HAMLET: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FATE AND GRACE

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The theme of this paper is the conflict between fate and Grace in Hamlet. However, before addressing that theme, I would first like to make some general comments about interpreting Shakespeare.

Of the many remarkable things about Shakespeare's plays, one is that they repay study from a number of different perspectives. From a Renaissance perspective this is possible because they have several planes or levels of meaning, ranging from simple everyday "truisms" to representations of The Divine Order Shakespeare perceives as underlying reality, and these levels of meaning may be contained in one another. Yet this very abundance of meaning can pose considerable problems when we attempt to explain any of the plays. There is a danger, no matter how rich our insight, that our explanation will become reductive, will reduce multiple meaning down to a single plane. For Example, we might reduce the meaning down to a study of human character following the "true to life" school of thought, and so omit the "spiritual" dimension. Or we might reduce the meaning down to "aesthetics", and so omit the intellectual dimension. So, although Shakespeare repays study from a number of perspectives, we need to be aware that any particular viewpoint is finite and can all too easily become reductive.

This raises the question: What is the act of interpretation? Is it a kind of paraphrase in which we say "this means that"? Is it structural analysis of the text? Is it deconstructing the text? Is it psychological or socio-political analysis?

I believe it is none of these, for the simple reason that all these approaches move out of the text rather than into it. With these approaches the text is made a point of "departure", rather than a point of "entry". The authentic act of interpretation involves entry in to the world of the text, a subjective participation in the world the text opens to us. By this I mean that "meaning" or, better, "meaningfulness", is not an objectification of the "content" of the text. Meaning is not an "object". It is bound up with the existential act of insight, or with the act of gnosis in the ancient sense of union between subject and object. Learning, in this sense, can certainly be reported, but the "report" is not itself the meaning, the explanation is not text thing explained. This would be reducing meaning to explanation. Meaning is only "meaningful" when it is our own insight.

So, interpretation can only ever be firsthand, just as being and existence can only ever be firsthand. Meaning arises through participation, and any attempt to "objectify" or "externalise" meaning must necessarily distort it.

I wish to emphasise this "subjectivity" of the interpretive act partly because, in our age, subjective knowledge has come to be regarded as synonymous with false knowledge or with mere opinion, and partly because "participatory"

knowledge involves entry into oneself as well as entry into the being of the object to be known. All higher modes of knowledge, such as philosophical, religious, cultural, mythical or moral knowledge, involve modes of participation in their objects, or communion of subject and object. They are modes of self-knowledge. So entry into the text, though initially a move out of oneself, also involves entry into oneself, and insight into the text also involves insight into oneself. Traditionally this has been described in various ways. Plato teaches that all knowledge is remembering. Nicholas Cusanus regarded the whole "ratio" of the universe as existing within man the "microcosmos". The Bible describes man as made in the image of God. The *Upanishads* teach that true knowledge of *Brahman* coincides with true knowledge of *Atman.* Inner and outer, self and world, subject and object are not exclusive opposites. Still less are they "alternative" realms of being or knowledge. They are the polarities of existential experience that find their resolution in the realisation of Being Itself.

It is the existential tensions between inner and outer, self and world, Creator and creature, subject and object that form the basis of conflict in Shakespeare's dramas and which makes them "dramatic". And it is with the resolution of these conflicts that Shakespeare is primarily concerned, or with the ultimate consequences of a failure of their resolution. In the Comedies they are resolved through the power of Grace, which manifests itself through beauty, Love or honour. In the Tragedies they are resolved through the power of Fate, which manifests through denial of the true self, justice or revenge. While the Comedies come to rest in the fullness of Being, the Tragedies terminate in death, the symbol of negation of, or estrangement from, Being.

This is why it is reductive to regard Shakespeare's plays simply as "character studies" or "true to life" representations. It reduces them to mere "imitations of appearances" or "shadows of shadows" as Plato calls such imitative art in the *Republic.* Shakespeare's own metaphor of the true nature of drama, as Hamlet puts it, is that of a mirror held up to nature. By the word "nature" Shakespeare does not mean ordinary reality as fallen man knows it, but rather the "true reality" which is hidden behind appearances, the Divine Order and harmony of "heaven" which informs all existence within and without and which gives everything its true being and telos or ultimate purpose. It is against the background of this Divine Order that the "plots" of Shakespeare's plays move and take their form, out of which emerge the conflicts and dilemmas of his characters.

As mirrors of nature his plays are also mirrors of ourselves and of our relation to the Divine Order. All that is 'within' Shakespeare's character is also within us. If that were not so we should have no ground to empathise with them, even at a superficial level. Likewise, all the conflicts and dilemmas of those characters are also within us, for they mirror the existential situation of mankind generally. If that were not so, we should not desire their resolution. It is precisely because of this mirrored correspondence between our own existential situation and that of Shakespeare's characters that we can participate in the meaning of the plays. It is

this correspondence that makes them universal and lends to them their extraordinary power. And it is this correspondence that makes the interpretive moment identical with "insight", and insight synonymous with the "truth" of the text. The interpretive act is complete when the truth without and the truth within converge.

These interpretive principles are operative within Shakespeare's plays themselves and, I believe, have a special place in *Hamlet.* I suggest that in this play Shakespeare is specifically exploring Hamlet's interpretations of reality and the dilemmas he confronts in seeking ways to respond to it.

