REVENGE, HONOR, AND CONSCIENCE IN *HAMLET*

By Harold Skulsky

IT HAS ALWAYS struck me as rather curious that the ghost should begin its final instructions to the Prince of Denmark with the words: "But howsomever thou pursues this act" (I.v. 84).[1] This evasive "howsomever" serves to point up the fact that the ghost has been disobliging enough to leave the task of defining revenge squarely up to Hamlet. The play, however, taken as a whole, is rather more obliging; for it illustrates two popular alternatives—the law of the talon and the code of honor, we may call them—either of which Hamlet might well choose. It will repay us to consider the light in which these are exhibited to Hamlet, and to us, before looking at the terms in which Hamlet eventually defines his mission, thereby resolving the ambiguity to his own satisfaction.

I

Strictly considered, the principle of the talon is not very aptly described as a law at all, for its essential motive is not obligation but will, and the satisfaction it seeks is limited neither by reciprocity nor, for that matter, by any other standard. What the talon lusts after is nothing less than the total destruction of the hated object and of all that can be identified with it. This "all," of course, will normally have its posthumous element. In a culture without a clear concept of damnation or of an immortal soul substantial enough to be worth the damning, the self may still be thought of as surviving, and vulnerable, in its lineal posterity. Aristotle's argument for a degree of misfortune after death is a celebrated case in point;[2] and the archetypal avenger in this sense will be a figure like the Virgilian Pyrrhus of the Player's Speech, for whom all Troy—"fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" (II.ii.462)—is a single hated extension of his own father's murderer. The indiscriminate bloody-mindedness of Pyrrhus' kind of revenge is faithfully reproduced in another Renaissance imitation, the brutal Rodomonte's atrocities at the siege of Paris:

> But Rodomont whose men consum'd with fire,
> Do fill their masters mind with double rage,
> Yet to avenge their deaths doth so desire,
> As nought but blood his thirst of blood can
> swage: . . .
> He kils alike the sinner and the good,
> The reverend father and the harmlesse child,
> He spils alike the yong and aged blood,
> With widowes, wives, and virgins undefil'd.[3]

Even in a pagan, Rodomonte's homage to grief was barely explicable to Ariosto, much less excusable. For Shakespeare's audience, one strongly suspects, a Christian Prince of Denmark could embrace the law of the talon only by forfeiting all claim to sympathy. It is instructively ironic, in this connection, that the passage in which Hamlet castigates his failure to speak out should be so closely parallel in cadence to the passage in which the Player describes the only failure to act of which a votary of the talon is capable:

> Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
> Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing. (II.ii.569–572)

> So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
> And like a neutral to his will and matter,
> Did nothing. (ll. 484–486)

But for the example of Pyrrhus, it would have been far easier to agree with Hamlet's estimate of John-a-dreams. In the Greek warrior even hesitation is no sign of conscience, only of surprise at the shuddering of Troy, which

> with a hideous crash
> Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear.
>
> after Pyrrhus' pause,
> A roused vengeance sets him new awork.
> (ll. 480–481, 491–492)

Better to "peak" like a John-a-dreams who retains some moral awareness than be "roused" to the insensibility of a Pyrrhus.

But the deeper irony of the passage exemplifies, as often in the play, the difficulty of penetrating the mind at the back of an utterance: where Hamlet, for reasons of dramaturgical symmetry cogently argued by Harry Levin,[4] may well be moved to tears because he sees in Priam "a dear father murder'd" (l. 587) and in Pyr-

[1] The text of *Hamlet* from which I quote is the Cambridge edition, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, Eng., 1936). The present essay was written before the appearance of Eleanor Prosser's study *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, 1967), to which some of my observations and working assumptions are parallel in tendency, though the frame of reference and the conclusions differ radically.

[2] *Ethica Nicomachea*, 1100[a] 18–21, 1101[a] 22sq., 1101[b] 5–9. Cf. Pindar, Ol. VIII. 77–80.

[3] *Sir John Harington's translation of* Orlando Furioso, ed. Graham Hough (Carbondale, Ill., 1962), p. 178.

[4] *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), pp. 141–164.

rhus, consequently, the uncle who did the deed, the spectator with even a smattering of Virgil could probably be relied on to recognize Pyrrhus as the son of Achilles, "of a dear father murder'd," quite specifically bent on the "vengeance" (l. 492) for which Hamlet cries out (l. 585) at the turning point of his meditation on the Player's Speech. And Hamlet himself reinforces the latter identification. For it is to this vengeance without bounds, vengeance by total destruction, that the Prince at a crucial point commits himself. The only difference is that the totality has been reinterpreted in a new and terrible Christian sense:

> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
> At game, a-swearing, or about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't
> Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damned and black
> As hell whereto it goes; my mother stays,
> This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.
> (III.iii.89–96)[5]

