

**“Faith which Worketh by Love”:
Justification in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

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*Beatae Mariae Semper Virgini,
Mediatrici, Coredemptrici, et Advocatae*

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Preface

Some contemporary interpreters of *Hamlet*—Peter Milward¹, *S.J.*, Clare Asquith², and more recently Joseph Pearce³—have compounded evidence that Shakespeare wrote literature of Catholic spirit in an England that suffered no opposition to the prevailing Protestant religion. By expanding and deepening their insights, one may apprehend more perfectly the integrity and coherence of Shakespeare’s drama. It yet remains to deliver *Hamlet* from the potent objections of its detractors, critics such as Samuel Johnson⁴ and T. S. Eliot⁵, who have found the play implausible, or dissipated in its realization. If, as Johnson maintained, the dramatic strength of *Hamlet* lies in its variety,⁶ one must nevertheless discover the artistic unity in this variety—or else yield to its critics. To see the work as more than a covert social or religious protest—as, indeed, a specifically Catholic classic—one must follow the symbolic transformation of Hamlet from fallen man to baptized soul infused with supernatural and life-giving grace. This interior renewal takes place against the backdrop of Lutheran and Reformed theologies that deny the necessity of works, and, by continual dramatic critique, Shakespeare outlines the traditional Catholic doctrine of justification. *Hamlet* is not fully appreciated because it transcends the culture of its composition by as much as theology transcends history.

This theological structure accounts for the abundance of Biblical references. The Geneva Bible, first printed in 1560 and then reissued in 1599, has been used to elucidate these often subtle uses of Scripture. There is clear evidence in *Hamlet* that Shakespeare used this translation, which, though produced by Calvinists, is objectionable to the Catholic less in the text itself than in the arguments and marginalia that serve to interpret the Scripture. The King James version had not yet been written, and the Catholic Douai-Rheims version, which in certain cases establishes even more forcefully this theological reading, existed only in the New Testament. Shakespeare was simply using a translation of the Bible that Englishmen would have easily recognized. The commentary indicates those few places where the Rheims New Testament of 1582 is used.

Shakespeare also brings Renaissance astronomical theory to bear upon his subject. The Copernican overthrow of the geocentric universe aptly expresses the revolution in perspective that comes from viewing the world through divine providence, rather than through human projects. There is consequently a recurring astronomical reference in the text, one that is best interpreted in theological terms, and which lends itself to apocalyptic visions. The earth-centered system, the embodiment of worldly and temporal fortune, must make way for the new God-centered creation. The destinies of the principal characters are bound up in this astronomical revolution.

Hamlet is sprinkled with references to Francis Bacon’s *Essays*⁷. It is likely that Shakespeare was pricked in his reading to address them, and found there additional material with which to work up his own masterpiece. He does not confirm these analogies in their original sense, but turns them on their heads, endowing them with an almost contrary meaning, as if to refute them. Far from insinuating Bacon as the true author of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s critique of Bacon’s worldly wisdom firmly shuts the door on the possibility. What is most baffling, however, is that

the references point to those essays of Bacon that were not printed until 1612 or 1625, many years after the publication of *Hamlet*. How then to account for the discrepancy of years? Given the times in which Bacon lived, and his piecemeal publication of the *Essays*, he likely withheld the publication of already existing essays, which, if they did not endanger his life, might yet have compromised his political career. These essays probably traveled in manuscript form within English literary circles prior to their printing. Absolute certainty in such matters is today all but impossible, and doubts of Shakespearean authorship will likely be maintained to the final generation. If the present interpretation of *Hamlet* is faithful, then Bacon was not the author, but was critiqued by the author, which accounts not only for the manifestly Baconian images, but also for their inversion.

The more broadly one considers Shakespeare's literary output, the less becoming is the application of any general method of interpretation. Yet, taking *Hamlet* in itself and apart from Shakespeare's other works, one may discern a technique that lends integrity to its excess: It is primarily through Shakespeare's unremitting wordplay that the seemingly uncoordinated elements of the drama are linked into a meaningful whole. The freshness and originality of his diction certainly owes something to this need to accommodate multiple meanings. The irony thus generated makes it necessary to read the drama at several levels. More Arachne than Ariadne, Shakespeare weaves a verbal web that resists fully linear development. A thematic exposition of *Hamlet* therefore befits the work more than commentary that retraces the dramatic sequence. Yet, inasmuch as the themes themselves depend logically upon each other, an effort has been made to order them coherently. The 1914 Oxford edition of *Hamlet* has been used, except where a single emendation from the *Quartos* is noted.

Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, this essay will not speak to everyone. It will have succeeded well enough if faithful Catholics, of whom there are still some number today, discover the wealth of spiritual reflection that Shakespeare has buried in this critically problematic work. *Hamlet* is not a rigorous apology that marshals arguments like Roman legions, but rather a pious meditation upon the means and meaning of mankind's spiritual regeneration. It serves as a reminder of a superior duty and destiny for all those who find themselves "crawling between heaven and earth." (III.i.125)

1. “Some Vicious Mole of Nature”

Due to the fall of Adam, mankind is incapable of pleasing God without the merits of the Redeemer and an infusion of sanctifying grace. Man’s actions, though often naturally good, are not ordered toward God, and are therefore devoid of supernatural merit. The king’s drunken revel aptly expresses this, for the original sin of Adam, communicated to the latest generation,

takes
From our achievements, though perform’d at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute. (I.iv.24-26)