Shakespeare is concerned with ultimate choices, life or death choices, and these ultimate choices are dramatically framed within the Christian Platonism of the Renaissance. Put very simply, Shakespeare's protagonists must ultimately choose between heaven and hell. When heaven is chosen, then Grace, the power of love and of regenerative mercy, enters the play and establishes the Divine Order or ushers in a new Golden Age. When hell is chosen, then Fate, the power of chaos and destruction, enters the play and reverses the order of nature or ushers in an age of darkness and death.

These ultimate choices are encountered through a series of "temptations" that give rise to inner conflicts that unfold throughout the play. According to their responses to these temptations and conflicts, the protagonists move from one state of being to another.

These changes in states of being warn us not to estimate Shakespeare's characters from an isolated passage or soliloquy. All Shakespeare's protagonists ascend or descend through different levels of being, and so their character undergoes corresponding transformations. In Hamlet himself we witness a step by step descent through different levels of being. Yet Shakespeare portrays this in such a way that we remain aware of Hamlet's true essence even to the last. Somehow we sense what Hamlet could have been, and this is perhaps what makes him Shakespeare's most sympathetic tragic hero. It is as though his essential nobility, the divine element of his spirit, or his "true self", becomes clothed over in darkness, which even at his death is not completely extinguished. It is this quality in Hamlet, which we might call the "potential" Hamlet, that has led some critics to fail to see he is a fallen soul. Confounding the "actual" with the potential Hamlet, they see him as the innocent victim of a cruel Fate over which he has no power or choice. There is a sort of truth in this, in that it corresponds with Hamlet's own view, but I shall argue that Hamlet did have the choice to submit to Fate or not and that the option of regenerative Grace was open to him but that he rejected it.

Just as we cannot isolate Hamlet's character from his gradual fall, so we cannot understand him in isolation from the state of Denmark, for Hamlet's fall in a particular sense is also the fall of Denmark. Denmark is the "outer world" corresponding to Hamlet's inner world. This correspondence may be understood in two ways. At one level Denmark may be seen as an allegory of Hamlet's inner state or psychology, a projection of his inner being, while at a much subtler level

Denmark represents the "real world" itself, in the sense of the Creation that awaits the power of Grace to realise the Divine Order through man. Shakespeare's symbol for the realisation of the Divine Order in Creation is very often true kingship, through which man becomes the agent or mediator of Grace into the world. Duncan and later his son, Malcolm, are examples of this in Macbeth. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, heir to the throne, has within him the possibility of manifesting this true kingship, but to realise that possibility he must reject the path of "revenge", the path that Fate sets before him, or even the path of justice, and choose that of regenerative Grace.

In Shakespeare's plays, when man chooses either justice or revenge, he is attempting to place the world under his own power, and in so doing he places himself outside the redeeming power of Grace and falls, through a failure to apprehend the Divine Law, under the power of Fate.

For Shakespeare, Fate is the general state of "sin", in the original Greek sense of *hamartia* which means "missing the mark". It is equivalent to the Eastern concept of *samsara*. Fate should not be confused with destiny, which is the divine telos or ultimate end of all things. The Christian conception of destiny is expressed in the doctrine of eschatology, which is the final overcoming of sin or Fate.

Given the correlation between Hamlet and Denmark, two parallel ways open For us to interpret the play. We may ask: What is the danger that threatens Denmark? The opening scene of Act I immediately tells us:

> ... young Fortinbras,
> Of unimproved mettle, hot and full,
> Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
> Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes
> ... to recover of us by strong hand
> And terms compulsatory those foresaid lands
> So by his father lost . . .
> (1. 1. 98-107)

Fortinbras of Norway represents the condition of "lawlessness" that imperils Denmark, against which a continuous watch is kept that "Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day" in warlike preparations. In its universal sense, lawlessness is the opposite pole to "true kingship", and so represents the ever-present peril to man. The threat of Fortinbras recurs throughout the play. In Act IV. IV. Hamlet even sees Fortinbras as an example to follow, and at the close of the play he names him his successor:

> ... I do prophecy th'election lights
> On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.
> (V. II. 360)

The outward resolution of the play is the fall of Denmark to Norway. This is not, as in Macbeth, a restoration of true kingship. It is rule by a "foreign'" power, and therefore signifies a fall to a lower order, perhaps a fall from one of the Four Ages to another. Yet for such a fall to occur there must be some parallel fall within Denmark itself that is symbolically linked with Fortinbras and the lawlessness he represents. Fortinbras is like a foreshadowing of Hamlet's possible fate. Shakespeare hints at several parallels between them. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras bears his father's name. And we may note that the Ghost appears in the same armour he wore on the day he defeated the elder Fortinbras. Thus there is an outward correlation between Denmark and Norway and an inner correlation between Hamlet and Fortinbras. They are linked by Fate.

These signs of the throat to Denmark are all indicated in the first scene of Hamlet. The opening scenes of Shakespeare's plays always repay close study, since within them are planted the seeds of the whole drama, often with such concision that we can very easily miss them.