Hamlet is devoted, at this point at least, to the death of his uncle's soul; and the devotion is not ennobling. His idea of mercy as a physic to prolong disease is a grotesque parody of the medicinal function traditionally ascribed to equitable punishment, a function performed by Hamlet himself in rebuking his mother. And it need hardly be added that Pyrrhus' rage bears no resemblance to any rule of conduct that would make it even tolerable to the audience. For if vengeance beyond the grave has nothing in common with classic penal justice, it is equally irreconcilable with the straightforward evening of scores prescribed by the Old Testament: "The reuenger of the blood himselfe shall slay the murtherer: when hee meeteth him, he shall slay him" (Num. xxxv.19).[6] No lying in wait, here, for the murderer's soul. Indeed, from the Christian point of view, even Laertes' promise "to cut his throat i'th' church" (IV.vii.125), however sacrilegious, is less of a sin against the Holy Ghost than Hamlet's object in *not* cutting Claudius' throat at his *prie-dieu*. And there could be little doubt in the pious mind where such desires originate. As the good Sir Thomas Browne observes: "Our bad wishes and uncharitable desires proceed no further than this Life; it is the Devil, and the uncharitable votes of Hell, that desire our misery in the world to come."[7] And the affinity between Hamlet's aims and Pyrrhus' is not only disagreeable but a little out of character. For the Prince, in his directions to Polonius on the treatment of the players, has revealed that he is no stranger to the precept of charity, and his rejoinder to Laertes—

> LAERT. The devil take thy soul.
> HAML. Thou pray'st not well.
> (v.i.253)

—shows him quite capable of deploring a malign purpose like his own. More than this, on reflection he comes near to seeing the similarity: "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" (v.ii.77–78).

In view of the "portraiture" Hamlet himself claims to have recognized, there is something rather ominous about the result of Laertes' single effort at penetrating another mind. For Laertes is forced by Ophelia's madness to botch her words up to fit his own thoughts (IV.v.10), as Hamlet is, to a degree, by the ghost's ambiguities; and his conclusion is the same: "Hadst thou thy wits, and didst *persuade revenge*, / It could not move thus" (ll. 168–169). A little later Ophelia presents her brother with a symbolic appeal equivalent to the ghost's "adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me"; Laertes is given "rosemary, that's for remembrance—pray you, love, remember" (ll. 174–175). But what is to be understood by remembrance, in both cases, is an open question, and Ophelia's speech, at least, leads one of the two aspirant revengers to an unwarranted conclusion; for in the excitement of "botching up" what he wants to hear, Laertes contrives to ignore the only words his sister utters that have any clear bearing on the issue he ought to be facing: "God ha' mercy on his soul— / And of all Christian souls I pray God" (ll. 199–200). An odd way to "persuade revenge," or even to suggest it. Especially the insatiable revenge of which Pyrrhus is a type, the revenge that, in Claudius' ironic endorsement, "should have no bounds" (IV.vii.127).

II

But one need not, perhaps, go quite so far as Pyrrhus. There is always the possibility of being prompted to revenge, not by anarchic hatred, but by fidelity to a code of honor coolly indifferent to the emotional excesses of the aggrieved party. Such indifference would be distinctly more rational than the talon—if it did not extend to the nature of the grievance itself. Laertes, for example, finds no embarrassment at all in claiming to be undecided whether Hamlet's plea

[5] For a different view see Levin, p. 147.

[6] All Biblical quotations are taken from the Geneva Bible.

[7] *The Works of the Learned Sir Thomas Brown, Kt.* (London, 1686), II (1685), 38. (See Kenelm Digby's "observation," p. 78.)

of innocence, though valid in *nature*, may still be unacceptable to *honor*:

> I am satisfied in nature,
> Whose motive in this case should stir me most
> To my revenge, but in my terms of honour
> I stand aloof, and will no reconcilement,
> Till by some elder masters of known honour
> I have a voice and precedent of peace,
> To keep my name ungored. (v.ii.242–248)

Such an anomaly, oddly enough, is in perfect accord with the definition of honor laid down by such courtly "masters" as Laertes might be expected to consult. By this definition honor does not inhere in the intrinsic merit either of action or of agent; instead it is a quasi-legal fiction regulated by analogy with the law of property and, to a degree, of commercial credit. "There is no difference," Possevino tells us in his eclectic *Dialogue on Honor*, "between someone who presses for his honor and someone who presses for his goods, or for anything else he owns."

This fiction is reflected in the debt of *duello* to the terminology of Roman law; thus the challenger in a cause of honor is the *actor*, the plaintiff in a suit for the restitution of alienated property, and the person challenged is the *reus*, the defendant in such a suit. Since the commodity under litigation is fictitious and possession is nine points of the law, the author of the graver insult both dispossesses his rival and imposes on him the burden of proving his right of ownership. Normally, reciprocity will be sufficient "proof," but the sole exception is revealing: when a man has been given the lie, he has effectively been debarred from answering in kind; he has lost his credit, and his assertions will not pass current. "The dishonored are powerless to dishonor." In this case the *actor* has no recourse but to shift the balance of injury in his own favor by outdoing his enemy: "Verbal insult is removed, and one's opponent burdened, by giving the lie; the lie is removed by the slap; the slap by the blow; and the blow by death." But even with injuries that lend themselves more readily to a clarification of the truth—"che hanno pruova sufficiente"—outdoing will obviously be the more effective remedy; so much so that in Possevino's account the inadequacy of turnabout is virtually taken for granted. The victim of a blow will remain in the unenviable position of a plaintiff or would-be creditor "until he has taken away the injury received *and inflicted another more serious*." Thus the logic of the gentleman's code leads to the same kind of infinite regress as the lust of the talon. In both cases the successive actions at "law," the oscillations of the burden of "proof," continue until the winner secures his honor by inflicting on the loser an injury that cannot be overgone. Our grievance, in Laertes' words, "shall be paid with weight, / till our scale turn the beam" (IV.v.156–157). Striking a balance will not serve, or not so well. Laertes, it would seem, is amply justified in drawing a sharp distinction in "terms" between the law of honor and that of nature.[8]

