

Hamlet Against Revenge

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Most of us have believed, as Maynard Mack wrote in 1952, that "Hamlet's problem . . . is simply the problem of the avenger: he must carry out the injunction of the ghost and kill the king" (518). But perhaps an injunction to violent revenge is not so simple. Certainly *our* problem, as audience, readers, directors, actors, critics, though very similar to Hamlet's, is not simple. We must decide—for the best production of the play or response to it—whether the dramatic, and thus moral, intelligence which creates the play for us is essentially in favor of Hamlet's obedience to the ghost or against it and therefore which that intelligence intends *we* should be: for or against the heritage of violence the ghost represents.

Producers and critics of the play for the past two hundred years have overwhelmingly voted in favor of obedience and have given us a "melancholy Dane," whose "tragedy" is that he is too intellectual to speed properly to his revenge. He thus unfortunately gets caught himself in the otherwise satisfying blood-letting at the end. Still, most have agreed, the "sweet prince" is finally obedient to his father: He is able to purge Denmark of its rottenness by killing Laertes and Claudius. As he dies he names fine young Fortinbras to the throne in his own place, and he will be buried with proper military honors. Surely, as Horatio hopes, "flights of angels" will sing him to his rest.

But in the past twenty years there have been some compelling arguments against such obedience and its inevitable violence. In 1967 Eleanor Prosser helped us look more carefully at the evidence Shakespeare provides that the ghost is far from an obviously benign and trustworthy spirit, one to be quickly obeyed in actions that might imperil one's soul (18–25). Prosser also gave us a valuable exposition of the central conflict of the play, "To be or not to be," in its contemporary context. It was a form of the growing conflict

between the medieval Christian ideal of a peaceful, suffering, forgiving response to the evils of the world and the secular Renaissance ideal of active, passionate battle against those evils—a conflict, that is, between mercy and revenge. Hamlet, Prosser demonstrates convincingly in her analysis of the parallel structure and the intellectual antecedents of Hamlet's argument with himself, is trying to decide whether a man's true being comes from disciplined cultivation of mind and spirit that accepts God's creation as given and leaves its evils (except for our own, for which we can repent) for God to remove or punish—or whether it is “more noble in the mind” to assert one's will and force justice on others, even at the risk of death, of literally *not* being. And in these terms Hamlet chooses, of course, “not to be”; but Prosser argues forcefully that Shakespeare neither approves of that choice nor wants us to approve (160–65).

Prosser's book has been entirely ignored by directors and largely ignored by critics, but in the past five years there has been increasing support for her central argument from three quite varied sources: First, a number of people have begun to notice that the code, the attitudes and behavior, which his father encourages in Hamlet is terribly sexist, in fact is precisely what Robert Heilbrun has identified in the tragedies as the “man-honor-fight dogma” (qtd. in Bamber 17)—and that such a code, however much Shakespeare realistically illustrates it and its rationale, is morally bankrupt and meant to appear so. As David Leverenz writes in his essay “The Woman in *Hamlet*: An Interpersonal View,” “Hamlet's tragedy is the forced triumph of filial duty over sensitivity to his own heart” (111). Prosser did not make her case against the revenge code in feminist terms, but it is interesting that many of her (male) reviewers have dismissed her in what seem to be sexist terms, as if she is troubled by something that should only be troubling to a woman, one who does not understand the male duties and satisfactions that are part of the revenge code (e.g. Andrews, “Professor Prosser” 83–85).

A second support for Prosser's argument comes from another woman, Joan Hutton Landis. She is as profoundly troubled as Prosser about our easy acceptance of the revenge code, but she uses an entirely different and therefore powerfully validating approach. In an essay published in 1984 she reviews four references to Poland in *Hamlet* which establish that for Shakespeare that country “represents not only

the butt of aggression but the urge to fight regardless of cause" (8). Poland "thus connects old Hamlet to young Fortinbras as a double" in acts of displacement of violence and then connects both to young Hamlet: "Shakespeare is dramatizing the case of a superior human being, a true prince, being forced into the terms of an ethos for which he was not fitted and which in and of itself is reprehensible" (16).