Obviously the Ghost is the central seed in Hamlet. But to understand the Ghost we should observe the circumstances of it's appearances, since "psychic" or unnatural powers manifest themselves only at "Fateful" moments, when characters are "ripe" for testing. Here, we observe, it is night and Francisco has already remarked "'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart". Bernado is speaking of the Ghost's previous appearance when the bell strikes and the Ghost enters. Horatio's immediate response is important, since he represents discernment or reason, not skepticism as some critics have suggested. He charges the Ghost "by heaven" to speak and disclose its purpose, but upon this charge "it is offended" and "stalks away". In Shakespeare's scheme Horatio's response is the right response, just as his deduction "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" proves to be the right deduction. But a higher kind of knowledge than Horatio's is required for right action in response to the Ghost. This is the "test" that awaits Hamlet.

The threat of Fortinbras is now discussed, immediately associating Norway with the appearance of the Ghost. Horatio then tells of the strange signs that appeared in Rome "a little ere before the mightiest Julius fell" as "harbingers preceding still the fates". Clearly Shakespeare intends us to associate the Ghost with Fate and to draw a parallel with Hamlet's impending fall. This remark tells us another important thing about Horatio. His reference to Julius Caesar associates his mind with prechristian Rome. The Roman ideal is that of law and duty the discernment of perfect justice. This is indeed a noble ideal, but in Shakespeare's eyes, though a high human ideal, it is lower than the divine power of regenerative Grace, the Christian ideal. This distinction between justice and Grace is amply shown in The Merchant of Venice, though in that play the ideal of justice is that of the Old Testament, which likewise preceded the Christian ideal.

Grace transcends justice and manifests in the forms of love, honour and mercy, powers that can transform both man and the world. While Grace stands

above and beyond justice, wholly transcending it, revenge stands below and outside justice, wholly negating it. Justice stands, as it were, as a mean between the transformative power of Grace and the binding power of Fate.

Horatio, then, is not sceptical of supernatural or demonic powers. They simply lie beyond the "gross and scope" of his opinion, as he admits himself. As friend and confidante of Hamlet these qualities of Horatio are very important, especially at crucial moments when Hamlet rejects Horatio's counsel. At such moments we must ask if his rejection is on the basis of Grace or of Fate. We may regard Horatio as embodying the justice aspect of Hamlet's nature.

Given this world in which Horatio moves and perceives, we can see the legitimacy of the questions he puts to the Ghost when it reappears:

> If there be any good thing to be done
> That may to thee do ease, and grace to me, . . .
> If thou art privy to the country's fate,
> Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, . . .
> Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
> Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
> For which they say your spirits oft walk in death,
> Speak of it...
> (S. S. 133-142)

None of these questions, as we must expect, address the real motive of the Ghost's coming. Whether it has come for divine or demonic reasons, it cannot answer Horatio. But something may be learned of the Ghost's motives from the circumstances in which it suddenly departs:

> It faded on the crowing of the cock.
> Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
> This bird of dawning singeth all night long;
> And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
> The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
> No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
> So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.
> (S. S. 162-169)

At the hour of the cock, symbol of Christ's birth, the Ghost "faded". Even if we allow for the uncertainty or hearsay of Marcellus's report, and note these Christian references do not come from Horatio, Shakespeare obviously intends us to understand that the Ghost has no heavenly associations, even though King Hamlet was himself the victim of a crime against heaven. Whether the Ghost is a manifestation of divine or demonic intent, this is for Hamlet to discern, and to act upon, either as the Ghost's damned state decrees or as heaven decrees.

Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is conditioned by two distinct emotions: black melancholy at his father's death and anger at the haste of Claudius's marriage to his mother and taking the crown of Denmark. In Hamlet's eyes Denmark ought still to be mourning, while in Claudius's eyes Hamlet's mourning is prolonged beyond due measure:

> It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
> A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
> An understanding simple and unschool'd.
> (1. 11. 95-97)

Claudius's words echo both biblical and classical sentiments on the propriety of mourning. They are traditional wisdom. Yet from his mouth their truth becomes a kind of falsity in Hamlet's ears. Hamlet's estimation of Claudius nullifies their wisdom. The question arises as to what extent Hamlet's "natural" grief is modified by his intuition that something is strangely amiss in his father's death. Does even the false report that King Hamlet was stung by a serpent while sleeping in his orchard convey to Hamlet, through its obvious biblical allusions, something of the hidden truth, and thus make his mourning "so particular" to him, as his mother puts it? This sense of something being amiss forms a third element in Hamlet's mood, and together with his grief and anger provides a key to his first soliloquy:

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely.
> (1. II. 133-1371

At first sight such words express sentiments typical of Renaissance melancholic or mourning poetry, in which the "mortal world" may appear meaningless and so awaken a desire For the eternal. Yet to see the world entirely possessed by "things rank and gross in nature" is strange and untypical. Here is something more than religious insight into the transience of the world and its ways that comes with a sense of the eternal. Hamlet is not comparing the world with the eternal, nor does he have any vision of a redeemed world. Rather he perceives the fallen state of the world and of man as absolute, completely devoid of any redeeming feature. Although there are indeed moments when Hamlet captures a truer vision of man and sees his godlike features, his prevailing view is that of man corrupted by some defect in his nature. This is the theme of his reflections immediately before his encounter with the Ghost, when he considers that certain men who bear:

> ...the stamp of one defect,
> Being Nature's livery or Fortune's star,
> His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo,
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault. The dram of evil
> Doth all the noble substance often dout
> To his own scandal.
> (1. IV. 31-38)

Although this is said of men's reputations, it has the double sense of referring to their being also. At this point Hamlet does not identify men with their inborn defect. He attributes it to their birth - to "Nature's livery or fortune's star", "wherein they are not guilty (since nature cannot choose his origin)". Hamlet understands that man is not corrupt in his essence and that any defect in his nature comes from outside, from Fate. Yet in all his considerations of Claudius he never once thinks to apply this distinction. He identifies him absolutely with the evil he has done and so precludes any thought of his possible redemption.