If honor has its jurisprudence, it has its economics as well, and for the same reason: what is being contested is an alienable commodity. This view, it should be understood, cannot be written off as mere cynicism, like Falstaff's "I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought."[9] On the contrary, it is, as we have seen, the basis of the code, unmistakably if tacitly acknowledged in the imagery of Hal's pledge to his father:

> Percy is but my factor, good my lord,
> To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf,
> And I will call him to so strict account
> That he shall render every glory up,
> Yea even the slightest worship of his time—
> Or I will tear the reckoning from his heart.[10]

Hotspur's accumulated honor is the "commodity of good names" that Hal will proceed to "engross," and when the time comes the loser will fully agree with his rival that "budding honors" are the kind of things one can "crop": "I better brook the loss of brittle life / than those proud titles thou hast won of me." The same sort of Renaissance assumption underlies the messenger's announcement to the discomfited Sacripante in *Orlando Furioso* (I.70): "fu Bradamante quella che t'ha tolto / quanto onor mai tu guadagnasti al mondo." In the words of Sonnet 25:

> The painful warrior, famoused for fight,
> After a thousand victories once foil'd,
> Is from the book of honor razed quite,
> And all the rest forgot for which he toil'd.

Thus honor, in the chivalric sense, is far from a contemptible prize; but it is equally far from recommending itself as a criterion of moral choice.[11] And Laertes' endorsement, clearly, does

[8] Giovanni Battista Possevino, *Dialogo dell'honore* (Venice, 1565), pp. 500, 503, sg., 515, 521.

[9] *1 H. IV* I.ii.92–93.

[10] *1 H. IV* III.ii.147–152.

[11] John Donne, who does not scorn it, reminds us in two separate places that "all honors from inferiors flow," and that God Himself, Who is the fountain of intrinsic value, has only such honor as His creatures grant Him. See *Poems*, ed. Grierson (Oxford, 1912), I, 218, 263.

little to recommend it. On the other hand, Laertes is merely pretending to confine his vindictiveness within the limits of the gentleman's code. Young Fortinbras lives by the code, and his career is consequently a fairer gauge of the standing in the play of honor as a standard for conduct.

In Shakespeare's Denmark, honor is for better or worse a young man's game—and one suspects for worse, if what the characters have to say about youth is any indication. "Youth to itself rebels, though none else near," says Laertes (I.iii.44). In youth, Hamlet agrees, "compulsive ardour gives the charge" (III.iv.86). Polonius warns us, with some reason as it turns out, of Laertes' "savageness in unreclaiméd blood" (II.i.34). And our first news of Fortinbras—"of unimprovéd mettle hot and full" (I.i.96)—is scarcely more reassuring. Like Pyrrhus, Laertes, and Hamlet, Fortinbras too has a father to avenge. His "enterprise," we are clearly informed (l. 99), has no legal or moral basis; it is purely an affair of honor. And when he is thwarted in it, he simply chooses another path to his goal: "to employ those soliders, / So levied, as before, against the Polack" (II.ii.74–75). It is this expedition that inspires Hamlet's remark on the discrepancy between the intrinsic unimportance of an "argument"—a patch of ground or even an eggshell will do—and the importance one can confer on it by engaging one's honor in its defense. "Rightly to be great," he contends,

> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honour's at the stake. (IV.iv.53–56)

That is, to stir without great argument is admittedly *not* to be rightly great, but on occasion to find quarrel in a straw *is* to be so; because whenever honor's at the stake a straw *becomes* a great argument. Far from condemning the greatness thus conferred as frankly arbitrary and factitious, Hamlet holds up the "delicate and tender prince" (l. 48) as a model of decisiveness, not least because his "divine ambition" (l. 49) has made him impervious to scruple; his spirit "makes mouths at the invisible event" (l. 50)—including "the imminent death of twenty thousand men" (l. 60).

In this lack of scruple, and in the relativity of the value to which he has dedicated himself, Fortinbras anticipates the disastrous position taken by Troilus, another of Shakespeare's "delicate and tender princes," in the debate of the Trojan council (*Troilus and Cressida* II.ii). Troilus, too, speaks for "manhood and honor" (l. 47) against "reason and respect" (l. 49); he, too, thinks of value as a fiat of the "particular will" (l. 53). What is especially instructive about the later play, however, is that it troubles to specify the crucial objection to the young man's code, namely that will as such cannot make "a free determination / Twixt right and wrong" (ll. 170–171) because decisions are free only as they are "true" to objective grounds of preference, grounds that cannot be willed into and out of existence; "pleasure and revenge," Hector warns, "have ears more deaf than adders to the voice / Of any true decision" (ll. 171–173). Hector's orthodox humanism, of course, is as potent a norm of Shakespeare's Denmark as of his Troy. Even Hamlet, who is positive that honor can of itself exalt an argument and impart a rightful greatness to the arguer, pointedly declines to build his whole case on it. A source of greatness it may be; but it is also, paradoxically, "a fantasy and trick of fame" (IV.iv.61). Unlike Fortinbras, Hamlet has "excitements of my reason" as well as of "my blood" (l. 58).