By “attribute” one must understand merit, for merit or demerit is precisely what is attributed morally to our actions. Original sin is a stain upon the soul, or in Hamlet’s words, a “stamp” and “complexion” that corrupts reason and moral habits:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As, in their birth,—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin,—
By the o’ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o’er-leavens
The form of plausible manners; that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature’s livery, or fortune’s star,
Their 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: (I.iv.27-40)

“Mole” is a term for stain, used especially in relation to cloth, which has long been a symbol of virtue. It is “vicious” because it is the origin of man’s vices. The “vicious mole of nature” is not an actual sin committed by individuals, but is likened to “their birth,—wherein they are not guilty.” Shakespeare thus insinuates under the veil of base lineage the truth that original sin is communicated by begetting, and not by choice. The overgrowth of this “complexion,” again a term implying stain, but also bearing the obsolete meaning of “temperament,” breaks down “the pales and forts of reason.” That is to say, original sin corrupts reason in a two-fold manner. First, reason goes beyond its proper limits: “Pales” are long sharpened poles used in defensive works, but also signify borders, as in the expression, “beyond the pale,” which means beyond civilized boundaries. Second, original sin weakens the reason, even when reason operates within its proper compass: “Forts” are literally fortified places, meaning positions endowed with strength.

Original sin is a “habit too much o’er-leavens the form of plausible manners.” The insubstantial courtier, Osric, is a man of that sort. He has a “yesty” (yeasty) “outward habit of encounter” in which the “bubbles” burst under trial. (V.ii.134) By this Shakespeare also evokes the Gospel of Luke: “Take heed to yourselves of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is

hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1) By “nature’s livery” is signified purely natural virtue, which is worn externally as a garment, while “fortune’s star” refers to the worldly rewards accruing to man in this life. Neither is sufficient to merit eternal life. The “general censure” signifies the General or Final Judgment of mankind, in which those who remain in this state of original sin will be condemned for this “particular fault” that leads to ruin all of the virtues.

“Mole” has another meaning that is operative throughout the drama. It is a mass or heavy body. When Shakespeare employs these latter terms, he links the new context to his observations on original sin. Laertes warns Ophelia of Hamlet:

but you must fear,
His greatness weigh’d, his will is not his own,
For he himself is subject to his birth; (I.iii.21-23)

By “his greatness weighed” is signified Hamlet’s “vicious mole of nature” (I.iv.28). Laertes expresses the Reformed doctrine. Man, being “subject to his birth,” that is, to original sin, “his will is not his own.” That is, Hamlet’s will is in bondage to Satan. When Ophelia later observes that Hamlet’s sigh “did seem to shatter all his bulk” (II.i.106-107), the audience discovers that Hamlet does, in fact, have the freedom to choose. In a similar vein, Laertes warns Ophelia to “weigh what loss your honour may sustain” (I.iii.34), should she yield to Hamlet.

When the underlying meaning of Hamlet’s discourse is apprehended, one can appreciate Shakespeare’s humor in Hamlet’s opinion of the king’s drinking bouts:

But to my mind,—though I am native here
And to the manner born,—it is a custom
More honour’d in the breach than the observance. (I.iv.18-20)

To discern the reference, one must remember that the common Bible at the time of Shakespeare’s writing was not the King James or Douai-Rheims translation, but the Geneva Bible, which is called by collectors the “Breeches Bible” for its unusual translation. When Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator by eating the forbidden fruit, they discovered their nakedness: “Then the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig tree leaves together, and made themselves breeches.” (Genesis 3:7) Shakespeare is punning on “breach.” Hamlet acknowledges that he too is subject to original sin, being “native here and to the manner born.” But he does not condone the drunken revelry of Claudius. A proper reckoning of the fallen state must lead one to clothe the body modestly rather than to permit its “observance.” The moral life, before and after the Redemption, demands this “modesty of nature,” a recognition that the wounds of original sin continue to afflict human nature even after its regeneration:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature; (III.ii.5)

When Ophelia describes Hamlet as the “the observ’d of all observers, quite, quite down,” (III.i.136) one must understand that Hamlet is indeed “quite, quite down,” for he is in the fallen state of nature.

Hamlet naturally grieves for the loss that original sin represents, and reveals to his mother the deep anguish that he experiences. The particularity of his grief joins this scene to Hamlet’s discussion with Horatio of the “particular fault” (I.iv.40):

Queen. Do not for ever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
Thou know’st ’tis common; all that live must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
Ham. Ay, madam, it is common.
Queen. If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee? (I.ii.73-79)

The queen’s reference to “dust” recalls God’s punishment of Adam after his sin, a rebuke that is repeated on Ash Wednesday in the distribution of ashes: “thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3:19). Hamlet does not share his mother’s unreflective oblivion. His grief is indeed “particular”:

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems.’
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, modes, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly; these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.80-90)

Original sin is not only attributed extrinsically and legally to man on account of Adam, but is “that within which passeth show,” an intrinsic, grievous stain that leaves the soul dead to God. It is “particular” with Hamlet, as it must be for all men individually. The death over which Hamlet grieves, as insinuated by the reply of the king, is communicated from generation to generation as a consequence of Adam’s sin:

’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father:
But, you must know, your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his; (I.ii.91-94)

The king disapproves of such grief:

but to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief:
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven. (I.ii.96-99)

And yet hidden under the objections of Claudius are serious theological truths:

Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so.' (I.ii.105-110)

One may read these lines in a sense different from that ostensibly intended by Claudius. It is not primarily Hamlet's grief, but original sin itself that is a "fault to heaven, a fault against the dead, a fault to nature." Original sin is a "fault to heaven," for it is the rejection of God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is a "fault against the dead," for it condemned men yet unborn to a natural death on account of Adam's sin. And it is a "fault to nature" inasmuch as it inheres in man and precludes his likeness to God in sanctifying grace. Man has no choice in being born into such a state: "This must be so."