Such is Hamlet's state when he encounters the Ghost. Yet upon the entry of the Ghost his initial response is to call upon Grace: "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" This is indeed the right response. Yet, unlike Horatio, he is not prepared to discern its true nature:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee.
> (1. IV. 40-44)

Horatio, arguing that to follow the Ghost might deprive Hamlet of the "sovereignty of reason", commands, "Be rul'd; you shall not go". Hamlet responds with the significant words "My fate cries out" and will not be ruled. In Horatio's view he "waxes desperate with imagination", that is, with one of the forms of frenzy that inspires the poet, the lover, or the madman. I believe it is the last of these, and suggest that Hamlet's resolution to revenge his father's murder confirms it.

Although there is much to be learned from Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, perhaps the most significant thing that emerges from it is how Hamlet sees his father as whiter than white and Claudius as blacker than black. Hamlet's later paintings of his father, comparing him to the gods themselves, surely disregard the fact he appears from the torments of hell. Plainly, the Ghost is that of a "fallen" man, even by his own admission. This invites us to question again

the significance of the "false" account of his death. Is it in some way symbolically true, if not literally true?

There is tremendous ambiguity in the first Act of Hamlet. One feels the ground is never firm and so, like Hamlet himself, we hover between different interpretations. In part this is because, like any of Shakespeare's plays, it has the possibility of moving to resolution or to tragedy, but it is also due in part to Shakespeare's skill in imparting to us, the audience, the taste of Hamlet's dilemma in its universal dimensions. How is man to confront evil, be that evil the sin of Adam or that of Cane? Ought he to repay it in kind? Ought he to meet it with impartial justice? Or ought he to transform it into good? These are not merely questions of civil ethics, they are some of the great questions that Shakespeare constantly explores in his plays, and they touch our very being. They demand of man an inner resource, not a theoretical answer. Our response can only be a response of being or else a total "failure" of response, what the existentialists have called authentic or inauthentic response. Yet Shakespeare is not posing the question: What should Hamlet do? Rather he is searching the "source" from whence Hamlet acts, or the "mode of being" he responds with, and then tracing, wholly without judgement, the inevitable or "lawful" consequences. From this viewpoint the question of "delay" becomes irrelevant.

Hamlet perceives and interprets the world, then, (as all Shakespeare's characters do) according to his state of being. The choices of action before him, revenge, justice, or transformation, each demands a change in his state of being. The dilemma he confronts is that, in his present state of being, he cannot revenge his father's murder. This, I am convinced, is the explanation of the question of "delay" that has so perplexed critics. At the beginning of the play Hamlet is at the cross-roads of a higher or a lower state of being. These two states are represented by the demands of the Ghost on the one hand, and those of Ophelia on the other. He loves then both, yet the "laws" of either love are in conflict. The love of his father demands death, while that of Ophelia demands new life.

Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia represents a decisive change in his state of being, the first in a sequence of such changes, and is therefore worth looking at in some detail. Ophelia, like so many of Shakespeare's heroines, symbolises Absolute Beauty in the Platonic sense. She also symbolises Hamlet's spiritual essence, or his true self, that is to be realised by the ascending path of Love described in Socrates' final speech in the Symposium - perhaps the most influential of Plato's dialogues in Renaissance philosophy and art and known throughout the West through Marsilio Ficino's translation and important commentary on it. Beauty, which shines in nature's forms, awakens love in the beholder's soul and draws it upward to union with Absolute Beauty itself, or rather to reunion with the Beauty the soul once contemplated without mediation in heaven before its descent into an earthly body and forgetfulness of the divine. It is through this Absolute Beauty, and the inspired Love that it

awakens in the soul, that Shakespeare marries the Christian and Platonic traditions.

In its Platonic aspect Love culminates in union with Absolute Beauty, while in its Christian aspect Love manifests as Grace or regenerative mercy. In this way the "contemplative" and the "active" aspects of Love converge, so that Love is at once in union with the ineffable and fully manifest as the dynamic principle of creation. It is the union of essence and existence in Being.