A third support comes from René Girard, who in "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," also published in 1984, independently confirmed Landis's work with a more broad-gauged review of Hamlet's involvement, both as victim and victimizer, in the age-old processes of mimetic desire leading to violence, to revenge upon a scapegoat, and then to repression of the violence. The essay continues Girard's earlier argument (see *To Double Business Bound*) that it is only the greatest writers, like Dostoevsky and Shakespeare, who are able to escape the human community's need and persistent effort to hide its violence. In *Hamlet*, Girard argues, Shakespeare dramatizes the continuing cycles of violence that develop with the revenge code, giving us, if we are content to accept them, all the traditional incentives to revenge and the customary audience satisfactions of a bloody "catharsis" at the end. But Girard claims that Shakespeare also gives us ample basis for seeing that Hamlet's greatness lies not in his mere intelligence or ultimate bloodthirstiness but in his prolonged *revulsion* against the ethics of revenge. For Girard the greatness of the play lies not in the way it tantalizes us so long and cleverly before loading the stage with the victims we expect in a revenge tragedy, but in how it reveals more clearly than any other drama the horribly self-perpetuating processes of mimetic desire and violence—and reveals as well our complicity, as readers, in those processes ("Hamlet's" 172–173).

I venture here a brief reading of *Hamlet* against revenge because I am convinced such a reading increases our understanding and appreciation of the complexity and moral intelligence of the play and of Shakespeare as a person. But I venture also because we stand at a time in history when the perennially threatening spirals of violent revenge such as we see in Ireland and Lebanon have reached, in the absurd imitative posturing of the arms race, apocalyptic dimensions: We desperately need the help Shakespeare has given.

Before we even meet Hamlet, we learn that he is already enmeshed in a revenge cycle, one with all the traditional elements of

pride and imitative desire—and thus jealousy, violence, and displacing of the desire for revenge onto a scapegoat. And we see Shakespeare interject into the cycle the first instance of what will be the repeated image of Poland in its usual role as scapegoat, an image that will serve both to identify the victims and demonstrate his own abhorrence of the violence. Throughout the play that old cycle will both energize and serve as a definitive commentary on the new revenge cycle into which the ghost draws Hamlet: Old Fortinbras of Norway, “prick’d on by a most emulate [imitative] pride” (1.1.83), has challenged Hamlet’s father to combat and has been killed. Old Hamlet, who will soon appear to his son in the “very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated” and frowning as he did once “when in an angry parle / He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice” (1.1.60–64), has not only slain old Fortinbras but has claimed Norwegian lands forfeited as part of a mutual pledge in the duel. Now young Fortinbras is threatening to reclaim those lands. But diplomacy by the new Danish king, Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, and Fortinbras’s uncle, “Old Norway,” diverts Fortinbras to attack the same perennial scapegoat used by old Hamlet—and as we will see, by young Hamlet, too: Poland. By 1600 Poland had already become the focus and symbol for displacement of political hostility and bullying that it still is today.

Old Fortinbras had made old Hamlet into both a model and a rival, imitating him in his pride and in the things he desired, which, as Girard shows, is a pattern that led him to be both jealous and “ambitious,” which inevitably led to violence, which (as always) led to revenge and more violence. That spiral has been temporarily diverted in the traditional way, scapegoating, but young Fortinbras will return from Poland at the play’s end to claim Denmark, able to do so precisely because of the separate but mirror-like cycle which old Hamlet inflicts upon his son and which leads to the destruction of the Danish royalty.

When we meet him, young Hamlet is ripe for that infliction and ready to imitate his own double, young Fortinbras: He has already developed a plague-like malaise, certainly a version of that universal symbol—a literal, easily communicable, sickness—for reciprocal scapegoating and violence that Girard has explored so thoroughly (see “The Plague in Literature and Myth,” in *To Double Business Bound*).

He is contemplating suicide, rejecting the world as "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed," and he is obsessed with two of the universal elements of the scapegoating process: He tries to *differentiate* the potential scapegoat, his uncle, from his father ("that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr," 1.2. 139–40), and he prepares himself and us to excuse the violence about to be inflicted on the victim by *accusations* of incest. This is the pattern we always use when we seek a scapegoat: witches, Jews, "enemies" of any kind, are accused of perverse sexual sin, and their differences from us are exaggerated. But what makes this play especially educative, and thus moves us to the only proper admiration of Hamlet, is precisely what critics and psychologists (and modern directors) want to "cure" in him—his prolonged inability to convince himself of the truth of the ghost's phoney accusations and exaggerations about Claudius, no matter how frenzied he becomes in the attempt in Gertrude's bedroom (Girard, "Hamlet's" 177).