Not only is Hamlet subject to such a birth, but he also shares in the condemnation derived from it. After murdering Polonius, Hamlet is banished by Claudius to England, and his conveyors bring with them his death sentence:

Ham. Good.
King. So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.
Ham. I see a cherub that sees them. (IV.iii.44-46)

This banishment of Hamlet mirrors that of Adam:

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the earth, whence he was taken. Thus he cast out man, and at the Eastside of the garden of Eden he set the Cherubims, and the blade of a sword shaken, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:23-24)

The cherub that Hamlet sees is one of the cherubim that guard the paradise of Eden. But then a reversal takes place. Hamlet rewrites the death sentence, transferring it to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who die in his place. One cannot but see in this the likeness of Christ's Redemption. That is, all mankind is redeemed by Christ's suffering and death, reversing the writ demanding death. Again, there is a Scriptural analogy:

And you which were dead in sins, and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, forgiving you all *your* trespasses, And putting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us... (Colossians 2:13-14)

But this still must be applied subjectively to men to obtain their salvation. By letter, Hamlet addresses Claudius:

High and mighty, you shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. To-morrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes; when I shall, first asking your pardon thereunto, recount the occasions of my sudden and more strange return. HAMLET. (IV.vii.50)

From a theological standpoint, Hamlet recognizes his own nakedness and now seeks pardon from the “high and mighty,” signifying God. That is, he seeks admission to God’s kingdom. Shakespeare then puns on “character” when he puts into the mouth of Claudius: “’Tis Hamlet’s character. ‘Naked.’” (IV.vii.54) “Character” can refer to a personal style of writing, but literally means a stamp or impression. Shakespeare thus recalls the “stamp of one defect” (I.iv.35), the original sin in which man discovers his own nakedness.

2. “New-Lighted on a Heaven-Kissing Hill”

It has been suggested that the ghost, the image of the dead king, bears a Catholic identity.⁸ It remains to add evidence, as well as some important specification, to what has been observed elsewhere. Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Hamlet a description of his father that evokes the nature and origin of the Church:

See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed,
Where every god did seem to set his seal,
To give the world assurance of a man. (III.iv.65-72)

The Church, like its Founder, is divine and human. Hyperion, “the high one,” signifies the resident divinity itself, and the “front” or forehead of Jove, the thought of the highest God, that is, the divine Word. The “eye like Mars, to threaten and command” signifies the authority and jurisdiction of the Church militant, and in particular the pope, while “the herald Mercury” suggests the Church’s evangelical mission. The Church gives “the world assurance of a man” because it is the mystical body of Christ, God and Man, Who of all men possesses the perfect integrity of humanity, unsoiled by the sin of Adam. He stands as the object of hope and assurance to all who seek salvation by joining themselves to His Mystical Body. “New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill” recalls Christ’s address to his disciples:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill, cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Horatio uses a similar image to describe the coming of morning:

But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill; (I.i.186-187)

The “heaven-kissing hill” appears here, with the further specification of the sun rising in the East, a figure of Christ’s Second Coming. The sun rises over the dew, and in this one discovers the profound meaning of Hamlet’s desire:

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew; (I.ii.133-134)

This resolution of his “solid flesh” into “a dew” signifies the melting of his frozen heart by the divine attribute of goodness, here signified by the sun, “being a good kissing carrion.” (II.ii.196) There is also a pun in the command of the ghost: “Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me.” (I.v.99) The heart melts in the fire of charity, and, as Pearce notes, *à Dieu* is literally a direction to God.⁹

Several other clues to the nature of the elder Hamlet are revealed in his appearance as the ghost. In the first place, it demands an act of belief:

Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us: (I.i.33-35)

It cannot be destroyed:

We do it wrong, being so majestical,
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery. (I.i.163-166)

The “invulnerable” air signifies both Christ’s glorified Body and the indefectibility promised to the Church: “And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18) The “malicious mockery” of “vain blows” also suggest the treatment Christ received at the hands of his executioners:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered about him the whole band. And they stripped him, and put about him a scarlet robe. And platted a crown of thorns, and put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand, and bowed their knees before him, and mocked him, saying, God save thee King of the Jews; And spitted upon him, and took a reed, and smote him on the head. (Matthew 27:27-30)

However, the connection to St. Peter and his “canoniz’d bones” (I.iv.53) is even more explicit. When Horatio has a second encounter with the ghost, he demands of it:

Or if thou has uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,

For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death, [*Cock crows.*
Speak of it: stay, and speak! (I.i.154-157)

The crowing of the cock calls to mind the denial of Peter foretold by Jesus: “Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.” (Matthew 26:34). Shakespeare implies that churchmen have denied Christ, in this case by setting their sights upon earthly, rather than heavenly, treasures:

Lay not up treasures for yourselves upon the earth, where the moth and canker corrupt, and where thieves dig through and steal. But lay up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither the moth nor canker corrupteth, and where thieves neither dig through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Bernardo and Horatio describe the ghost thus:

Ber. It was about to speak when the cock crew.
Hor. And then it started like a guilty thing
Upon a fearful summons. (I.i.167-169)