III

But the whole point of the speech in which these phrases occur is that reason is susceptible to diseases, notably "bestial oblivion" and "craven scruple," of which scruple is at present much the more dangerous to Hamlet; for in his view any further exercise of reason on his part will inevitably consist in the morbidity and cowardice of "thinking too precisely on th'event." So far, at least, Hamlet might well say (with Troilus) that "reason and respect / Make livers pale and lustihood deject." Indeed, in an earlier speech he does say something very like this, and without any ambiguous deference to the "excitements of reason." Moreover, the context of this earlier remark puts honor, as an antidote to cowardice and "craven scruple," in a very odd light.

The premise of Hamlet's best-known soliloquy is that the very process of living entails what is degrading to a "noble mind" (III.i.57), a servitude of whips and scorns, of grunting, sweating, and bearing fardels, from which such a mind will naturally choose the only possible deliverance—to die. The distinction between choosing death and suffering it, or choosing to risk it, would seem to be clear enough, but in the course of his meditation Hamlet finds an opportunity to be quite specific:

> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time . . .
> When he himself might his quietus make
> With a bare bodkin? (ll. 70, 75–76)

There is, however, a difficulty that ought to be faced; for in his initial formulation Hamlet puts these alternatives somewhat more darkly: "to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them." The alternative to generic suffering, one might argue, is generic acting; so that the taking of arms in the third line can hardly suggest a specific action, let alone one so far from constructive as suicide. The weakness of this argument is that Hamlet does not in fact speak of suffering in general, but suffering fortune; and in the Elizabethan view the only alternative to suffering fortune is ending life. Indeed, active men suffer fortune with an even more conspicuous inevitability than passive, for though fortune's purview is the whole sublunary sphere, her name denotes par excellence the mutable condition of all human *undertakings*; to resist her is to suffer her obstreperously. "Ending one's troubles," if it is to mean a valid alternative to "suffering fortune," must be equivalent to "ending one's life." To be sure, it does not necessarily follow that "opposing one's troubles," likewise, is equivalent to "opposing one's life"; one may happen to die by unsuccessfully opposing one's troubles in the hope of surviving. But, by the same token, one may happen to realize this hope and survive. Hamlet, however, speaks of *ending* one's troubles, not of *happening* to end them; he is, after all, assessing the comparative nobility of effectual choices, not of contingent events that are beyond choice and hence cannot ennoble; this would be especially true of the series "opposing and ending," which, besides being a candidate for the title of superior nobility, can hardly exemplify the "suffering of fortune" to which it is the presumed alternative. "Ending one's troubles," in short, is not the inadvertent result but the purpose of "opposing" them. "Troubles," therefore, must be literal and not a metonymy for "things that trouble"; what is being opposed is, not the *occasions* of "heartache" and the weariness of life, but the weary life itself. As has till very lately been taken for granted, the alternative to suffering fortune is dying by choice, the sole human act (according to its traditional advocates) whose consequences to the agent are beyond the control of fortune.

The recommended course, clearly, is suicide, and the terms of Hamlet's introductory "question"—whether suicide or its contrary is "nobler in the mind"—are the familiar terms of the venerable debate between pagans and Christians over the *honestas* or *magnitudo animi* of that act. Hamlet is simply taking the pagan view that suicide is, to use Augustine's report of the opposition, *honestas turpia praecavens*, the *turpia* being summed up in the Prince's metaphors from the abasements of slavery.[12] It is the same view that Horatio, whose Stoicism Hamlet so much admires, will try in vain to live up to at the end of the play: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." At that point the Prince will assume that the reward of suicide is "felicity" (v.ii.346), but in the present soliloquy he is not certain, and his uncertainty enables him to argue, not only that suicide is "nobler in the mind" than the baseness of continuing to live, but that those who are ignoble in this sense are acting out of simple cowardice. It is this argument for the honorableness of suicide, especially in the dramatic context Shakespeare provides for it, that adds yet another obstacle to his audience's imaginative acceptance, not only of honor, but of revenge as well.

Hamlet argues that, all other things being equal, suicide would be the choice not merely of the "noble mind," but of any mind that appreciated the full misery of the human condition. But all things are not equal. Suicide is possible only to those who are not cowards, the others being put off by "the dread of something after death" (III.i.78). Of this "something" Hamlet has just lately received some privileged information; "after death," of course, comes punishment for ill deeds done in our "days of nature" (I.v.12) —in Claudius' case, Hamlet hopes, eternal punishment. And punishment is a thing one would not dread but for a faculty that Hamlet here calls "conscience" and elsewhere dismisses as "scruple": the practical reason or moral sense one of whose functions is consciousness of ill doing. Suicide, indeed, is only one, though a notable one, of many cases in which conscience plays a contemptible role. It simply illustrates the principle Hamlet has in mind:

> *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. (III.i.83–88)

Suicide is, to be sure, an enterprise of great pitch and moment from the pagan viewpoint Hamlet is adopting, and he may well see it for the moment as very near the top of his agenda. But he must of course absent himself from felicity awhile. The "enterprise" that has highest priority is

[12] See S. Aureli Augustini, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. J. E. C. Welldon (London, 1924), I, 37, 39.

revenge; it is on behalf of his vow to the ghost that Hamlet fears the conscience that "makes cowards of us all"—the "craven scruple" of which his encounter with Fortinbras' army will once again seem to accuse him. But by inviting the audience to see an analogy between suicide and revenge, in the joint opposition of these two enterprises to cowardice and conscience, Hamlet is ironically subverting his case. For he has put his mission in what the play consistently shows to be very bad company indeed.