And we soon see how *un*differentiated the figures being swept up in the revenge spirals are: Old Hamlet was a double of old Fortinbras, and their sons become imitators of them and each other. Old Hamlet was also a double of his brother, Claudius: Claudius has killed him because of ambition that has led directly from jealous desire; he is in turn desired as much as old Hamlet by Gertrude and rules the state with as much cunning and force; and Claudius himself then gets swept up in revenge in response to young Hamlet when Hamlet tries to revenge his father. And finally Laertes, who imitates Claudius in seeking blood revenge, is imitated precisely by Hamlet, who becomes an absurdly competing ranter in Ophelia's grave and who also kills Laertes and Claudius with the same poisoned foil that they have used to kill *him*. Hamlet is the hero of this tragedy, not because he ultimately proves who is "different," who the real villain is, and wreaks his revenge, but because he has "that within" which for a while leads him to resist the "show" (1.2.85), by which I believe Shakespeare means both the social custom of blood revenge and the dramatic convention of revenge tragedy. Hamlet even moves out of the cycle entirely, but only for a moment after the graveyard scene; then he is swept up by the forces he has unleashed and is left to enjoy his revenge along with the other revengers, Claudius and Laertes (and

his father)—in the absolute undifferentiation and indifference of a pile of corpses.

Shakespeare carefully gives Hamlet (and us) a way to avoid this new cycle of violence: He provides good reasons to *resist* the ghost's command to murder Claudius. The ghost appears the first time in full armor, a clear reminder of some of his admitted "foul crimes done in my day of nature" (1.4.12), crimes which certainly include killing old Fortinbras and smiting the Polacks. Shakespeare suggests that the ghost is some kind of projection of Hamlet's malaise: He has the ghost repeat, in very similar language, Hamlet's effort in his earlier soliloquy to differentiate Claudius from himself and make him incestuous (1.2.137ff.; 1.4.42ff.). But Shakespeare is not being a theological or psychological quibbler; he has larger interests than the nature of spirits or of projection—or, for that matter, the legal definition of incest. Marrying a brother's wife was illegal in England from Henry VIII's famous change of mind until 1917, but it clearly had a much more ambiguous status in the imagined Denmark of *Hamlet*, where no one objects but Hamlet and the ghost. And though the ghost is seen by others even before Hamlet sees him, yet later that same ghost apparently is not able to be seen by Gertrude when it *is* by Hamlet—as if Shakespeare is warning us not to worry about the reality and truthfulness of the ghost so much as about its effect on Hamlet.

The effect is devastating—intellectually and morally. Shakespeare gives ample hints that a spirit that must leave at the approach of dawn is unwholesome. He gives an additional suggestion of the nature of that spirit when he has its voice return from "under the stage," from what Hamlet explicitly recognizes as "the cellarage"—a clear sign to the Elizabethan audience that this "old mole's" origin and home is hell (1.5.148–162). But despite all this Hamlet swears to remember and obey, and he does so in words that signal clearly that he is capable of idolatry as well as the blasphemy he later commits. He is willing to "wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" from his memory and let the ghost live "all alone" in his brain, "unmixed with baser matter" (1.5.98–103). In other words, he will give ultimate concern and authority to the ghost's command that he judge and execute

vengeance on his uncle, over and against everything he has learned from the law, from moral teachings, even from the Bible.

But we next see Hamlet, two months later, still debating with himself what to do. In calmer moments he has realized the moral and physical dangers of what he has been commanded: The apparition may be a "damned ghost" and his own imaginations "foul as Vulcan's smithy" (3.2.82-3), and an attempt at revenge on the heavily guarded King will quite likely bring his own death. In his most famous soliloquy Hamlet poses this dilemma exactly: "To be or not to be." This speech is not, as it is usually played, about whether to take revenge or to commit suicide. The syntax is absolutely clear in its parallel construction: "To be" is to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.55-57)—that is, to find one's being in accepting God's world and his will and in obeying *his* commands. "Not to be" is "to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing, end them" (3.1.55, 58-59)—that is, as the ghost commands, to try to do away entirely with evil, which he has focussed in the King (vain, Ahab-like blasphemy), and to end the pain of such troubles by being killed in the attempt or in the ongoing retribution of the King's guards or friends. There is hardly a more fundamental opposition in human experience: Is the truly heroic moral life to be found in absorption of evil, taking suffering on oneself? Or is it rather to be found in active assertion of one's honor and rights, including revenge? Is the ultimate spiritual energy and justification to be found in the ideal of mercy and reconciliation or in that of justice and revenge? The play is the drama of Hamlet's struggle with these contraries, his painful, articulate, attractive yieldings and his even more admirable resistances. And the play, I believe, stands ultimately against revenge.

