1951), 201.
now be a result of his contemplation upon "taking arms," the alternative to "suffering." Taking arms, moreover, is not without other risks to the noble mind; for the action that Hamlet meditates would involve killing a king, his mother's husband, and might easily precipitate the country into such civil disturbances as Shakespeare had earlier dramatized in *Julius Caesar*, where the noble Brutus took a similar course of action with disastrous consequences. Vengeance, in any case, might well be regarded as a nasty business, as so many earlier plays on this theme demonstrate—Chettle's *Hoffman*, for example. But would "suffering" be nobler? The code of honor under which Laertes operates later in the play, as many critics have noted, stands in direct contrast to Hamlet's scrupling upon the event of such an enterprise. But he is Hamlet's foil, and in this play Shakespeare, through his hero's dilemma, is implicitly bringing into question the whole idea of blood vengeance, so strongly opposed by officials, clerics, and other thoughtful men of his time. Among these others were dramatists, who, like Shakespeare, found the conflict between "honour" and "moral conscience" worth exploiting even as they sought to gratify the kind of taste that seems to have given the revenge play its vogue.

Such a dramatist was John Marston, and in *Antonio's Revenge* Pandulpho's stoical counsel to his nephew parallels the situation in *Hamlet*:

Listen, young blood. 'Tis not true valour's pride
To swagger, quarrel, swear, stamp, rave, and chide,
To stab in fume of blood, to keep loud coil[s]
To bandy factions in domestic broils,
To dare the act of sins, whose filth excels
The blackest custom of blind infidels.
No, lov'd youth: he may of valour vaunt
Whom fortune's loudest thunder cannot daunt;
Whom fretful gales of chance, stern fortune's siege,
Makes not his reason slink, the soul's fair liege;
Whose well-pais'd action ever rests upon
Not giddy humours but discretion.
This heart in valour even Jove out-goes:


Jove is without, but this 'bove sense of woes:
And such a one, eternity.

(I. ii. 325–339; ed. A. H. Bullen)

Pandulpho utters similar sentiments in his confrontation with Piero in the next act (II.i.67–176); but unlike Shakespeare, Marston could not sustain this sort of conflict. In Act IV, Pandulpho reverses himself and joins with Antonio and Alberto in revenge against Piero (IV.ii.68 ff.). Chapman, in a later play, resolves this conflict only to introduce a more hopeless dilemma. In The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois, Clermont has pledged to the Ghost of his brother that he will take vengeance upon Montsurry, his murderer. Like Hamlet, he soon feels the burden of his vow, but in contemplating the alternatives of action and suffering Clermont is quite certain about which is the nobler course:

All worthy men should ever bring their blood
To bear all ill, not to be wreak’d with good:
Do ill for no ill... .

(III. ii. 113–115; ed. T. M. Parrott)

The vow itself he attributes to a temporary lapse from his stoical principles of conduct, during which his passions got the better of him. Presumably, the pledge is inviolable, and Clermont’s problem then becomes one of finding the noblest way to execute the revenge he cannot escape.

That Hamlet seriously contemplates a course of suffering is also shown by his praise of Horatio in III.ii. Once more the dramatic sequence of events is instructive. After the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet confronts Ophelia, “loosed” to him by her father, and the episode occasions a new outburst from the Prince that ends with his thinly disguised threat against the King’s life (III.i. 155–156). A few moments later, however, Hamlet reappears, calmly giving instructions to the players, after which he turns to his confidant:

Horatio, thou art e’en as just a man
As e’er my conversation cop’d withal... .

Dost thou hear?

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal’d thee for herself. For thou hast been
As one in suff’ring all, that suffers nothing;
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hast ta’en with equal thanks, and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

(III. ii. 59–79)

The contrast between Horatio's character and his own could scarcely be more pointed, for in his friend Hamlet sees the sort of person that he wishes he himself were: "one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing." The dramatic pertinence of these comments—or longings—is that they come immediately before Hamlet springs his "Mousetrap." As such, they show Hamlet's continued reluctance to accept the duty of revenge that the King's guilty behaviour presumably will require of him if the Gonzago play functions as planned. But however noble or otherwise attractive to him the course of suffering may appear, it is impossible for Hamlet to choose it. As he seems to recognize himself in the lines above, and in his second dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (III.ii.360 ff.), his blood and judgment are not so well commingled; he is indeed, at least at crucial moments of his experience, passion's slave, as in his castigation of Ophelia and, more tragically, in his murder of her father. But there is another important reason why Hamlet cannot refrain from some overt form of action as opposed to Christian forbearance. The Ghost has explicitly charged him with revenge, and whatever interim doubts Hamlet might have, both his initial response and his eventual experience of the Play Scene convince him that it is an "honest" Ghost, that vengeance is appropriately demanded. Before proceeding to analysis of the Ghost's specific commands and Hamlet's reaction to them, however, we should remember that while these commands seriously complicate Hamlet's motives, the Prince (unlike Chapman's Clermont) already has adequate grounds for action against his uncle. Before he ever sees or hears of the Ghost, Hamlet—and indeed the entire audience—knows that Claudius is guilty of one heavy offense and may be of another: he has joined with Gertrude in an incestuous marriage (a marriage whose sin is aggravated by its unseemly haste), and he has apparently stolen Hamlet's right to succeed his father, the dead King.