The fitful inquiry into the circumstances of Ophelia's death that occupies much of the fifth act of the play would be strangely otiose if it did not serve to drive home one point of crucial relevance: that even if a prospective suicide had no other trespasses to plague him with "the dread of something after death," the act of suicide itself would be trespass enough. Laertes' remark that his sister has been "driven into desperate terms" (IV.vii.26) anticipates the central issue, for the mortal sin of which suicide is an irrevocable expression is the sin of despair. "There is nothing worse, then when one envieth himselfe";[13] that is why the Everlasting, as Hamlet himself admits, has "fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (I.ii.131–132).[14] And Horatio had been speaking more as a Dane than an antique Roman when he warned Hamlet that the ghost might tempt him to suicide, and that the cliff itself might overcome him with "toys of desperation" (I.iv.75). It is precisely this theme of damnation through despair that the question of Ophelia's death refuses to let out of our sight, and the theme strikes us with all the greater clarity for the unresolved ambiguity of Ophelia's guilt or innocence. To this ambiguity the gravedigger's malaprop interrogatory, breaking the silence at the beginning of the fifth act, is a fitting prelude: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?" (V.i.1–2). The second clown offers one possible answer: "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out a Christian burial" (ll. 23–25). Gertrude has already suggested another: Ophelia made no attempt to save herself because she was "incapable of her own distress" (IV.vii.177). The priest is uncertain, but inclines to the grimmer view:

> Her death was doubtful,
> And but that great command o'ersways the order,
> She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
> Till the last trumpet. (V.i.221–224)

Laertes, perhaps too stridently, decides for salvation:

> I tell thee, churlish priest,
> A minist'ring angel shall my sister be,
> When thou liest howling. (ll. 234–236)

And Ophelia's "maiméd rites" (l. 213) are equally ambiguous: to Hamlet they

> betoken
> The corse they follow did with desp'rate hand
> Fordo its own life. (ll. 213–215)

And indeed we learn from the priest that they are not the same as are accorded to "peace-parted souls" (l. 232). Yet she has been buried in hallowed ground, and, as the second clown informs us, "the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial" (ll. 4–5). All this is scarcely designed to invite us to decide for ourselves; the evidence is far too inconclusive. But it does serve to prevent the audience from consigning to limbo even for a moment the doctrinal inhibitions they will have to suspend in order to make the most of a purely sensational play of revenge. And the elaborate comparison Hamlet has already made between suicide and revenge makes it doubly difficult to avoid following Hamlet's destiny with the same order of anxiety as we guess at Ophelia's. If Hamlet does not hesitate, his audience has the better reason to hesitate for him.

IV

For, despite his reticence on the point, the ghost has solemnly intimated that Hamlet's mission threatens in some sense or other to taint his mind (I.v.85); and now if ever Hamlet's danger is upon him: when he ventures to equate conscience with cowardice he virtually puts his audience on notice that his encomium of suicide and kindred enterprises is a convention not of plot but of characterization—a plague sign of taint in its ultimate phase. The espousal of libertinism, as dramatic shorthand for villainy, can be illustrated in a grosser form from a much earlier stage in Shakespeare's career. Here, from *Richard III*, is Clarence's murderer-to-be on conscience: "I'll not meddle with it. It is a dangerous thing. It makes a man a coward" (I.iv. 137–138). His infamous employer carries less conviction in maintaining the same opinion: "O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me" (V.iii.179). But he maintains it all the same: "Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / De-

[13] Ecclus. xiv.6. Cf. Lactantius, *Patrologia Latina* VI.407: "Nam si homicida nefarius est, quia hominis exstinctor est, eidem sceleri obstrictus est, qui se necat, quia hominem necat. Imo vero maius esse id facinus existimandum est, cuius ultio Deo soli subiacet."

[14] Cf. *Cym.* III.iv.78 ff.

vis'd at first to keep the strong in awe" (ll. 309–310). As part of a "mirror" for magistrates, the import of this detail is that the tenacity of Crookback's creed is itself a part of his doom. But the status of conscience in the present play is, if anything, far more sacrosanct. For Hamlet has arrayed against it suicide and revenge, that is, breaches of the revealed will of God; and as a partner with Scripture in that revelation, conscience is virtually an operation of grace. Laertes' consecration to revenge, which is perhaps noisier than Hamlet's if not more complete, makes this point very clear:

> To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,
> *Conscience and grace* to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
> Most thoroughly for my father.
> KING. Who shall stay you?
> LAER. *My will, not all the world's.* (IV.v.131–138)

In exalting will above conscience Laertes merely echoes without euphemism Hamlet's preference of "the native hue of resolution" to "the pale cast of thought."