We are distracted from the play's intent when the "to be or not to be" soliloquy is played or read as a sentimental evocation of our feelings about the supposed heroism of suicide in the face of "a sea of troubles." With magisterial indifference to what every well-foot-noted text clearly tells them, directors continue to have actors play the line, "When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin" (3.1.74-75), while soulfully contemplating a dagger pointed at themselves. But "quietus" does not mean something like "quietness in suicide"; it means to "write paid to his account" (see

Evans's note to 3. 1. 74, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*)—that is, to take revenge: The alternative to merciful living ("to be") that Hamlet is considering is not suicide but violent revenge and his own resultant death. Such misreading masks for modern audiences the full horror of Hamlet's conclusion, where he chooses, against his Christian and philosophic training and his conscience, not to be: Conscience, he claims, "makes cowards of us all." "Native [instinctual] resolution" is supposedly destroyed by "the pale cast of thought" so that we fail to act on "enterprises of great pitch and moment" (3. 1. 85)—which is what Hamlet (unaware of the irony, though Shakespeare certainly is not) calls murdering his uncle.

We soon see what such a decision "not to be" leads to: Hamlet uses the visiting actors to trap Claudius into revealing his guilt, but despite his earlier determination he holds back from a perfect opportunity to kill the King when he catches him at his prayers. If, at this point, we still think Hamlet is justified in obeying the ghost and righting the wrong done to himself and Denmark by Claudius, his decision not simply to kill the defenseless King and assume the throne should show us that he is becoming fully caught up in the damning coils of blood revenge: He succumbs to the devilish temptation to send the King's soul to hell by waiting to take his revenge when the King is not confessing his sins—entirely beside the point of any politically or legally justifiable retribution. Again, Shakespeare is not interested in doctrinal fine points about whether or not such a choice would really achieve its purpose. What interests him is Hamlet's intent, and that intent is brutal and blasphemous.

Shakespeare confirms Hamlet's growing brutality when he has him rashly, thoughtlessly, stab someone behind the arras (who turns out to be Polonius) and then follow up with the crude, conscienceless comment, "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room" (3.4.212). Shakespeare's judgment of Hamlet's loss of compassion is given extra force by Hamlet's unintentionally ironic word, "neighbor." Shakespeare later confirms Hamlet's blasphemy as well as his vengeful brutality when he has him trick Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, not merely into captivity in England that would preserve his own life, and not even merely to their deaths, but to an immediate execution—as he boasts to Horatio, "not shriving time allow'd" (5.2.47). Again Hamlet presumes to send souls to hell by preventing any opportunity

for them to confess before death. As he traces this decline in his "hero," Shakespeare, while putting in Hamlet's brilliant voice all the traditional arguments for revenge, steadily provides his own commentary on the ugly scapegoating and moral brutalizing that remorselessly follow the revenge spirit. For instance, Hamlet, moved by a more blessed instinct than he realizes, asks the chief of the freshly arrived Players to declaim Aeneas's account to Dido of the vengeful slaughter of his father Priam, king of Troy, by the victorious Greek, Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus's father, Achilles, had been ambushed by Priam's son, Paris. But when he wrote *Hamlet* Shakespeare had already shown (in *Troilus and Cressida*) his view of any "honor" that might justify Greek revenge by having a cynically cowardly Achilles direct his Myrmidons to kill the unarmed Hector, son of Priam. Thus Shakespeare here is ready to give us Pyrrhus as the true shape of blood revenge, "horribly trick'd / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons," in a passage so long (2.2.446-517) that it tempts directors to cut but thus also witnesses Shakespeare's desire to make his point clear. The passage thoroughly exposes the horror of Pyrrhus's "roused vengeance," which falls with "less remorse" than that of bestial Cyclops and moves Priam's wife Hecuba to grief that "Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven, / And passion in the gods."