With this Shakespearean philosophy of Love in mind, let us see what light it throws on the nunnery scene in Act 3. Scene 1. In his soliloquy immediately preceding this decisive encounter with Ophelia Hamlet has resolved that "outrageous fortune" should be opposed with justice. His conscience accuses him of "the law's delay". In this frame of mind Love, which Hamlet has known till now only in its contemplative aspect, appears to him as a kind of idleness. This is why, upon seeing Ophelia, Hamlet says "in thy orisons be all my sins remembered". By "sins" he means omissions. Beauty, in his view, is at variance with honesty, that is, with "honour" or virtue, and so is not a principle of right action. This, according to Shakespeare, is a profound misconception of the true nature of Beauty, hence Ophelia responds with words unmistakably Platonic:

> Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?
> (111. 1. 109)

Beauty, as every Renaissance poet or artist declared, is united with virtue through Love. Virtue is the realisation of Beauty in action. It is through Love, and Love alone, that Beauty and honesty have perfect "commerce". This is the great truth that Ophelia embodies and sets before Hamlet. In this one statement she opens the way to Hamlet of regenerative action. Since Ophelia stands at the opposite pole to the Ghost, who is "an honest Ghost", yet not informed by the divine light of Beauty. Again, Ophelia represents the New Testament fulfilment of the Law through Love, while the Ghost represents the Old Testament fulfilment of the Law through justice or vengeance.

Having chosen the principle of justice as his guide, and therefore rejecting the transformative power of Love, the power that unites truth and beauty, Hamlet fails to see the truth of Ophelia's significant statement, and so he responds:

> the power of beauty will sooner transform
> Honesty from what it is to a bawd than the
> Force of honesty can translate beauty into his
> Likeness. This was once a paradox, but now the
> Time gives it proof. I did love you once.
> (III. 1. 111-115)

This "paradox" is a travesty of the true relationship between Beauty and honesty. Separated from Beauty, honesty must become a mere caricature of itself - a bawd

- a heartless form of virtue that has no commerce with heaven. But in Hamlet's view once man has fallen he cannot be restored to his original state:

> .. for virtue cannot
> So inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it.
> (111. 1. 117-118)

But virtue borne of heavenly Beauty, as the active power of Grace, can transform "our old stock" into new being. This is the possibility Ophelia holds out to Hamlet. But Hamlet has "absolutised" man's fallen state, hence he can be only a "breeder of sinners". The human race are "arrant knaves all".

> O help him, you sweet heavens

cries Ophelia. And again,

> heavenly powers, restore him.

And finally,

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown.

His "noble and most sovereign reason" is "blasted with ecstasy", that is, with madness. We may note a parallel here with Horatio's words at Hamlet's death in the final Act: "Now cracks a noble heart". Beauty, personified in Ophelia, would draw reason up into itself and infuse it with the transformative power of Love, while reason, personified in Horatio, would find its term in the heart and the "informative" power of Beauty. That is why Ophelia mourns Hamlet's fall of reason, and Horatio the breaking of his heart.

Claudius's and Polonius's remarks upon Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia are both true, though at different levels, yet that of Polonius is most to the point:

> ... But yet do I believe
> The origin and commencement of his grief
> Sprung from neglected love.
> (III. 1. 178-180)

We might assume that Polonius means Ophelia's neglect of Hamlet's love. Polonius, we recall, had instructed Ophelia to spend no further time with Hamlet and later admits this was a rash command, and the probable cause of Hamlet's present state. But the law that makes the "outer" correspond with the "inner" indicates that it is Hamlet's own state that determined Polonius's command in the first instance. Polonius, who personifies good counsel and fidelity, and whose motives are above question, has become infected by the

confusion that has begun to reign in Denmark. His judgement falters and he begins to speak foolishness. This explains his tendency to verbosity. It is therefore highly significant that he should be the first to perish by Hamlet's sword in error and confusion. With his death the "father" of the potential union between beauty and honesty - the respective qualities of Ophelia and Laertes - is destroyed. Ophelia, instead of being "baptised" in the purifying water of transforming Love, signifying Hamlet's metanoia, drowns in grief in the waters of forgetfulness.

With the rejection of Love as his guiding principle, Hamlet never again seeks the "good" in man or in the world. His mind is bent entirely on seeking imperfection. All his apparently "shrewd" insights into human nature discern only failings and weaknesses. Apart from his father, whom he has idealised, we may observe that Hamlet has no word of praise for any man, past or present, save only Horatio. Yet Hamlet always ignores Horatio's counsel, taking his support for granted, even when it is not given.

With this in mind, I would like to introduce another major concept that throws much light on Shakespeare's tragedies - the principle of reversal.

We have seen already that Love culminates in union with Absolute Beauty, and that the dynamic aspect of this union is the radiation of regenerative Grace. This manifest Grace encounters all evil and imperfection with divine mercy and restores it to its original perfection. It is, of course, the central doctrine of Christianity, but it is also equivalent to compassion in Buddhism and Hinduism. The great Gospel statements that embody this idea in Its practical application are "love thine enemies", "resist not evil" and "return good for evil". This understanding of Love permeates Shakespeare's works. So the question arises: What are the consequences of resisting evil? To clarify this question we may define three ways in which man may relate to the Good. First he may love evil and regard it as the good. Second, he may hate evil while remaining indifferent to the good. And third, he may love the good and discern that good as the true essence of all things. This third relation to the Good alone possesses perfect "knowledge" of the Good. The second relation, of hating evil In the name of the Good, is a "counterfeit" knowledge of the Good. In the Gospels It is "the world's" notion of the Good or, in Plato's view, the common man's conception of the Good, while in Buddhism and Hinduism It is the view that binds men in samsara and ignorance.