8 Harold Goddard (The Meaning of Shakespeare [Chicago, 1951], pp. 367–370) and Lawlor ("Tragic Conflict in Hamlet," RES, p. 110) both suggest that Hamlet may have wished to force Claudius into open confession of his guilt through the device of the play. Certainly he says as much at II. ii. 617–625; but that he expects this to obviate any necessity for blood revenge is doubtful from what follows: "I'll observe his looks; / I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench, / I know my course" (624–626). How well Hamlet will know his course is the later argument of this essay. See also H. R. Coursen, Jr., "That Within: Hamlet and Revenge," Bucknell Review, XI (May, 1963), 23.

9 Though scholars have argued that kings were elected to the Danish throne,
In both of these actions, moreover, Claudius has implicated the entire court:

> ... nor have we herein barr'd
> Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
> With this affair along. For all, our thanks.¹⁰

(I. ii. 14–16)

It is this recognition of the overwhelming odds against successfully opposing Claudius' actions, as well as his revulsion against the corruption of a court that tolerates such offenses, that prompts Hamlet's feelings of impotence. Again, the pollution theme can be traced back to the original story. Saxo's comment upon Feng's successful persuasion of the court is illustrative, but Belleforest's fuller comment is perhaps more to the point. In the translation of 1608 it reads: "... hee wanted no false witnesses to approove his act...; so that instead of pursuing him as a parricide and an incestuous person, al the courtyers admired and flattered him in his good fortune. ..."¹¹ The situation at the beginning of Shakespeare's play is not unlike this, and no wonder Hamlet concludes: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good. / But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue!" (I.ii.158–159). But when the Ghost appears at the end of this act and adds still further imperatives to action, they are such "excitements" to Hamlet's reason and his blood that, were it ever possible for him to remain silent and inactive, he feels he cannot do so now: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.189–190).

In one sense, then, the appearance of the Ghost is almost unnecessary; it serves mainly to contribute additional incentives to those Hamlet and indeed Hamlet later specifically refers to the election, we should remember that the play was presented to an Elizabethan audience, whose first thoughts would be of the natural succession of the son and heir to his father's throne, according to the laws of primogeniture enforced in England. See J. Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1951), pp. 26–32, and cf. Joseph, "Hamlet: A Christian Tragedy," SP, pp. 122 ff., and S. Warhaft, "The Mystery of Hamlet," ELH, XXX (1963), 201. Note also Claudius' suspicions of Hamlet's "ambition," as advanced by his spies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their first dialogue with the Prince (II.i.258 ff.).

¹⁰ Cf. Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, p. 29, and Warhaft, "The Mystery of Hamlet," ELH, p. 197, who also cite this passage.

already feels. In this way, as in their common use of garden imagery and other verbal echoes, Hamlet and the spirit of his father seem to be groping toward each other from the outset, as J. C. Maxwell has suggested.\textsuperscript{12} Horatio's news of the Ghost is nearly anticipated, in fact, by Hamlet's vision of his father in his "mind's eye" (I.ii.184–185). The Ghost has not yet spoken; but after hearing his friends' account, Hamlet rightly doubts some foul play (I.ii.256). He has, of course, no reason yet to suspect his uncle of murder, and the comment is necessarily vague; nevertheless, all of this, coupled to Hamlet's intense dislike and distrust of Claudius, provides the essential preparation for his climactic confrontation with the Ghost in Act I.

II

From this point of view we can well understand Hamlet's initial reaction to the Ghost's accusations against Claudius: "O my prophetic soul!" (I.v.40). Clearly, Shakespeare establishes an identity of feeling and attitude between the Prince and the spirit of his father that should raise some suspicions about Hamlet's later questioning of the Ghost's authenticity.\textsuperscript{13} Careful consideration of the Ghost's actual commands raises still further suspicions, for in them he says nothing that is not compatible with Hamlet's initial acceptance of his "honesty"—the only disclosure he makes to Horatio while Marcellus is still within earshot (I.v.138). What is it, then, that the Ghost demands?