But, as it turns out, conscience of some sort or other cannot be dispensed with, for an "honor" that erects will into law is no more amenable to persuasion than the lawless will of the talon. If we exorcise conscience we shall sooner or later be forced to assume something else of the kind. This is the irony of Claudius' appeal to Laertes in a later scene: "Now must your conscience my acquittance seal" (IV.vii.1). It is also the irony of the new, robust "thoughts" that Hamlet has substituted for "godlike reason," and for the thought whose pale cast seemed to him so sickly in his earlier soliloquy: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" (IV.iv.65–66). If Hamlet is urged on by "excitements of my reason *and* my blood" (l. 58), it is at the same time oddly difficult to tell the two sources of excitement apart. On the other hand, if reason and conscience can decay, honor and the gentleman's code can be redeemed, as Hamlet redeems them in the pauses of his vengefulness. The model of the "gentleman" to which he appeals in asking pardon of Laertes (V.ii.225) is not the model Claudius praises in Laertes (IV.v.148) in preparing to seduce him to an act of treachery. And the "honor" Hamlet commends to Polonius is so far from the ordinary code of gentlemen as to be indistinguishable from Christian charity: "Use them after your own honour and dignity: *the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty*" (II.ii.535–536).

V

By the Prince's own standards, it would seem, revenge is an indulgence of the fallen will, and the honor that claims to control it, for all its legalism, is will all over again. Hamlet embraces revenge in its extreme, but with honor, as we have observed, he is not wholly satisfied; it is "a fantasy and trick of fame." An alternative sanction, however, is not easy to find; against revenge as against self-slaughter the Everlasting has fixed his canon. And the ambiguity of the ghost's origin, even more than that of its words, compounds the difficulty: if revenge is a counsel of the devil, as the faith testifies, and the ghost is a spirit of health, as the Prince eventually concludes, the anomaly of Hamlet's position achieves cosmic proportions. In this respect his invocation is prophetic indeed: "O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? / And shall I couple hell?" (I.v.92–93). Later he will not find it necessary to ask whether he is "prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell" (II.ii.588); and this last is the "coupling" on which Hamlet's final interpretation of his role seems to depend.

To be prompted by heaven *and* hell undoubtedly verges on a contradiction in terms. But in fact it is not unorthodox to allow that heaven may on occasion issue the same command as hell; and in accepting responsibility for the death of Polonius Hamlet remembers what such a supernatural entente usually means:

> 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.
> (III.iv.172–175)

A scourge of God, according to a familiar tradition of Christian historiography, is a man divinely ordained to make an example of his fellow sinners by means proper enough to God, to Whom vengeance belongs, but ordinarily fatal to the soul of the agent:

> Villains! These terrors and these tyrannies
> (If tyrannies war's justice ye repute)
> I execute, enjoin'd me from above
> To scourge the pride of such as heaven abhors.
> Nor am I made arch-monarch of the world
> For deeds of bounty or nobility.
> But since I exercise a greater name,
> The scourge of God and terror of the world,
> I must apply myself to fit those terms,
> In war, in blood, in death, in cruelty,
> And plague such peasants as resist in me
> The power of Heaven's eternal majesty.[15]

[15] *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. U. M. Ellis-Fermor (New York, 1930), p. 248.

The tragedy of such a decree is that there is little in an instrument of torture for even its Master to love; Tamburlaine himself is the "hate" as well as the "scourge" of God.[16] To be elected a scourge, in the end, is to be bound to the violation of one's own moral being, and it is no wonder that Hamlet thinks of this role as a punishment.

But by assuming that the punishment emanates from God Hamlet is virtually acknowledging that he deserves it, and this acknowledgment has persuaded some critics that he must be thinking back to a particular offense.[17] No history of actual guilt need be postulated, however, to justify God in electing a scourge. The language in which the theory of the scourge was couched is often ambiguous, but it is a serious perversion to construe it as flouting the common doctrine by limiting God's choice to those who are "already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation."[18] No guilt is so great as to overcome divine mercy, which, like all divine attributes, is infinite; indeed, it is precisely for blaspheming against this truth that despair is traditionally branded, in the words of Chaucer's Parson, as a "synnyng in the Hooly Ghoost," a disease to which even Claudius knows the antidote:

> What if this curséd hand
> Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
> Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
> To wash it white as snow? whereto serves mercy
> But to confront the visage of offence? (III.iii.43–47)

And if there is no such thing as sinning too much to be saved, there is, correspondingly, no such thing as sinning too little to be damned; "man," as Article IX has it, "is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation." Hamlet is plainly aware of this fact: "Use every man after his desert and who shall 'scape whipping?" And Hamlet's views, we must bear in mind, are solely in question here. Heaven, in short, is in no man's debt either for reward or for punishment. In both justice and mercy God's will is unconfined. The ultimate reason why a particular sinner is chosen a scourge is quite simply, in Hamlet's words, that "heaven hath pleas'd it so."