The Player, like the gods he describes, is moved to tears, but Hamlet completely misreads what should be apparent to him and us: He claims such empathy is "all for nothing" ("What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?"), whereas for himself there is such "cue for passion" as ought to "drown the stage in tears" (2.2.561-62). Poetry designed to move its hearers to empathy and pity is perverted by Hamlet into an injunction to emulate wild, bloodthirsty revenge.

Thus Shakespeare shows us the moral and intellectual decline that is fostered by acceptance of the revenge ethic: Hamlet rejects the great possibility art has for revealing violence and moving us to compassion for the victim in favor of making art a device for encouraging his own spirit of reciprocal violence. No wonder Hamlet can soon come to the horrifying conclusion that conscience makes us cowards. No wonder that though he has continuing suspicions that the ghost "may be a dev'l" who "Out of my weakness and melan-

choly . . . Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.599–603), he can ignore the psychological insight implicit in those very words about how his own moral weakness, not the ghost, is what is leading him astray. Instead he prepares to *use* art (in the form of his own adapted drama, "The Mouse-trap") to "catch the conscience of the King," not in order to bring the King to repentance but so he can kill him (2.2.605). And no wonder that in that very effort he is naively ignoring the likelihood that the King's guilt is not the issue: The ghost may indeed be telling the truth about the uncle's murderous act, but precisely in order to lead Hamlet to the revenge; that is, to his own murderous act that will damn him—regardless of whether the ghost is father or devil or projection or whether the King is guilty. As Shakespeare has Banquo warn Macbeth (to no avail), "oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths" (1.3.123–4).

Hamlet's moral and rational decline, and Shakespeare's careful commentary, are shown even more clearly (though, again, modern directors often cut the passage) when Hamlet, on his way to England, observes Fortinbras and his army, who have been granted passage through Denmark on their way to invade Poland—the scapegoat arranged by those cynical doubles, Hamlet's and Fortinbras's uncles. Questioned by Hamlet, a Captain points out the absolute absurdity of the action, which will take many lives and much treasure to obtain a "little patch of ground" not worth farming. And Hamlet agrees, calling the whole matter "an egg-shell," "a straw." He recognizes that Fortinbras has no justification and that there will be only shameful waste in

The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot . . .
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain. (4.4.60–65)

But Hamlet's sinful indulgence in vengeance has continued to corrupt his reasoning powers, and his reflection on this absurdity leads to a conclusion exactly opposite of what it should. Shakespeare, with chilling irony, makes Hamlet's lines into a confused perversion of the Captain's and Hamlet's own earlier judgment: "Rightly to be great /

Is not to stir without great argument, / But greatly to find quarrel in
a straw / When honor's at the stake" (4.4.53–56).

The irony is compounded when we recognize that Fortinbras is doing precisely what Hamlet himself has already done, following a pattern begun by old Hamlet, who also "smote the Polacks": He is striking Poland as a substitute victim. Shakespeare, in order to make this pattern of scapegoating absolutely clear, changed the First Quarto name of the officious old counselor, Corambis, to Polonius—simply a variant of "Polonia," the founder and name source for Poland (Landis 10). When Hamlet in his own way smites the Polack through the arras, thus making Polonius into a substitute for the King, the links of mimetic envy, and also the chains of mimetic violence inherent in the revenge ethic, are made perfectly clear—to us, if not to Hamlet. And to complete the chain Shakespeare has Hamlet jealously refer to Fortinbras, in the speech of moral obtuseness just reviewed, as "that delicate and tender prince," imbued with "divine ambition" (4.4.48–9), the very quality in Claudius that led him to murder old Hamlet but that young Hamlet is now trying to emulate.

But Hamlet is far from simple. He refers to his revenge as "dull" (4.4.33), something that makes him "ill" in his heart (5.2.212), and before the play ends in its accumulated violence, his great qualities of intelligence and imagination, which make him probably the most fascinating character in all literature, come again to the fore—and his conscience returns. After the scene at Ophelia's grave, perhaps while reflecting on her death and the *memento mori* of Yorick's skull, he apparently can see feelingly where the pattern of revenge, of returning evil for evil, has led and will inevitably lead—to destruction and loss. He also can realize—as he reflects on the figure of Laertes, the stereotypical ranting avenger right out of Seneca, and remembers his own leap down into the grave with Laertes to outrant him—what he is turning himself into: Laertes's double in mimetic violence. He can see a perfect figure there—the two of them competing in vengeful threats while struggling in a grave—of their common fate in death and hell.