As in his first appearance, the Ghost attempts to stimulate anxiety about his message, to get Hamlet alone, and to insure a sympathetic response. Only then does he give the charge to revenge his "foul and most unnatural murther" (I.v.25). The strategy works. Even before hearing the Ghost's story, Hamlet longs to "sweep" to his revenge. But what form of revenge? It is precisely here that the problem—for Hamlet as for the critics—becomes crucial. The Ghost's charge is explicit:

\begin{quote}
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
\end{quote}

This is his one positive call to action. Two negative injunctions follow:

\begin{quote}
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
\end{quote}


Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. (I.v. 82–88)

At no point in the entire dialogue does the Ghost say “Kill Claudius!” The omission is important, although some critics might argue that such a command would be a piece of supererogation: the Ghost has already twice called for revenge, and to anyone in Shakespeare’s audience this would seem to invoke the lex talionis, a life for a life. But, as noted above, vengeance of this kind had been strongly disapproved by the late sixteenth century. Popular feeling may have revelled in Hieronimo’s bloody revenges in The Spanish Tragedy, a play upon whose pagan spirit Christian doctrine only slightly impinges. But in Hieronimo’s soliloquy that begins “Vindicta mihi” (III.xiii), Shakespeare may have found another clue for the tragic conflict of Hamlet which opposes the chivalric code of honor to the Christian doctrine of charity. The conflict is also suggested by Belleforest, who takes several occasions to comment editorially upon the barbaric customs of the Danes. For example, at the very beginning of his narrative, he says:

You must understand, that long time before the kingdom of Denmark received the faith of Jesus Christ, and imbraced the doctrine of the Christians, that the common people in those days were barbarous and uncivil, and their princes cruel, without faith or loyalty, seeking nothing but murder, and deposing (or at the least) offending each other, either in honors, goods, or lives; not caring to ransom such as they took prisoners, but rather sacrificing them to the cruel vengeance naturally imprinted in their hearts [la cruelle vengeance, imprent naturellement en leurs ames].

The passage continues in this vein, inveighing against the wholesale attacks upon virtue by such heathens. In the next chapter Belleforest again picks up his theme, now with reference to Amleth and the revenge he contemplates against Fengon:

But when I speak of revenging any injury received upon a great personage or superior, it must be understood by such an one as is not our sovereign, against whom we maie by no means resist, nor once practise anie treason nor conspiracie against his life: and hee that will followe this course must speake and do all things whatsoever that are pleasing and acceptable to him whom hee meaneith to deceive, practise his actions, and esteeme him above all men, cleane contrarye to his owne intent and meaning; for that is rightly to playe and counterfeite the foole, when a man is constrained

14 Again Laertes, as a representative of this code, is Hamlet’s foil. But see Lawlor, The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare, pp. 48–52.
15 Gollancz, The Sources of Hamlet, p. 179.
to dissemble and kiss his hand, whom in heart he could wish an hundred foote depth under the earth, so he might never see him more, if it were not a thing wholly to bee disliked in a christian, who by no meanes ought to have a bitter gall, or desires infected with revenge.16

Belleforest later justifies Amleth's revenge against Fengon on two grounds: (1) the King is an usurper and therefore commands no loyalty; (2) "If vengeance seemed ever to have any shew of justice, it is then, when pietie and affection constraineth us to remember our fathers unjustly murdered."17 The same justification might also apply to Hamlet,18 except that this is really a secondary issue compared to the larger, all-pervasive one: should a Christian ever harbor thoughts of vengeance, and if so, what kind of vengeance? Belleforest merely scouts the question, at one place claiming that revenge is "a thing wholly to bee disliked in a christian," and at another apparently endorsing Amleth's destruction of Fengon and his court. Shakespeare does not engage in such evasion. Though his hero fails to sound the ultimate depths of his dilemma, a more explicit confrontation of his alternatives would ruin the play's dramatic intensity, as Professor Lawlor has shown in Chapman's The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois and Tourneur's The Atheist's Tragedy.19 Nevertheless, it is precisely these depths that provide for the greatest tragic conflict latent in the revenge theme, as Shakespeare saw.