As conceived by the Prince, the divine pleasure currently in prospect—atrocity and perdition—is not merely arbitrary but intolerably bleak. Does Hamlet allow himself no small ration of hope? It has been suggested that when Hamlet says he is "scourge and minister" the latter term somehow denotes an alternative to the former.[19] But this proposal has more goodwill in it than grammar; a conjunction is a very strange way to add an alternative. What we have here is ordinary hendiadys; Hamlet will be the kind of minister who scourges. A more substantial consolation is held out by the Prince himself on his return from the sea, when he expresses a new reverence for the "divinity that shapes our ends" and, by implication, a serene confidence that a providential opportunity will, in the "interim," make "deep plots" unnecessary (v.ii.6–11, 73–74, 218–220). The resolve to play a waiting game, to be sure, dates from his sparing of Claudius (III.iii.89–95); but the serenity and the theological inflection are new, and they do not sound like a man expecting to be damned. Moreover, on reconsidering Claudius' offenses, Hamlet no longer doubts that it is "perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm" (v.ii.67–68). And far from being damned for usurping divine vengeance, Hamlet now thinks it

> to be damned
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil. (ll. 68–70)

The rehabilitation of Conscience, the statesman-like appeal to the public welfare, and the clear implication that Hamlet no longer thinks himself damned would appear to suggest that he has repudiated the role of scourge. At closer quarters, unfortunately, two of these indices cancel each other out and the third can be otherwise accounted for.

The same conscience that refuses to let Claudius "come in further evil" raises no objection, a few lines earlier, to its owner's gratuitous murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "They are not near my conscience, their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (ll. 58–59). But, as Hamlet seems to concede, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were clearly unaware of their complicity in his attempted murder, and insinuation is not a

[16] *Tamburlaine*, p. 146. See Roy W. Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine* (Nashville, Tenn., 1941), pp. 108–113, 129–133, and Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* XVII. It is interesting that one of the texts adduced by Erasmus to illustrate the concept fits Claudius far better than Hamlet: "Fortassis illud est quod ait Job cap. xxxiv. *Qui regnare facit hypocritam, propter peccata populi.*" See *Colloquia*, ed. Schrevelius (Amsterdam, 1693), p. 133. The scourgeship of Claudius, in view of Hamlet's mission, would add a particularly mordant irony to the play; vengeance on the Scourge, all the authorities agree, is reserved to God alone.

[17] See G. R. Elliott, *Scourge and Minister: A Study of Hamlet* (Durham, N. C., 1951), p. 122, and Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA*, LXX (1955), 740–749.

[18] Bowers, p. 743.

[19] Bowers, p. 745: "we may see . . . the anomalous position Hamlet conceives for himself: is he to be the private-revenger scourge *or* the public-revenger minister?"

capital crime.[20] Hamlet showed himself well aware of this last when he repented of killing Polonius, another "intruding fool" who "made love to his employment"; indeed that inadvertent crime was what persuaded him of his election to the unenviable office of scourge. This falling off in the tenderness of Hamlet's conscience, taken together with the double standard conveniently applied by that faculty, should perhaps remind us that a Shakespearean character who invokes conscience in a doubtful cause is at least as likely to be perplexed in the extreme as to have regained his moral bearings. Othello, too, at the lowest ebb of his moral awareness, argues that he must kill to prevent his victim from "coming in further evil": "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (v.ii.6). But the difference between the two cases of rationalization is as instructive as the parallel; Othello's disavowal of vindictive impulse may be suspect, but he does offer Desdemona the respite that is indispensable to Christian execution:

> If you bethink yourself of any crime
> Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
> Solicit for it straight.
>
> I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
> No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul.
> (ll. 27–30, 31–32)

It is crucial to recognize that Hamlet, *despite* his new serenity, the fresh endorsement of his conscience, and his princely if intermittent concern for innocent bystanders, has not disavowed his intention to kill the soul of his enemy. Indeed, the health of his victims' souls has come to worry him so little that he sends even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "to sudden death, / Not shriving time allowed" (v.ii.46–47). It is a commentary on his argument from statesmanship that he should fail so spectacularly in the end to avoid "coming in further evil" to the amount of three additional deaths, and that the assassination of Claudius should be so far removed in spirit from solemn execution.

By sinning against the Holy Ghost, Hamlet continues to play the part of a scourge. To see why he no longer expects to be damned for it we shall have to refer again to that view of God's absolute sovereignty which, as we saw earlier, underlies the very notion of a human scourge. In such a view the moral law is simply a creature of divine will subject to revocation by that will at any time. Sometimes even a Patriarch, as Augustine explains, might abrogate the ordinary law of God by God's extraordinary command—*ad personam pro tempore expressa iussione.* In performing such a command the Patriarch is like a sword that owes its assistance to him who wields it—*adminiculum gladius utenti.*[21] And the only difference between the deed of the sword and the deed of the scourge is that the latter ends in damnation. In the Middle Ages the theory "that the heroes of the old covenant had a special command, or revelation from God," when their conduct "ran counter to the prevailing Christian ethics" was elaborated by Scotus, and passed on in substance to the theologians of the Reformation; though, like Scotus, Luther and Calvin denied that such dispensations can recur in the latter days.[22] Hamlet is not so cautious. Not conscience ultimately but the "divinity that shapes our ends" (v.ii.10) condemns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to a death by treachery in whose smallest detail, Hamlet is quite sure, "heaven" was "ordinant" (l. 48). Like Tamburlaine—or Abraham, for that matter—Hamlet is performing what is "enjoin'd me from above." But like Abraham he will not be damned. It would seem that the quest for a satisfactory way of defining his mission has inspired the Prince to a new flight of clairvoyance: what the mind of the ghost has withheld Hamlet reads in the mind of God. And what he reads—in dread at first, and later in tranquillity—is naked will beyond good and evil.