Right after letting us see Hamlet receive these opportunities for insight, Shakespeare shows us a somewhat different Hamlet. Besides planning to be reconciled to Laertes and agreeing to duel him, "in

sport," Hamlet seems to tell Horatio that he is trying to turn back to choosing "to be" and will not pursue his revenge:

Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart:
 . . . it is such a kind of [misgiving], *as would perhaps trouble a woman* . . . There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
 If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now;
 if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all . . . *let be*.
 (5.2.180–89; my emphasis)

This suggests that Hamlet is finally remembering some things he had purged from his mind in his capitulation to the ghost—such as Christ's command to "resist not evil" (Matt. 5.39) and Saint Paul's version, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12.21). He is choosing *to be* by trying to "let be," despite his sexist apology that the revenge spirit *should* only be troubling to a woman, not a man like himself—and despite Horatio's failure to understand what he is talking about. Hamlet, for a while, pulls back from his sin, that is, from presuming against God's express commandments not to judge or take revenge, a sin which he has clearly seen can only multiply the evils of the world in natural consequence.

But consequence from his earlier sins catches up with Hamlet, and as the supposedly friendly duel proceeds he learns that Claudius and Laertes, now obviously his doubles, motivated by the same sinful vengeance, have planned it to kill him. He reverts to his own vengeful anger and, after killing Laertes, not only stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil but also brutally forces him to drink the poison which has killed Gertrude. That poison is a perfect emblem of the poison of revenge that began with Claudius—poured literally by him into old Hamlet's ear but then poured figuratively by old Hamlet into Hamlet's and by Claudius into Laertes's ears. The poison that could have been stopped by Hamlet has now rotted all of royal Denmark, finally by his own hand.

Hamlet, coming back to himself as he dies, seriously doubts his own salvation—and yearns to return to the time when he could still choose "to be" or when he was ready to "let be": He pleads to Horatio, "Had I but time. . . . Oh I could tell you— / But *let it be*" (5.2.337–8; my emphasis). But Hamlet has for too long chosen "not to be" in every way—choosing to deny God and self in the fantasies of

imitative desire and violence as well as choosing the violent death he knew was the usual consequence. There is little reason to hope, in Horatio's wish, that flights of angels will sing him to his rest.

The earthly results of Hamlet's revenge are just as frightful. Young Fortinbras, returning from pillaging Poland, enters and takes over the kingdom, a continuation of his desired revenge on Denmark for Hamlet's father's killing of Fortinbras's father. Shakespeare leaves us with the final savage irony that Fortinbras (fortune embracer; strong-in-arms), as he claims his "vantage," imposes his own thoughtless militarism and decrees that to "honor" our gentle hero, Hamlet, "The soldiers' music and the rite of war / Speak loudly for him" (5.2.399-400).

There is nothing in the moral, spiritual, or political landscape of the final scene that we can imagine Shakespeare happy about. We certainly can take no comfort in some powerful "catharsis" that all this blood at the end may have provided, and apparently still provides, many in the audience. Some critics have seriously suggested that the fascinated fulfillment some feel in that last scene proves such things as that "Far from providing a perspective which reveals Hamlet's moral or spiritual inadequacy, the play gives its audience the satisfaction of vicarious participation in an act of blood revenge" (Andrews, "Hamlet" 83). We are told that "We are not merely resigned to Claudius's death: we hunger for it" and that Hamlet's long and successful campaign against Claudius "ends not only in the vengeance we have so desired, but in the destruction of all that Claudius represents" (Andrews, "Hamlet" 95, 101). This despite the evidence Shakespeare provides, clear enough if we will see, that Hamlet has merely produced six more corpses by the end and left Denmark to Fortinbras, who arrives fresh from victimizing Poland just as Hamlet has victimized Polonius. Thus Hamlet has merely perpetuated (even increased) the poisonous jealousy and resultant violence that Claudius represents.

I cannot see any reason to think Shakespeare believes that such a price is warranted—in art or life—to satisfy our lust for blood. Shakespeare is better than that, in every way. *Hamlet* stands against revenge.

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