To return to the Ghost's commands. If tragedy depends upon some kind of moral choice, then the hero must have at least the illusion of choice, and the audience some awareness that—however fated the hero is to choose falsely—some true choice, some right working out, is in fact there, if only to remain unseen or otherwise rejected by the protagonist. This is the basis for tragedy in Hamlet as it is in Oedipus; and it is this among other things that contributes to the awesomeness, or "wonder" as Horatio calls it (V.ii.374), that we feel at the end of the play, and that Bradley includes in his comment upon our "sense of waste."20 For Hamlet, there appears to be only the choice of doing or suffering ill, an illusion of choice because he is not the kind of man who can withstand those excitements of his reason and his blood that call upon him to act. For the audience, however, other choices remain that reveal the obverse side of tragedy—the reciprocal relationship, that is, through which So-

16 Ibid., p. 197. Cf. the last sentence in the original: "Si cela n'estoit du tout esloigné de la perfection du Chrestien, qui ne doit avoir le fiel amer, ni les desirs confits en vengeance" (Italics added).
I78 JAY L. HALIO

ocrates at the end of the Symposium connects both tragedy and comedy and shows them to be essentially one.

In Shakespeare's play one choice, as Sister Miriam Joseph has said, is for Hamlet to become the dispassionate avenger of the Lord, bringing justice to Denmark by killing the murderer, not in hatred, but in the kind of Christian charity which, according to Scripture and the Homilies, should accompany all acts of justice carried out by God's magistrates. Citing Renaissance moralists as well as St. Thomas Aquinas, she rightly points out how Hamlet violates the precepts on justice with charity and becomes a tragic hero in Christian terms. The crucial episode is the Prayer Scene. There Hamlet comes upon Claudius attempting to pray, and thinking that the king is repentant, decides not to kill him. This is Hamlet's first tragic error—not mistaking his uncle's unsuccessful penitence, but (more profoundly) desiring his damnation. Like any bloodthirsty avenger, Hamlet here wants to destroy not only Claudius' body, but his soul. This substitution of hatred for charity is almost immediately punished in the next scene by Hamlet's second error, the murder of Polonius.21

This argument, as put forward by Sister Miriam and others, supposes that Hamlet has no other alternative in enacting the Ghost's commands but to become the scourge of God and kill the sinful Claudius. But surely this view is premature—according to both Christian theology and the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Killing Claudius would be, after all, the ultimate form of vengeance, understood as God's punishment for mortal sins. But God desires the reform of the sinner, not his death. "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). Up to the concluding lines of the Prayer Scene, there is no reason to assume that Claudius is totally incapable of amendment. On the contrary, the very fact that he attempts to pray must nullify that assumption. Moreover, the posture of repentance could hardly be clearer to Hamlet, who with terrible irony explicitly regrets to find Claudius thus. Even earlier,

in his aside before the Nunnery Scene (III.i.49–54), Claudius reveals himself as no hardened villain—though he becomes one later and may then be given up as lost. This is the point: had Hamlet observed the calling of a Christian to return ill not with ill, but with good, he might not have plunged himself—and all of the principal characters—into the course of tragic catastrophe.

The other and prior alternative open to Hamlet, which he fails to perceive, blinded as he is by his hatred for his uncle, is one that would require no blood spilling at all. Furthermore, it would fulfill all of the commandments of the Ghost. It involves ministering to Claudius in the same way that Hamlet ministers to his mother—after it is too late, after he has already violated both of the Ghost's negative injunctions and, in fact, has required the Ghost's intercession in the Closet Scene to prevent him from doing worse. Hamlet fails to perceive this alternative because it is one impossible for a man of Hamlet's temperament to grasp and—this may be the point—impossible for any human being who is not a saint to carry out. For if we regard the tragedy in its basic human terms, Shakespeare is radically opposing the inclinations of men to satisfy their natural lusts—including the lust for revenge—against the claims that Christianity makes upon us to overcome the temptations that flesh is heir to and become saints. Specifically, in Hamlet, this claim is, in the words of the Homilies, "to love every man, good and evil, friend and foe; and whatsoever cause be given to the contrary, yet nevertheless to bear goodwill and heart unto every man, to use ourselves well unto them, as well in word and countenance, as in all our outward acts and deeds . . ." (Italics added).22

Now loving one's enemy does not mean loving the offense in him that makes him our enemy. On the contrary, it is a function of love to hate the offense even as one cherishes the offender. In more relevant terms, to quote St. Thomas, "it is our duty to hate, in the sinner, his being a sinner, and to love in him, his being a man capable of bliss; and this is to love him truly, out of charity, for God's sake."23 For Hamlet to set things right in Denmark would mean, first, casting out the sin that has