Furthermore, Horatio describes to Hamlet the face of the ghost as having “a countenance more in sorrow than in anger.” (I.ii.246) One must recall: “Then Peter remembered the words of Jesus, which had said unto him, Before the cock crow thou shalt deny me thrice. So he went out, and wept bitterly.” (Matthew 26:75)

In this opening scene, the ghost will not speak to Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo. However, Horatio exhorts his companions:

Let us impart what we have seen to-night
Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him. (I.i.189-191)

Later, when Hamlet returns from his encounter with the his father’s ghost, he will not discuss the content of this revelation with his friends. Under one aspect, these friends represent those who died before the coming of Christ and the establishment of His Church, who yet sought Him and His justice in their hearts:

All these died in faith, and received not the promises, but saw them afar off, and believed *them*, and received *them* thankfully, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly, that they seek a country. And if they had been mindful of that *country*, from whence they came out, they had leisure to have returned. But now they desire a better, that is a heavenly, wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

Those who have not received Christ’s promises, especially the Jews before the time of Christ, but beholding from afar, as does Horatio, nevertheless die according to faith if, as “strangers,” they seek the “heavenly” country. And thus the exchange between Horatio and Hamlet:

Hor. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Ham. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. (I.v.186-187)

And then Hamlet refers to Horatio's "philosophy":

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I.v.188-189)

This "philosophy" can refer to those who, lacking revelation, had nothing to govern them but natural religion, that true but incomplete religion which reason of its own power can attain. But Shakespeare, by his one other reference to "philosophy," seems to suggest that those who labor under a merely human interpretation of Scripture, but genuinely seek God's word and its true interpretation, may yet possess the virtue of faith, so long as they have not culpably rejected divine revelation. Because Horatio has come from Wittenberg, it may be assumed that this would apply to some born and educated into Protestantism. For if Horatio "had been mindful of that *country*, from whence" he had come out, namely Wittenberg, he also "had leisure to have returned." Hamlet explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father lived, give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. (II.ii.268)

There is a recognition of the office of king, independent of the man who holds the office. If "philosophy could find it out," that is, if the Protestants could make the distinction between the sinful man who occupies the papacy, and the supernatural character of his office, their difficulty would be largely alleviated.

There is another indication that Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, belong to the Old Covenant. According to Catholic teaching, the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament had to wait until Christ redeemed mankind before themselves entering into heaven. When the Creed states that Christ "descended into hell," it is not the hell of the damned that is understood by this, but the "limbo of the fathers." According to Tradition, during the three days of His burial, Christ preached to those who had thus waited. In England, this was known as the "Harrowing of Hell." The text is suggestive:

Ber. In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Mar. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

Ber. Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

Hor. Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder. (I.i.54-57)

The apparition harrows Horatio, as Christ harrowed the ancient patriarchs and prophets. Horatio has not received the revelation from the ghost, but now has the virtue of faith, and therefore awaits this visitation from "the king that's dead." This harrowing also suggests the plowing and weeding of the soil as a preparation to planting, a theme that recurs throughout *Hamlet*.

3. “The Witness of these Gentlemen”

The ghost’s revelation mirrors that of Christ’s Gospel. The drama opens as Horatio joins Marcellus and Bernardo on the platform to prove the apparition of the ghost. Horatio will not accept the word of Marcellus or Bernardo concerning the reality of the apparition:

Mar. Horatio says ’tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us: (I.i.33-35)

Hor. Tush, tush! ’twill not appear. (I.i.40)

Absent from the first apparitions, as was St. Thomas, the Apostle, Horatio accepts the reality of the ghost only when it appears to him:

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible avouch
Of mine own eyes. (I.i.71-73)

The visitation of Christ to St. Thomas is also suggested by Horatio’s testimony to Hamlet:

thrice he walk’d
By their oppress’d and fear-surprised eyes,
Within his truncheon’s length; whilst they, distill’d
Almost to jelly with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him. This to me
In dreadful secrecy impart they did
And I with them the third night kept the watch;
Where, as they had deliver’d, both in time,
Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
The apparition comes. I knew your father;
These hands are not more like. (I.ii.211-221)

These prior apparitions suggest the first appearances of Christ. The Apostles, still in hiding from the Jews, had described the appearance to St. Thomas, but he refused to accept the reality of Christ’s Resurrection until he could put his fingers into the wounded side and hands of his Lord:

Then came Jesus, when the doors were shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace *be* unto you. After said he to Thomas, Put thy finger here, and see my hands, and put forth thy hand, and put it into my side, and be not faithless, but faithful. Then Thomas answered and said unto him, *Thou art* my Lord, and my God. Jesus said unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou believest; blessed *are* they that have not seen, and have believed. (John 20:26-29)

And thus, “these hands are not more like.” One perceives in this that Horatio has become a true believer, but only by the “sensible avouch” of his own eyes. Horatio proceeds to evangelize the young Hamlet, calling upon the “witness” of Marcellus and Bernardo to support his claim:

Hor. Season your admiration for a while
With an attent ear, till I may deliver,
Upon the witness of these gentlemen,
This marvel to you.
Ham. For God's love, let me hear. (I.ii.200-204)

The parallel with the First Epistle of St. John is manifest:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life, (For the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was made manifest unto us.) That, *I say*, which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye may also have fellowship with us, and that our fellowship also may be with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