Yet this Is the view that Hamlet "descends" to and adopts through rejecting Love and the regenerative power of Grace. In Shakespearean terms, the consequence Is a negation of the power of Grace and a reversal of the unitive power of Love. Man becomes bound by that which he hates and Instead of overcoming evil he is swept up in its wake and drawn into its fate. Hamlet has answered his great question "to be, or not to be" wrongly. "Being", In Shakespeare's plays, is never established through opposing the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (since fortune must ever be "outrageous" from

the heavenly viewpoint), but rather by "suffering" them to be and transcending them, and so transcending Fate, through the divine law of Love.

We may see this process of reversal take place In the relationship between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes mirrors the possibility of Love in Hamlet. He represents the opposite direction to Fortinbras, and so his cares are bound up with Ophelia and the realisation of true Love. But Love, on the path of Platonic ascent, cannot realise its end Lawfully without virtue purifying the will, and so the lover must pass through a series of "tests" that prove him capable of performing the duties that Love demands. This is a common theme of the love Comedies. It Is the main purport of Laertes's leave-taking advice to Ophelia, in which he points out to her the tender stage of Hamlet's love and the dangers that accompany it, dangers not only for himself and Ophelia but for the state of Denmark itself:

> For he himself is subject to his birth:
> He may not, as unvalu'd persons do,
> Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
> The sanity and health of this whole state;
> (I. III. I8-21)

If Hamlet's love proves to be true, then it will show its truth in deeds:

> Then if he says he loves you,
> It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
> As he in his particular act and place
> May give his saying deed;
> (I. III. 24-27)

Love will prove itself precisely through its "commerce with honesty". Ophelia receives this counsel in the Platonic spirit in which it is given:

> I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep
> As watchman to my heart.
> (I. III. 45-46)

There can be no doubt that Ophelia is faithful to this counsel. Love is, and remains, her sole concern, indeed her very life, and her death is no less than the death of Love itself in Hamlet, for Ophelia is the divine principle of Love that must "give saying deed" in and through Hamlet.

If Hamlet had taken the path of Love, Laertes would have become his brother-in-law and Ophelia Queen of Denmark. But since he rejects the path of Love, Laertes inevitably becomes bound up with Hamlet's tragic fate - "for on his choice depends the sanity and health of this whole state". With the death of Polonius, the first death that gives Hamlet's "saying deed", Laertes finds himself

confronted with the same dilemma as Hamlet, the murder of his father and the question of revenge. By choosing the path of revenge Hamlet has "duplicated" the very crime he seeks to remedy. Thus in Hamlet's relationship with Laertes we find two instances of "reversal". From potential brother-in-law Laertes's advancement as courtier, in the sense of spiritual ascent, is reversed, and from the son of a loving father he becomes the avenger of a wholly pointless death. And with the death also of Ophelia, and therefore of the possibility of Love giving birth to regenerative Grace, Laertes is swept up in the fate of Denmark thus set on course, which only Grace, in the form of "true kingship", could avert. But that is no longer a possibility. With the death of Polonius the die has been cast and the "sanity and health of the whole state" is in peril.

Another highly significant reversal may be seen in Claudius. We are tempted, perhaps, to see Claudius through Hamlet's eyes, as a character similar to Macbeth. But Claudius is not wholly evil, even though he has committed the terrible crime of fratricide and unlawfully assumed the crown of Denmark. Until the death of Polonius he proves to be a good king, diligently caring for the state, acting wholly as a loving husband to Gertrude, and caring deeply for Hamlet's welfare. His crime, so far as we can tell, was motivated by love for Gertrude, albeit that this love was an unlawful love, although it may (or must?) also have been motivated by the desire for the crown. Further, we have no grounds to assume, at least before the death of Polonius, that Claudius ever intended to deny the crown to Hamlet as rightful heir to the thrown.

Taken together, all these circumstances indicate that Claudius was not beyond redemption. His crime is rooted in misplaced love. But so also is Hamlet's. This is a problem we shall return to later. Yet there is another overriding indication of Claudius's "ripeness" for redemption. After the performance of the play that Hamlet has contrived as a means to search out from Claudius some sign of his guilt, we find Claudius on his knees in penitential prayer seeking a remedy from God for the wretched state of his soul. This, I believe, indicates that the path of regenerative Grace was a possibility for Claudius. In the torment of his guilt he is aware that, although he might justify himself to the world, his real offence is before heaven:

> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above:
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
> To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
> Try what repentance can. What can it not?
> Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?
> (III. III. 57-66)

As he calls upon the help of angels and resolves to pray, Hamlet enters. It is a decisive moment for them both. Had Hamlet not rejected the path of Love, he could have been at this moment the agent of Claudius's redemption. If Hamlet had been a comedy this scene would certainly have been a critical moment when Grace would have entered the play and turned it in a wholly new direction. But Hamlet's heart is set upon revenge, not mercy, not even justice. Whether or not Claudius's soul would have gone to heaven if Hamlet had slain him at this moment, as Hamlet assumes, is beside the point. It is Hamlet's rejection of the possibility of salvation for Claudius that is decisive. If Hamlet had slain Claudius at this moment, then "justice" would have been served - justice in the Old Testament sense of "an eye for an eye". A death would have been paid for by a death. But even justice, the law of "this world", does not decide, nor can decide, the lot of the human soul. That judgement belongs solely to God. Justice redresses the "deed", not the "person". Revenge condemns the "person" irrespective of justice.