22 "Of Charity," p. 56. Following these words are quotations from the Sermon on the Mount and several commentaries upon Christ's own example in loving his enemies and persecutors. See also Romans 12:14–21, and cf. Bryant, Hippolyta's View, p. 135: "What Shakespeare has done here is to take a bloody fable of a barbaric and pagan world and hold it up to the norm that makes possible the Christian view of man's situation as tragic; in it we see not only what we are but the potential perfection which we have missed, marred, or otherwise turned willfully away from."

polluted the realm—hating the sin, certainly, but not hating the sinner in so far as he is "a man capable of bliss." Up to the end of the Prayer Scene Claudius does appear capable of repentance and reformation and therefore of bliss. "Try what repentance can," he says. "What can it not?" (III.iii.65). As he bows his stubborn knees to pray, he cries, "Help, angels! Make assay!" But instead of an angel or any minister of grace—the Prince's proper function here—Hamlet enters, malevolently thirsting after his uncle's damnation.

It will be argued, however, that the Ghost has called for revenge (I.v.25), and that his references to Claudius, "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (42), scarcely suggest much affectionate regard. On the other hand, he shows the greatest concern for his country ("Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest") and for his son ("Taint not thy mind"). Though the Ghost is human enough to detest Claudius, he does not long for his blood, or for the risks that Hamlet would run in shedding it. He is at a far remove from the "filthy whining ghost" screaming for revenge "like a pig half sticked" satirized in A Warning for Fair Women. The preoccupations of this ghost are quite different. So, too, are Hamlet's, whose conflicting attitudes towards revenge are epitomized even as he urges the Ghost to tell his story:

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge. (I. v. 29–31; italics added)

These considerations come together in the alternative to killing Claudius which would fulfill all of the requirements of the Ghost's commands without simultaneously violating the precepts of Christianity to do good to one's enemies. Claudius' repentance, as Claudius well knows (III.iii.52–60), must result in breaking up the royal bed. At the same time, it would also involve a large measure of vengeance, but Divine Vengeance, not the kind typified by Laertes or, worse, Hamlet's diabolical contemplations in the Prayer Scene. For vengeance, understood in Christian terms, means fit punishment. The intention of punishment is not to harm, but to remove the harm done, and where possible to bring

24 On the nature of the Ghost in Hamlet see Robert H. West, "King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost," PMLA, LXX (1955), 1107–1117. West reviews the scholarship on this subject up to the time of his article and makes incisive comments upon the opposite views of Roy Battenhouse and I. J. Semper. Although sympathetic to West, I feel that too much importance has been given to the identity of the Ghost and not enough to its actual dramatic function in the play, which is to complicate a problem that already exists before its appearance, and further to serve as a kind of red herring for Hamlet's troubled conscience.
about the amendment of the sinner. Besides the familiar exhortations to Christians to exercise justice with mercy, there are specific prohibitions throughout the Judaic-Christian ethical tradition against excessive or cruel and brutal punishment. Finally, according to St. Thomas, “punishment may be considered as a medicine, not only healing the past sin, but also preserving from future sin, or conducing to some good . . .” (ST, II–II, Q. 108, A. 4).

Hamlet fails to medicine Claudius’s sin, for the reasons already given, and he does so not without perhaps some oblique awareness of what his proper function should be, even before the culminating ironies of the Closet Scene. Soon after the King rises during the play within the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern re-enter to report that Claudius is “marvellous distemper’d” (III.ii.312). Hamlet’s punning retorts convey more than their usual crafty madness: “Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to the doctor; for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler” (316–319). But Hamlet is, or should be, the physician to Denmark, and it is not only the King who, later, ironically misconstrues his disease and its cure. To Claudius’ bloody meditation, “Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me” (IV.iii.67–69), we should compare Hamlet’s concluding comment in the Prayer Scene: “This physic but prolongs thy sickly days” (III.iii.96). Hamlet has given Claudius no true physic, and Claudius’ own attempt to “purge” himself by killing Hamlet leads eventually to the tragic consequences of the concluding episode.

There is yet another aspect to the Ghost’s call to vengeance compatible with every restriction mentioned. By moving his uncle to repentance, Hamlet would not only end the incest contaminating the royal bed, but in the process inflict the severest pain upon Claudius. For without Gertrude, Claudius would miss the most valued of the prizes he has sought—“My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen” (III.iii.55). He confesses as much to Laertes, when he explains why he hesitated to act against Hamlet:

O, for two special reasons,
Which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinew’d,
But yet to me they are strong. The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself,—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which,—
She’s so conjunctive to my life and soul

That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her. (IV. vii. 9–16)

Though elsewhere Claudius is deceitful in his dealings with Laertes, this has the ring of truth. It exactly matches his solicitude for Gertrude and his tenderness toward her (as at IV.v.76–96)—the woman whom he has brought down "the primal eldest curse" upon himself to possess. Separating Claudius from Gertrude, therefore, would be vengeance enough for any honest Ghost. Moreover, it would be in strict accord with the key passage of Romans 12: 19–21: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him: if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." In the Prayer Scene, Hamlet fails to give place to wrath, to overcome evil with good. Instead of heaping coals of fire upon Claudius' head, he heaps them upon his own.