Hamlet's urging takes on a theological aspect in that it is for the sake of "God's love" that Horatio is to reveal the matter. Horatio acknowledges that it is indeed "writ down in our duty" (I.ii.234) to share this knowledge with Hamlet, just as the Apostles were charged with the duty of preaching:

Finally, he appeared unto the eleven as they sat together, and reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him, being risen up again. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. (Mark 16:14-15)

Hamlet's similarity to St. Paul should be evident. The Apostle to the Gentiles speaks of himself in First Corinthians:

And last of all he was seen also of me, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the Apostles, which am not meet to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am that I am, and his grace which is in me, was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:8-10)

Hamlet, by his Lutheran association, presumably "persecuted the Church of God" and the true Faith. Shakespeare evokes this passage with Hamlet's lament:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right! (I.v.211-212)

The young student from Wittenberg is "one born out of due time," for which reason "time is out of joint." He is in the fallen state of nature and must "set it right," not only by faith, but by works, just as St. Paul "labored more abundantly than they all." As St. Paul was knocked from his horse, so too is Hamlet, but figuratively, for the horse, as will be seen, signifies Luther's heretical notion of justification. Hamlet's desire for the truth is most firm:

If it assume my noble father's person,
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace. (I.ii.263-265)

Hell would not have Hamlet communicate with the ghost at all, for the latter represents the Church and New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

4. "Thy Commandment All Alone"

The persistent theme of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the title character's inability to take revenge for the murder of his father. So violent an act would seem incongruous to Hamlet's spiritual regeneration, but there is ample evidence that Shakespeare intends his revenge to signify this very thing. Revenge by no means bore then the wholly immoral character assigned to it today. It signified the restoration of a just relationship. "Revenge" is derived from the French *se revenger*, which, in turn, derives from the Latin *revindicare*. Literally, *vindicare* meant to claim something legally as one's property. By extension, it also meant to claim as free, that is, to liberate. By the addition of the prefix, *revindicare* meant to claim again, or to claim by force one's own property. The French derivative, *se revenger*, is a reflexive verb, as is the typical English form, "to revenge oneself upon someone." The agent thus receives the action in some manner. Such is the case in Hamlet's reflection upon his opportunity to kill Claudius:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.
And now I'll do 't: and so he goes to heaven;
And so am I reveng'd. (III.iii.80-82)

One revenges oneself and one is revenged. Grammatically, at least, revenge is compatible with justification, for one cooperates in one's justification when justified by God.

Mankind's fall through Adam allowed Satan to claim the earthly creation for his own, but Christ's suffering and Redemption restored man to His Kingdom: "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out." (John 12:31) The wresting of mankind from Satan's dominion is also expressed in terms coincident with the classical notion of *revindicatio*:

But if I by the finger of God cast out devils, doubtless the kingdom of God is come unto you. When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, the things that he possesseth, are in peace. But when a stronger than he cometh upon him, and overcometh him; he taketh from him all his armor wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils. (Luke 11:20-22)

This overcoming of Satan by Christ is paralleled by the elder Hamlet's overcoming of Fortinbras, whose name in French means "strong arm." Fortinbras, "thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride" (I.i.100), challenged him to combat, just as Satan, whose sin was pride and envy, challenged God. The elder Hamlet by this "seal'd compact" (I.i.103) and "covenant" (I.i.110) defeated Fortinbras, just as Christ conquered Satan through his New Covenant. As Satan, "prince of this world," was forced to surrender to God his earthly kingdom, obtained through the fall of

Adam, so Fortinbras was forced by the elder Hamlet to “forfeit with his life all those his lands which he stood seiz’d of, to the conqueror.” (I.i.105-106)

Objectively, the kingdom ought to belong to young Hamlet, but, subjectively, he can only attain to it through revenge. The appearance of “revenge” with terms suggesting peace and mildness should alert the reader that this is no ordinary revenge play. When Hamlet’s father reveals that he was murdered, Hamlet responds:

Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge. (I.v.35-37)

The juxtaposition of “revenge” with “meditation or the thoughts of love” is certainly jarring. But one must grant to Shakespeare this poetic license, which most certainly does not err in its object. These “wings” are instrumental to revenge; they are the means, not the revenge itself. Shakespeare is affirming that one is justified by charity, the love of God. He subtly, but firmly, rejects the doctrine of justification “by faith alone” (*sola fide*). In the words of St. Paul: “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, neither uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.” (Galatians 5:6) It is precisely this operant form of faith that Hamlet lacks, even after believing the ghost’s revelation. Hamlet is “prompted” to his “revenge by heaven and hell” (II.ii.419), because man desires salvation and fears damnation. The necessity of both faith and charity to salvation is also expressed when the ghost binds Hamlet’s conscience in preparation for the directive:

Ghost. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.
Ham Speak; I am bound to hear.
Ghost. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (I.v.10-13)

There is a twofold obligation. First, one is bound to hear: “Then faith *is* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Romans 10:17) Second, one is bound to perform works:

What availeth it, my brethren, though a man saith he hath faith, when he hath no works? Can that faith save him? For if a brother or a sister be naked and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, warm yourselves, and fill your bellies, notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what helpeth it? Even so the faith, if it have no works, is dead in itself. (James 2:14-17)

Faith without works is dead. The “faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6) is, on the other hand, a living faith that justifies. As Pearce has recognized,¹⁰ Hamlet’s demand that Horatio and Marcellus swear not only by faith, but by the sword, signifies the need for both faith and works:

Ham. Never make known what you have seen to-night.
Hor. & Mar. My lord, we will not.
Ham. Nay, but swear’t.
Hor. In faith,

My lord, not I.

