Two Key Speeches by Hamlet
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Professor Hardin Craig has described the scene (III, iii, 73f.) in which Hamlet refuses to kill the King at prayer as "the crucial passage in the interpretation of Hamlet's character." Professor Fredson Bowers has stated that the lines spoken just after the death of Polonius "contain perhaps the clearest analysis Hamlet makes of his predicament."

From the first assumption has stemmed a large and provocative store of criticism; from the latter, Professor Bowers' own convincing solution to the problem of both Hamlet's delay and the ultimate destruction of the hero in the tragic catastrophe. In my opinion, these two passages are closely linked by an Elizabethan concept of revenge which may be cited to synthesize important observations on the character of Hamlet.

Comments upon the speech mentioned by Professor Craig provide a revealing epitome of two centuries of Shakespearean criticism. Since the early nineteenth century, the issue aroused by remarks of Hamlet during the prayer scene has been essentially a question of whether his words are to be taken at face value or considered mere rationalization springing from a weakness of his will. Romantic interpretations of Hamlet as a procrastinator readily displaced earlier revulsions against a hero who sought the spiritual destruction of his enemy. Critics of the early twentieth century suggested repugnance aroused in Hamlet by the prospects of attacking an unarmed man. Psychological critics probing his repressed desires have stressed a sense of guilt which reminds Hamlet that he is no better than the murderer whom he must punish. Some recent scholars, who have examined Elizabethan writings for more insight into theories of revenge, have called attention to both views and narrative traditions which demand a soul for a soul as well as a body for a body.

Before the appearance of Professor Bowers' article, comments on the closet scene emphasized little except the idea that the death of Polonius places Hamlet in the power of King Claudus. Bowers himself has examined Elizabethan concepts of scourge and minister. A scourge is an agent, already condemned because of his personal corruption, whom God uses to punish evil. Motivated by private desires, the scourge chooses his own time to act. A minister is an agent, not corrupted as is the scourge, chosen by God to establish some public good. The minister awaits God's time to do an act of public justice. Anticipating God's appointed time to act, Hamlet the scourge murders Polonius. Only after he has made this mistake, which he wisely avoided while the King was praying, is Hamlet ready to surrender fully to the will of Heaven.

Now if the idea that Hamlet ultimately acts as a minister of God is correct, the following passage from Two Guides to a Good Life will help explain his attitude in both the prayer scene and the closet scene. It will also provide more insight into his subsequent rôle as an agent for good. The author, probably Bishop Hall, objected to private revenge, First, because God hath said vindicta mihi, vengeance is mine, and therefore it is rebellion to offer to pull this privilege out of his hands.

And secondly, because it is a great part of folly and injustice, to thinke ve [we] are reuenged of an iniurye, when wee haue punnished the body of him that [that] offered it, knowing the soule and affections are the chiefe cause (which are out of our reach) and the body but the soules instrument, and therefore he that in
furie and rage tyranizeth ouer the
body for anye offense is offered him,
doeth as the dog, that bites the
stone, and suffers him that caste
it, to passe away untoucht.3

Hamlet has proved the testimony of
the Ghost and now has ample evidence
of the King's guilt. In fact, Hamlet be-
comes aware that the Ghost, revisiting
the earth with divine permission, has
commanded him to act as an agent ap-
pointed by God both to punish a crimi-
nal and to reestablish public justice. If
he must kill for personal reasons mainly,
wisdom above that of a dog would de-
mand complete revenge—both the physi-
cal destruction and the spiritual damna-
tion of his enemy. The risk of self-
damnation is too great for him to be
content with anything less. Professor
Bowers explains that Hamlet, after his
return from the sea, has undergone a
manifest change which signifies that he
has accepted the rôle of acting as an
instrument of divine justice.

This point granted, it then becomes
apparent that in finally acting for God,
Hamlet returns the privilege of venge-
ance to the one to whom it belongs. Thus
through his delay until he can kill the
King publically, as well as while he is
in the toils of additional crimes, Hamlet
fulfills both conditions of revenge as it
is analyzed in Two Guides to a good
Life. The killing of the King then be-
comes a wise pursuit of vengeance. Even
so, Hamlet himself must die as expiration
for the death of Polonius, for that death
occurred because of an act which may
be appropriately labeled Hamlet's rebel-
liion against a law of God.

The quotation from Two Guides to a
good Life strengthens a historical per-
spective against which one may interpret
Hamlet. Any assumptions that Hamlet
would, first, be satisfied with less than
total vengeance while acting for personal
reasons and, second, act contrary to a
conviction which he has accepted as a
divinely appointed mission for his life
are unwarranted interpretations of an
Elizabethan point of view. Moreover, to
consider the death of Hamlet harsh or
wasteful of the good is to challenge the
basis of Elizabethan morality itself, the
total responsibility of an individual for
the consequences of any act which he
hazards.

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NOTES
1The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed.
2"Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," PMLA,
LXX (Sept., 1955), 740.
3Two Guides to a good Life: The Genealogy
of Vertue and The nathomy of Sinne (London,
1604), E5v-E6.