III

Both Hamlet's mistake and his proper mode of action are demonstrated in the Closet Scene. Having uncovered Claudius' guilt by the device of the play a short while before, Hamlet exults. Horatio's attempts to temper his jubilation are ineffectual, as Rosencrantz and

---

26 I do not mean to suggest that when he addresses his son in Act I the Ghost has Claudius' repentance specifically in mind, though perhaps Shakespeare may have had. It remains, nevertheless, among the more important choices open to Hamlet. The choice of specific action is left up to him: "Howsoever thou pursuest this act . . ." This follows the tradition of other plays, which places the burden of devising a suitable revenge upon the avenger, as in Antonio's Revenge (III.i.48). But such impositions usually signify little more than a test of the avenger's ingenuity and the bloodiness of his imagination and are often accompanied by admonishments quite different from those of Old Hamlet. "Remember this," says Andrugio's Ghost as he departs from Antonio: "Sceletae non vulcisceris, nisi vincis" (50–51; from Seneca's Thyestes, 194–195). Shakespeare differs from Marston and the others by suggesting a deeper ambiguity underlying his Ghost's remark, one that points again to Shakespeare's merging into the spectre of Old Hamlet the vengeful ghost of the Senecan-Kyd tradition and the benevolent ghosts of Christian lore. For the story of such a benevolent ghost, see e.g. Lewes Lavater, Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night, ed. (from second edition of 1572) with an Introduction and Appendix by J. Dover Wilson and May Yardly (Oxford, 1929), p. 155.

27 "Coals of fire must . . . mean, as most commentators since Augustine have said, 'the burning pangs of shame,' which a man will feel when good is returned for evil, and which may produce remorse and penitence and contrition" (Rev. William Sanday and Rev. Arthur C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, 2nd ed. [Edinburgh, 1896], p. 365). Cf. also the episodes of David's sparing Saul's life in I Samuel 24 (esp. v. 17) and 26.
Guildenstern enter and fan his passion. Summoned by his mother, Hamlet pauses briefly in soliloquy:

Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (III. ii. 408–410)

Indeed he could—and does—in the next two scenes, as he acts out in his heart not only the death, but the tortures of damnation that he would heap upon his enemy’s soul. Thus Hamlet violates the first condition of the Ghost’s revenge: “Taint not thy mind.” He continues on to his mother’s chamber, having resolved to “speak daggers to her, but use none” (III.ii.414). Taken unawares, he rashly stabs the intruder behind the arras, whom he assumes to be the very man he has just left at his prayers. The multiple ironies of the Prayer Scene are completed now as Hamlet’s malevolent desires, so quickly fulfilled (or so he at first believes), rebound upon his own head:

. . . heaven hath pleas’d it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me. . . .

(III. iv. 173–174)

These words, however, express maturer reflections. Undaunted by his murder of Polonius, Hamlet at once proceeds to violate the second condition of the Ghost’s revenge and tasks his mother with her sinful and possibly criminal conduct:

A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

(28–29)

“Leave her to heaven,” the spirit of his father had commanded, “And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (I.v. 86–88). Why? Dover Wilson (pp. 249 ff.) believes the reason is to protect Gertrude from too heavy a burden of shame and guilt, and when Hamlet gets close to revealing the fact of his father’s murder, the Ghost must intervene. This tender concern on the Ghost’s part, however, overlooks the Ghost’s prior and surely primary concern for his son. By contriving aught against Gertrude, Hamlet’s heart might indeed lose its nature and let the soul of Nero enter (III.ii.411–412). In the Closet Scene, he in fact gets dangerously close to losing all natural respect and affection for his mother. He has already dispatched Polonius and is working himself into a frenzy of wrath against her. But following the other alternative and helping Claudius to repentance would obviate the necessity of any action against the Queen: she could then be left to
Heaven. The reverse procedure does not follow: a repentant Gertrude could not be relied upon. Her frailty has already been amply demonstrated. The witchcraft of Claudius' wit would very likely overmaster her strongest resolve to abstain from further sin; specifically, from Claudius' bed. And the breaking up of that incestuous union is the one task that the Ghost unequivocally commanded Hamlet to perform.