Mar. Nor I, my lord, in faith.

Ham. Upon my sword.

Mar. We have sworn, my lord, already.

Ham. Indeed, upon my sword, indeed. (I.v.161-169)

Horatio and Marcellus initially refuse to swear by the sword because they have already sworn “in faith,” which, to the Lutheran mind, guarantees a man’s justice in the eyes of God. But Hamlet has left Wittenberg far behind. He demands that they swear upon the sword, which sword, as Pearce notes, forms a cross, signifying the carrying of one’s cross. They must comply in deed (“indeed”). Hamlet’s friends eventually accede to his demand.

The ghost’s command to take the life of Claudius in revenge for murder elicits a resoundingly theological response from Hamlet:

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter: yes, by heaven! (I.v.104-112)

Shakespeare first makes a playful jibe about the “distracted” audience of the Globe Theater. But then follows Hamlet’s promise to live by the ghost’s command, wiping the tablet of his memory clean of all prior experience and habit. He even swears “by heaven” to do this, indicating the supernatural character of the obligation he has incurred. The supremacy of this duty mirrors that of the first and greatest commandment:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and the great commandment. And the second is like unto this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hangeth the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

But one need not stop at these outward indications that “revenge” signifies the perfection of faith in charity. Scripture itself employs the term in a sense that is spiritually commendable. St. Paul uses it to describe the very godly repentance of the Church at Corinth:

I now rejoice, not that ye were sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance; for ye sorrowed godly, so that in nothing ye were hurt by us. For godly sorrow causeth repentance unto salvation, not to be repented of, but the worldly sorrow causeth death. For behold, this thing that ye have been godly sorry, what great care it hath wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, *what* indignation, yea, *what* fear, yea, *how* great desire, yea, *what* a zeal, yea, *what* revenge, in all things ye have shewed yourselves, that ye are pure in this matter. (2 Corinthians 7:9-11)

The Apostle to the Gentiles credits the Corinthians with “revenge” (*vindictam*), indicating that the Corinthians are now “pure in this matter.” Clearly, St. Paul is not speaking of an act of violence against one’s neighbor, or even God’s revenge against the unjust, but rather the revenge of the spirit upon the flesh:

Nevertheless, though we walk in the flesh, yet we do not war after the flesh. (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God, to cast down holds.) Casting down the imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ, And having ready the vengeance against all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

Shakespeare likely had the writing of Bacon in mind when he chose to express spiritual regeneration by revenge:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office.¹¹

The meaning of Bacon is simply that by revenge one takes the law into one’s own hands. This is not only to disobey the law, but to abolish it. Shakespeare transforms this into a theological statement about man’s justification. Hamlet’s revenge “putteth out of office” the Law of Moses, which, of itself, could only yield “fruit unto death”:

For when we were in the flesh, the affections of sins, which were by the Law, had force in our members, to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the Law, being dead unto it wherein we were holden, that we should serve in newness of Spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. (Romans 7:5-6)

Man often obeys the law of concupiscence, which is of the flesh:

For I delight in the Law of God, concerning the inner man; But I see another law in my members, rebelling against the law of my mind, and leading me captive unto the law of sin, which is in my members. (Romans 7:22-23)

But the “Law of God,” that spiritual law of the “inner man,” can revenge itself upon that “law of sin” which is in the members.

In view of the theological meaning of “revenge,” Hamlet’s refusal to kill Claudius is supremely ironic. Hamlet realizes that Claudius is in prayer, possibly seeking God’s mercy for the murder of the elder Hamlet. It is precisely in Hamlet’s unwillingness to revenge himself that he fails in charity, for he desires Claudius to be eternally damned:

And am I then reveng’d,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season’d for his passage? (III.iii.91-93)

The ghost had already warned Hamlet of the dangers of soiling his mind:

But, howsoever thou pursu'st this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; (I.v.92-94)

This recalls the admonition given by St. James:

If any man among you seem religious, and refraineth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion *is* vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God, even the Father, is this, to visit the fatherless, and widows in their adversity, *and* to keep himself unspotted of the world. (James 1:26-27)

A man must remain “unspotted” and visit “widows in their adversity.” Hamlet clearly fails in obedience to his father's evangelical command when he chooses to confront his widowed mother with violent and cruel words:

Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites; (III.ii.284-286)

He carries out this intention even after failing in his intention to revenge his father's death.

5. “Our Old Stock”

The drama's first encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia signifies Hamlet's confrontation with Protestantism in light of his newfound Catholic Faith. Shakespeare alerts us to it by an allusion to Scripture. Ophelia describes Hamlet's parting to her father, Polonius:

That done, he lets me go,
And, with his head over his shoulder turn'd,
He seem'd to find his way without his eyes;
For out o' doors he went without their help,
And to the last bended their light on me. (II.i.108-112)

At the surface, Hamlet's behavior appears as an obsession with Ophelia. He is so mad for her love that he cannot take his eyes from her. But the spiritual interpretation of the episode depends upon St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “Therefore we are always bold, though we know that whiles we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. (For we walk by faith, and not by sight.)” (2 Corinthians 5:6-7) Hamlet “seem'd to find his way without his eyes.” That is, he now walks “by faith, and not by sight.” His whole comportment must henceforth be examined in light of the Catholic Faith. His odd behavior is a natural response to his discovery that Ophelia is not what he took her to be. In the spiritual signification, the Reformed communion is not the Church of Jesus Christ. He has perused her face, only to find that the beauty he sees is only an outward covering, not the inward reality. Shakespeare may also be thinking of an observation of Bacon:

It is a poor saying of Epicurus, *Satis magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus*: as if man, made for the contemplation of heaven and all noble objects, should do nothing but kneel before a little idol, and make himself a subject, though not of the mouth (as beasts are), yet of the eye; which was given him for higher purposes.¹²

“We are a great enough theater to one another.” Ophelia is an idol, not the proper object of his veneration. His letter to her, shared by Polonius with Claudius and Gertrude, already contained in seed the fruit of his perusal: “*To the celestial, and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia.*—” (II.ii.120) She is not beautiful, but “beautified”—outwardly. Hamlet is now confronted with the fact in an undeniable and inescapable manner. He lets go of her, only then finding his way out of her room “without his eyes,” thereby signifying his renunciation of Reformed theology and in particular its doctrine of justification. As Ophelia prefaced her own description of these events to her father, Hamlet appeared to be one “loosed out of hell to speak of horrors.” (II.i.93-94) Hamlet has indeed been loosed, and is now free from the error of a Christian sect. To describe Ophelia, one may quote Shakespeare’s *Sonnet XCV*:

O, what a mansion have those vices got
Which for their habitation chose out thee,
Where beauty’s veil doth cover every blot,
And all things turn to fair that eyes can see!

True love is fixed first upon God, as expressed by Shakespeare in *Sonnet CV*:

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
Fair, kind, and true is all my argument,
Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one.

Idolatry is the love and worship of a changeable creature. Charity is the love and worship of the immutable God: *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto, sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum*. Shakespeare’s verse, “one thing expressing, leaves out difference,” indicates the single and singular divine Nature. But this “one thing” is also “fair, kind, and true,” which, though applicable to the Blessed Trinity as a whole, can be appropriated to the three really distinct Persons in God: “Three themes in one.”

Though Hamlet has not yet arrived at charity, he has been freed by faith from the illusion of carnal love. This explains his apparent self-contradiction in the staged encounter with Ophelia:

Ham. I did love thee once.

Oph. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Ham. You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it: I loved you not. (III.i.121-123)

There are two answers, one for each kind of love. Hamlet once loved Ophelia out of self-love. But he did not love her with charity, that is, for the love of God. The “old stock” recalls original sin and its communication from Adam down to the latest generation. To “inoculate” is to graft a new branch upon a tree, recalling Christ’s analogy: “I am that vine, ye *are* the branches;” (John 15:5) Paul’s warning to the Romans is even more apposite:

For if the firstfruits *be* holy, so *is* the whole lump; and if the root be holy, so *are* the branches. And though some of the branches be broken off, and thou being a wild Olive tree, wast grafted in for them, and made partaker of the root and fatness of the Olive tree; Boast not thyself against the branches; and if thou boast thyself, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches are broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well, through unbelief they are broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear. For if God spared not the natural branches, *take heed*, lest he also spare not thee. (Romans 11:16-21)

Shakespeare is communicating some profound truths. One may understand Hamlet to be saying that even after being grafted into Christ, man retains a certain concupiscence or “relish” for things sinful. There is another law in man’s members warring against the spiritual law. It extends to the act of procreation, so that even children begotten in holy Christian unions will be born into original sin. Therefore Hamlet follows up this observation by enjoining Ophelia: “Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (III.i.125) In the convent Ophelia would learn to restrain and discipline this concupiscence.

But *oculus* means in Latin both a bud and an eye. To “inoculate” is literally to “put the eye into.” Shakespeare by a single word has evoked two images. The first is that of grafting. The second is that of vision:

The light of the body is the eye; if then thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be light. But if thine eye be wicked, then all thy body shall be dark. Wherefore if the light that is in thee, be darkness, how great is that darkness? (Matthew 6:22-23)

This is the spiritual eye whereby man “looketh in the perfect Law of liberty.” (James 1:25) The secondary sense therefore repeats and reinforces the reference to Paul’s letter: “For if the firstfruits *be* holy, so *is* the whole lump; and if the root be holy, so *are* the branches.” Human nature is truly sanctified by the application of Christ’s Redemption. The Calvinist doctrine of “total depravity” is false.

6. “The Table of My Memory”

Shakespeare is a master at evoking complex relationships by a single phrase. In an offhand manner, he manages to establish an important relationship between Hamlet and Horatio in their first meeting at Elsinore:

Hor. Hail to your lordship!

Ham. I am glad to see you well:

Horatio, or do I forget myself. (I.ii.165-167)

The reference, perhaps not immediately obvious, is to the Epistle of St. James:

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness, and superfluidity of maliciousness, *and* receive with meekness the word that is grafted in you, which is able to save your souls. And be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any hear the word and do it not, he is like unto a man who beholdeth his natural face in a glass. For when he hath considered himself, he goeth his own way, and forgetteth immediately what manner of one he was. But who so looketh in the perfect Law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he not being a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:21-25)

Horatio comes to Hamlet bearing the news of the ghost’s appearance, which word is “ingrafted” by Hamlet’s faith. Yet Hamlet delays to carry out the command of his father. This is a moral failure of the highest degree: Hamlet is a man who hears the word of God, as ministered by the Church, but is forgetful of the attendant obligation, most especially that of charity. Can so much be expressed by so simple a greeting? The answer depends, in part, on the perfection of art which one credits to Shakespeare. But one may also confirm this reading by recourse to Hamlet’s conversation with Horatio prior to the enactment of the *Mouse-trap*:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal’d thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hast ta’en with equal thanks; and bless’d are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well comingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee. (III.ii.27-38)