Herein lies the distinction that Shakespeare, in a wholly Christian way, draws between justice and revenge. For man to pass judgement upon the human soul is to commit the sin of hubris, the primal sin of "self elevation". "Judge not, that ye be judged not. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." This is the great Gospel statement upon the matter.

That Hamlet commits the great sin of hubris and would damn Claudius there can be no doubt:

> Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,
> At 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 damn'd and black
> As hell, whereto it goes.

(III. III. 88-95)

It is because some critics fail to see this crucial distinction between justice and revenge that the question of Hamlet's delay arises. Hamlet dose not delay, as this soliloquy amply shows. He awaits "a more horrid hent" when he can send Claudius's soul to hell - if indeed such an act is within the power of man. Yet, in Shakespeare's scheme, it is possible to deny the regenerative power of Grace, or mediation of that Grace, which is the highest possibility of man. Such is the denial we witness in these harsh, merciless words of Hamlet - words that yield their first-fruit in the death of Polonius in the following scene. With this deed the first steps of Claudius upon the path of salvation are halted and reversed.

We said earlier that Shakespeare's plays are concerned with ultimate choices. In this brief scene we witness Hamlet explicitly choose between salvation and damnation. Such an absolute choice cannot be attributed to "Fortunes star" at Hamlet's birth, or to time being "out of joint". The Christian fabric of Shakespeare's plays affirms man's responsibility for his choices. Likewise his Platonism, though recognising the Influence of "fortune" over men's births, never conceives of men as mere "playthings of the gods". Divine and demonic powers represent the universal forces that shape human events, yet all men choose in their hearts how they respond to these universal powers. In this lies their ultimate freedom. Put another way, the universal powers determine man's "existential situation", but not the way he meets that situation. That he determines himself. How he determines it, I believe, is what most interests Shakespeare, especially in the Tragedies. Through the choices he makes, so he comes to see the world.

Hamlet, through being unable to resolve the conflict between the demands of two different orders of love - filial and divine, represented by his father and Ophelia respectively - misinterprets the nature of the world and the spiritual possibilities of mankind. By his birth his duties lie with the "sanity and health" of the whole state of Denmark, not simply with his father. If "true kingship" has been usurped through Claudius's murder, then Hamlet's "spiritual" duty lies in the restoration of true kingship, not in revenge. Through his natural love of his father, Hamlet fails to see that the Ghost's demand for revenge was for his own satisfaction only, not for the welfare of the state. Revenge is in conflict with the universal good.

Universal Love is the only power that can attain the universal good. This is a truth writ large in Shakespeare's plays. But such Love transcends and overrides the circumscribed demands of all lesser loves. This is why Hamlet's love for his father, simply as filial love, is no basis for right action. It is what makes his father's death "so particular" to him and not the "common" grief of all men. Similarly, this is what makes Claudius's love for Gertrude a wrongful love. Love, removed from its ground in Absolute Beauty, is blind and "it shows a will most incorrect to heaven".

In Act V. Hamlet's love expresses itself very strangely, even demonically. The graveyard scene of this final Act is in many respects like a recapitulation of Act 1. Hamlet and Horatio dwell on the matter of death and mortality. As they gaze upon the bones of the dead, the body of Ophelia is brought to be buried. Laertes, with a father murdered and a sister lost in the madness of grief, and with revenge in his heart, mirrors Hamlet's original situation almost exactly. Yet Hamlet has no compassion for Laertes. Indeed, he sees Leartes's mourning as an attempt to "outface" his own sorrow, as though there were some gruesome "competition" in grief. He claims his love for Ophelia, to whose face he denied all love, was greater than Laertes's:

> I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
> Could not with all their quantity of love
> Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?
> (V. I. 264-266)

Is this the "noble" Hamlet we knew at the beginning of the plays Is all loss and grief so particular to him that of others is wholly eclipsed and nullified by his? This is a strange and dreadful change in him. And is it not curious that Hamlet fails to see why Laertes hates him? He seems oblivious of the fact that he is the murderer of Laertes's father, end that he is to Laertes now as Claudius was to him at the beginning of the play. Even later, when he expresses his regret to Horatio at treating Laertes so wrongly, he remains unaware of his real offence:

> But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
> That to Laertes I forgot myself;
> For by the image of my cause I see
> The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours.
> But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
> Into a tow'ring passion.
> (V. II. 75-80)

In what sense does Hamlet see Laertes's cause the portraiture of his own? He is blind to the parallel with Claudius. To say he will "court his favours", given the true situation, is not only verging on madness but practically makes light of Laertes's grief. It hints almost at the behaviour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who would "distract" Hamlet from his grief.

Throughout the final Act (with an important exception we shall see presently) it is evident that Hamlet has no grasp of his real situation or that of the world about him, though he assumes he does. His mockery of Osric, even if it be feigned madness or false levity (though in fact it is extraordinarily cruel and unworthy of the Prince of Denmark), actually serves to blind him to the trap that Claudius, now the agent of Fate, has set for him. Horatio discerns that Hamlet will lose the duel with Laertes and counsels him to withdraw, but

Hamlet will not hear of it. Whatever befalls from this point on has the distinct quality of inevitability about it. The ruthless power of Fate has been unleashed and will course unobstructed to its gruesome end.