It is quite clear that in the flush of his success in the Play Scene Hamlet has forgotten the first of the Ghost's negative injunctions, and when his mother summons him to her closet he is moved further to violate the second one. Called on to account for his behavior to the King, he instead demands that his mother answer for her behavior with the King. Significantly, the mirror image used earlier to the actors (III.ii.22 ff.) reappears here, when Hamlet holds another mirror up to nature—his mother's nature—to show her what she has become; by so doing he tries now to catch her conscience. But as Gertrude openly confesses her guilt, Hamlet again allows himself to be carried away. He vents his wrath, and only the last appearance of the Ghost stops him. This extremely short dialogue, though problematic in meaning, is crucial to our understanding of what has happened so far, and what has not happened. Hamlet asks the Ghost:

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, laps'd in time and passion, lets go by
Th' important acting of your dread command?
O, say! (III. iv. 106-109)

As several commentators have remarked, the question seems curiously at odds with what we have recently observed. The play that Hamlet has staged, his soliloquy upon the kneeling King, the murder of Polonius, the shending of Gertrude: these do not correspond to someone "laps'd in time and passion." The qualifying phrase excepted, however, the rest of the question is vitally appropriate, for Hamlet has indeed in the Prayer Scene let go by the important acting of the Ghost's command. Clearly the best time to have confronted Claudius—or, as I have argued, to have moved him to repentance, and in this way break up the royal bed of Denmark—was when Hamlet found the King alone and trying to pray. But Hamlet then was given over to wrath, just as he is now. Hence, he requires some reminder of what the Ghost had earlier warned him against:

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. (110–115)

When Hamlet does again speak to her, his tone changes from invective to concern and eventually to fervent supplication:

Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infests unseen. Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. (144–152)

As Sister Miriam Joseph has said, Hamlet here gives his mother “sound spiritual advice, urging her to remedy the sinful state of her soul by taking three necessary steps to reconciliation with God—confession, contrition, and a firm purpose of amendment” (p. 135).28 Precisely: but she fails to note that it might have been given earlier, in the preceding scene, to Claudius, who seems already to be taking the first steps. Then all might have been well. However Claudius would have reacted to such charity—whether he would have completed his repentance—Hamlet’s own soul would have been free. But charity would have required the action of a saint, such is the tragic burden of the play. Much of this argument seems to be implicit though unrecognized, ironically, by Hamlet in his parting words to the Ghost:

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. Then what I have to do
Will want true colour—tears perchance for blood.
(127–130)

Since the Ghost has asked Hamlet to have compassionate regard for his mother, maintaining these “stern effects” cannot refer to her. They may only refer to Claudius. Again, Hamlet misses the point: the Ghost does not ask for blood. “Tears”—tears of penitence—“perchance for blood” are exactly what is required. Though Hamlet has killed Polonius, and for this same lord he does repent, the course of bloody action need go no further. When Prospero, in Shakespeare’s last play, reflects upon

though those who have been his enemies, he makes this point explicit, and the phrasing serves almost to point a commentary upon Hamlet:

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
Yet with my nobler reason ’gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. (The Tempest, V. i. 25–30)

But we need not go to the end of Shakespeare’s career to demonstrate his awareness of this alternative to vengeance. Professor Lawlor has shown how Shakespeare rejected the revenge theme in favor of the forgiveness of enemies when he fashioned Measure for Measure from Whetstone’s Promos and Cassandra. To this evidence we may add Orlando’s treatment of Oliver in As You Like It, another play closer in time to the composition of Hamlet. Again, as in Hamlet, the conflict derives from the actions of an “unnatural” brother (AYL, IV.iii.123, 125); but for Orlando the real crisis comes when he sees Oliver asleep in the forest and wreathed about by a serpent, which glides away (significantly) at his approach, only to reveal another threat—a starving lioness. Although Orlando might have left his elder brother as “food to the suck’d and hungry lioness”—a possibility that Rosalind explicitly queries—the outcome is different. As Oliver describes it:

Twice did he turn his back and purpos'd so.
But kindness, nobler even than revenge,
And nature, stronger than his just occasion,
Made him give battle to the lioness,
Who quickly fell before him. . . .

(IV. iii. 128–132; italics added)

Oliver’s repentance follows directly, nor is it too much to see in this episode the emblem or prototype of Hamlet’s dilemma, here clearly perceived and happily resolved. As in Measure for Measure and The Tempest, the alternatives of “virtue” and “kindness” provide for the comic obverse of Shakespeare’s tragedy of revenge. Their potentialities are implicit in Hamlet, but for reasons both psychologically and dramatically sound, Shakespeare never permits them to become explicitly formulated by his protagonist.