VI

In pursuance of his vow Horatio eventually offers his hearers an index to his projected relation of Hamlet's career in revenge:

> so shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Faln on the inventors' heads. (v.ii.378–383)

"Plots and errors," as he sums things up, lie behind the present "mischance" (ll. 392–393). We have seen Hamlet elbow-deep in the plots, and he has not been notably innocent of the errors. Claudius, to be sure, has been guilty "of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts," and both he and Laertes of "purposes mistook / Faln on the inventors' heads." But this does not absolve their opponent "of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause." Horatio will no doubt proceed to

[20] Claudius reveals his plan in soliloquy rather than dialogue after dismissing R. and G. (IV.iii.57 ff.); moreover, once they lose Hamlet to the pirates R. and G. would hardly bother to deliver Claudius' letter if they knew what was in it.

[21] *De Civitate Dei*, p. 36 sq., p. 42.

[22] Roland H. Bainton, "The Immoralities of the Patriarchs According to the Exegesis of the Late Middle Ages and of the Reformation," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXIII (1930), 39–49.

excuse the latter; that is why he has deferred his felicity. But if he intends to go further, and justify them, his list is perversely calculated to obscure the fact.

What Shakespeare's audience paid for, undoubtedly, was a hectic afternoon of sensation, and this, at the outset, is what they got. The necessary thrill was provided by the morally neutral question of *modus operandi*: what grizzly end will Hamlet think up for the villain? And it was clearly necessary that the question remain morally neutral if the thrill was not to be spoiled. But it is not long before Shakespeare spoils it, or rather replaces it with a new question and a new order of suspense. For when the Prince asks himself which of two alternative courses more befits a great soul—which is "nobler in the mind"—he compels us to recognize him as a serious moral agent and (if we have not already begun to do so) to worry about him in a new way. The new worry, indeed, is nearly the opposite of the old; we worry lest Hamlet betray his commitment to the faculty of "noble mind" to which he pays such high tribute: the "apprehension" as of a god (II.ii.310), the "large discourse" (IV.iv.36), the "fair judgement, / Without the which," as Claudius agrees, "we are pictures, or mere beasts" (IV.v.84–85). "Discourse of reason," as Hamlet's training prepares him to understand its practical function, is not merely a prudential, but a moral faculty as well—though he assumes that a degree of morality may be expected even of "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (I.ii.150). There is thus a disturbing irony in the spectacle of an "antic disposition" that moves Ophelia to recall "what a noble mind is here o'erthrown" (III.i.153). For the "noble and most sovereign reason" (l. 160) whose decline we are to be shown is not the prudential acuteness in which Hamlet increasingly takes pride, but the "nobility," the "conscience," the right reason that this very pride will slowly submerge. The Hamlet whose fall from grace we may well regret is not the tactical improviser who cries out: "O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (III.iv.209–210), but the man even his enemy thinks of as "most generous, and free from all contriving" (IV.vii.134), the humane Prince whose gorge rises at the cynicism of the gravedigger tossing about the remains of the dead: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats with them? mine ache to think on't" (V.i.89–90). It is difficult to recognize in this man the very different figure that is discovered preparing to "lug the guts into the neighbour room" (III.iv.212), or, for tactical purposes, playing hide-and-seek with them later on (IV.ii.29–30). And it is difficult to reconcile the Hamlet who protests in one scene that he is "not splenitive and rash" (V.i.255) with the advocate of "rashness" in the next (V.ii.7). Last and most important, it is difficult to reconcile the Christian and the man of charity with the avenger. Or rather, it is disturbing to *have* to reconcile these things. For the worser part is always threatening to prevail.

"Yet have I in me something dangerous, / Which let thy wiseness fear" (V.i.256–257). The irony of this advice is that its author never takes it himself. In the pride of his intellect, he hopes to find his unknown duty by seeking what is immeasurably less known: "For what man knoweth the things of a man, saue the spirit of man, which is in him? euen so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (I Cor. ii.11). The vision of deity that results from this quest, as we have seen, is blasphemously partial; it sacrifices infinite goodness on the altar of infinite might. And the vision of duty that results from this warped vision of God is equally troubling to the onlooker. The tragedy of Hamlet, in short, is a tragedy of spiritual decline arrested only by the brief madness of the Prince's last anger. We are relieved by the reflex violence of an act that would be abhorrent to us if it were deliberate—if it were, that is, the sterile act of hatred we have been waiting for.

Shakespeare has left the identity of the ghost a matter of conjecture, however straightforward, and this should warn us that the importance of that figure is not its identity but its effect on Hamlet, which is to test the Prince more cannily than the Prince ever contrives to test anyone else. It is by his interpretation of the ghost that Hamlet is tried and found wanting. If the lure of idle speculation persists, it may be diverting to imagine a Prologue in Heaven, in which God grants Mephistopheles dominion over Hamlet in terms like those of the corresponding scene in Goethe's *Faust*: "Draw this mind from its fountainhead, and lead it off, if you can get hold of it, your own way. And stand ashamed when you are brought to acknowledge that a good man in his dark striving remembers the right way."[23] In Hamlet's case, I would suggest, the devil would have feared no such humiliation, nor would God have added the wager; for the darkly striving Prince, though he is saved, is no better than the rest of us.

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[23] *Faust*, ll. 324–329.