Hamlet's plea for Laertes's pardon, though too late, is nevertheless extremely significant in the light of the theme of the play. As a mirror Image of Act 1, yet with the possibilities now irrevocably determined, Hamlet's plea for pardon shows how he might have shown heavenly mercy towards Claudius - by separating the person from the deed, which is Hamlet's own plea:

> What I have done
> That might your nature, honour, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'an away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
> Who does It then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
> (V. II. 226-235)

Through madness he was not himself. This is no vain excuse, but rather Hamlet is speaking the truth at last. Here we have a fundamental Shakespearean theme; when man acts according to his true nature, then he acts in accordance with the Divine Order in the "Image" of which he is made. For Shakespeare there is only one principle from which man should act: truth to himself. This, we recall, was the advice Polonius gave to Laertes at his leave-taking, and it is highly pertinent that Hamlet should remind him of it now at the moment of his own leave-taking from this world:

> This above all: to thine own self be true,
> And It must follow as the night the day
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.
> (I. III. 78-80)

To be true to "thine own self" is to be true to the self of every man, that is, to the "divinity" which is the essence of every self, the "image of God" that is every man. This is Shakespeare's understanding of the basis of Christian Love - to "love thy neighbour as thyself". It is therefore the basis of Shakespeare's conception of regenerative mercy and Grace: to distinguish the person from the deed when the deed does not express the true person. Grace transforms man back to his "own self" and into harmony with the Divine Order. Had Hamlet applied this transformative principle to Claudius, then the play would not have been s tragedy. But what Hamlet did do was "never Hamlet", it was his ignorance

of himself, his "madness", his failure to be true to his own self. In this failure he fails to be true to Claudius also, by identifying Claudius with his deed. And where men's deeds are not the mirrors of his true self, then they are the deeds of some other power or principle foreign to himself. This "foreign power" is Fate, the power that rules where man is estranged from himself. That is why Fortinbras exclaims "Where is this sight?" when he enters, and later when he observes:

> Such a sight as this
> Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
> (V. II. 406-407)

By "the field" Fortinbras means, of course, the battlefield. But the battlefield is symbolic of the realm of Fate where disharmony, strife and mutability reign, not "true kingship", Love, honour and Grace, symbolised in royalty and the royal court. But since these qualities have been negated, the royal court has become the battlefield of Fate, and thus the rightful kingdom of Fortinbras.

The play ends with the natural order reversed, with vengeance lord where Grace should rule, death where life should be. Horatio alone is spared, though he himself now sees death as true to his Roman nature:

> I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
> Here's yet some liquor left.
> (V. II. 346-347)

Death, in Hamlet's eyes too, remains the only path to felicity, yet he would have Horatio live and show the world, by way of a forewarning, his tragic error:

> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story.
> (V. II. 352-354)

In his dying words Hamlet plants a seed of Grace, showing thereby that, even though overcome by Fate, he is still truly Hamlet.

NOTES

1. These hermeneutical principles are derived, with some modification, mainly from Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* (1977, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press), For a valuable study see D, E. Klemm's *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricoeur* (1983, London: Associated University Presses). Although I have adopted some existentialist terminology in this paper, this does not imply

an existentialist interpretation. I have done so only with a view to articulating in modern terms what is implicit in the Platonic theory of art adopted in the Renaissance and which I believe is clearly evident in the plays of Shakespeare.

2. I am aware of course that the problem of revenge in *Hamlet* has been extensively discussed by scholars, some of whom have argued that man may be the legitimate vehicle through whom "divine vengeance" may be enacted. R.W. Dasai deals with the theological problem of revenge, for example in his *Hamlet as "The Minister of God to Take Revenge"* (English Language Notes XXXI, 2, December 1993). Martin Lings also in his *The Secret of Shakespeare* (London 1989) likewise maintains that Hamlet is justified in the Christian sense by avenging his father's death. He sees this vengeance as redemptive. However, I am not concerned in this paper with the moral question of revenge as something that can be objectively or doctrinally determined, but rather with the existential problem as Shakespeare sets it before us within the closed dramatic circle of this one play. The "meaning" of revenge is precisely what Shakespeare is exploring within *Hamlet*, and as a dramatist he is not concerned to impose a critique of morality from outside the world of the drama itself, but rather to explore the mode of being that decides in favour of revenge. Therefore he is not directly concerned with the outward moral act, but with the states of being in man that give birth to such acts. The levels of Grace, Justice and Revenge outlined in this paper are offered as a rough map through which we can focus on these inner states of man and the spheres of his possible action. The three levels exist within man, not outside. A similar view is taken by L. C. Knights in his *An Approach to Hamlet* (London, 1964) with which I am wholly in sympathy.

3. See *A Midsummer-Night's Dream,* V. I, 4-23, where the allusions to Platonic "frenzy" are explicit. For a precise and extremely interesting description of Renaissance understanding of the modes of frenzy see *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Vol. 1, Letter 7 (1975, London: Shepheard Walwyn).

4. For a full theological elucidation of the modern Christian understanding of the relationships between essence, existence, and Being see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 1. Part II (1978, London: SCM Press).