Many other Elizabethan dramatists recognized the alternative to blood re-
venge that is implicit in Hamlet's conflict. Even Marston, whose *Antonio's Revenge* would lead us to expect otherwise, shows in *The Malcontent* how a bloody and tragic outcome may be averted. In this play the repentance of the usurper, Pietro, becomes the key not only to his own salvation, but the means through which his wife, the dissolute and cast-off Aurelia, is led from despair into a similar penitence (IV.v). Although Altofronte at first conceives a "revenge most deep," a soul-killing revenge against Pietro (L.iii.196 ff.; ed. Bullen), his later actions are not consistent with these motives; indeed, he is a prime mover of repentance in the malefactors. Far from poisoning their souls, he medicines them. The action of Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (though less obviously a tragicomedy) likewise aims at the remorse, not blood, of the trespasser. Mr. Frankford's "revenge" takes the form of an unusual bequest upon his adulterous wife, which—however cruel its conditions seem to modern readers—must have seemed to the original audience a noble magnanimity and a heaping of coals upon Anne's head. Certainly it seems so to the other characters in the play, including Anne's brother, Sir Francis Acton (V.iv.16–22; ed. H. Spenser). This action, then, leads directly to the repentance of the sinner and to the final reconciliation of husband and wife. Truly penitent, Anne Frankford dies, forgiven on earth and anticipating a similar pardon in heaven.

Although Montsurry's repentance is never an issue in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, his reformation of character at the end is of the utmost significance. Deciding that a duel would be the most honorable way to execute his revenge, Clermont at last confronts the evasive and cowardly murderer of his brother. His compelled valor at first despised, Montsurry eventually wins approval and even admiration as he rises in stature before his noble opponent. Finally, as he lies dying, Montsurry exchanges forgiveness with both Clermont and his wife, Tamrya. He has indeed become both "noble and Christian," as Clermont says, and "for all faults found in him before, / These words, this end, makes full amends and more" (V.v.114–115; ed. T. M. Parrott). To this extent, at least, Clermont succeeds in returning good for ill by converting his victim from the contemptible coward that he once was.

But although Clermont quits himself as honorably as possible, the play ends tragically. The hero's suicide, however, should not be understood as merely the working out of an arbitrary formula that dictates the death of the avenger (see Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, p. 184). As in many another revenge play, the death of the hero is a direct function of his commitment to blood vengeance, although complications of the plot may tend to obscure this point. In Chapman's play the Guise is killed just as Clermont is preparing to confront Montsurry in their long-deferred duel. After the duel takes place the news of his patron's death becomes the immediate cause for Clermont's suicide, or, in the full dramatic context, direct retribution for his commitment to blood vengeance, of "ill for ill," no matter how nobly executed.

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* reveals further illuminating parallels and contrasts to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The revenge that Ferdinand and the Cardinal take against their sister contains within it, as in the case of Ferdinand's lycanthropy, retribution enough; but still more revealing are the events that occur after Antonio's decision to confront the Cardinal. Antonio plans to visit his brother-in-law at midnight in his chamber, as Ferdinand had earlier visited the Duchess in hers; but unlike Ferdinand, Antonio is bent on reconciliation, not vengeance. To further his success, he hopes to find the Cardinal at prayers (V.i.75–79; iv.48–49; ed. F. L. Lucas); and, indeed, the Cardinal would be praying then. Like Claudius he has suffered an affliction of his conscience, but like Claudius, too, the devil has robbed his heart of any confidence in prayer (V.iv.30–32). In the meantime Bosola, the villain-turned-revenger, pretends to accept the Cardinal's commission to murder Antonio the better to protect him from the vicious Prelate. How all of these good
purposes are thwarted becomes the tragic emphasis of this play, whose recurrent note of despair, as in the final speeches of Antonio and Bosola, markedly contrasts with the conclusion of Hamlet. Antonio never gets his opportunity to confront the Cardinal, for cutting across his path comes Bosola, who, thinking to join with Antonio in “a most just revenge” (V.ii.77), mistakes both Antonio’s intent and his person, and stabs him to death thinking he is the Cardinal. Thus, like Hamlet, he brings retribution upon himself for his vengeful thoughts by killing the wrong man; but the irony is more bitter since Antonio is now more dear to Bosola than Polonius ever was to Hamlet.

*University of California
  Davis*