Horatio is the man Hamlet would wear in his “heart of heart,” the inmost recess of his person. This “election” of which Hamlet speaks has a twofold meaning. First, it is Hamlet’s choice of Horatio as the charitable, equable, and long-suffering man he would befriend and imitate: “Horatio, thou art e’en as just a man As e’er my conversation cop’d withal.” (III.ii.17-18)

Second, it is God's eternal election of Hamlet, which has sealed the Christ-like Horatio for himself. Thus it is that Hamlet wears him "in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart." For it is the supreme part of the human heart in which Christ would dwell. Hamlet perceives that Horatio masters his passion, so that he is no "pipe for fortune's finger." Horatio is not only a "hearer of the word," but one of the "doers of the word":

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. (III.ii.3)

Horatio is the man with the true "gait" and "accent" of a Christian, who not only mouths the doctrine of the Church, but suits the action to the received word of the Gospel:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now, this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O! there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. (III.ii.5)

In this life the features of virtue are known only in one's actions. These acts are the "mirror" in which one may observe virtue and vice, much like the mirror that Hamlet holds up to Gertrude's gaze:

You go not, till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you. (III.iv.25-26)

Hamlet has looked into this mirror of works and forgotten what sort of man he is. The initial exchange between Hamlet and Horatio is continued:

Ham. I am glad to see you well:
Horatio, or I do forget myself.
Hor. The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.
Ham. Sir, my good friend; I'll change that name with you. (I.ii.166-169)

Hamlet's interior man is initially in servitude to the outer. That subordination will be reversed by Hamlet's spiritual regeneration. But he must first return to the Catholic Faith:

Ham. But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?

Hor. A truant disposition, good my lord. (I.ii.174-175)

The question is not only asking what makes Horatio come from Wittenberg, but what he makes of it. Horatio judges Wittenberg, “in faith,” to be of a truant disposition. Hamlet’s regeneration begins with his rejection of Lutheranism. That done, it remains for Hamlet to obey his father’s parting words: “Hamlet, remember me!” (I.v.99) Hamlet vows it in the most absolute of terms:

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter: yes, by heaven! (I.v.104-112)

The forgetfulness of this “tardy son” (III.iv.122) will be addressed by the ghost’s subsequent reminder: “Do not forget.” (III.iv.126) But Shakespeare suggests after the vow that Hamlet has already forgotten in the deeper theological sense:

My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I’m sure it may be so in Denmark:
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
It is, ‘Adieu, adieu! remember me.
I have sworn’t. (I.v.115-120)

The recording on a tablet of his observation that a man may be outwardly pleasant, but inwardly evil, appears downright bizarre, unless one calls to mind *Sonnet CXXII*:

Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
Full characterized with lasting memory,
Which shall above that idle rank remain
Beyond all date, even to eternity;
Or, the least, so long as brain and heart
Have faculty by nature to subsist,
Till each to rased oblivion yield his part
Of thee, thy record never can be missed.
That poor retention could not so much hold,
Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score.
Therefore to give them from me was I bold,
To trust those tables that receive thee more.
To keep an adjunct to remember thee
Were to import forgetfulness in me.

To see in Shakespeare's sonnet no more than a clever apology for ridding himself of a gift is to pass over the theological bearing of the poem. In the figure of a writing tablet, the Bard has distinguished the lasting and spiritual memory from the fleeting and physical. Hamlet's keeping of these "tallies," a hedonistic calculus of sorts, contributes to the spiritual malaise afflicting him:

*O dear Ophelia! I am ill at these numbers:
I have not art to reckon my groans;* (II.ii.129-130)

Hamlet's love for Ophelia is wholly natural, not at all supernatural. He has preferred a physical table to that capacious spiritual table in which the divine commandment must dwell. Thus, keeping an "adjunct" to memory, he has imported "forgetfulness" in himself.

These "tables" appear elsewhere. In her madness Ophelia babbles, "God be at your table!" (IV.v.37) This refers not only to the question of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist, but to His spiritual indwelling in the tablet of memory. When Hamlet exclaims, "My tables,—meet it is I set it down," (I.v.115) one ought also to hear, "the funeral bak'd meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." (I.ii.186-187) The table of Hamlet's memory is marked not by love, but by cold thrift and calculation.

7. "Mad in Craft"

Hamlet's "madness," so called by himself and other characters of the play, is central to understanding his flaw. His altered behavior is observed carefully by Claudius, who points to both an inward and outward change in the man:

Something you have heard
Of Hamlet's transformation; so I call it,
Since nor the exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was. (II.ii.6-9)

Shakespeare allows one to peek at the theological meaning of this "madness" through Hamlet's protestation to his mother, the queen:

I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. (III.iv.208-209)

The most straightforward interpretation given this statement is that Hamlet is merely feigning madness. Certainly, Shakespeare allows his audience to believe that it is nothing more. Yet "craft" has more than a single meaning. It has the sense of "cleverness" and "deception," but at its most basic, it simply means "work." It is this last sense that allows Shakespeare to discuss the relation of faith and works under the cover of Hamlet's madness. Hamlet is not mad "essentially," that is, according to substance and faith, but "in craft," that is, in his works. Hamlet has the faith, but he lacks the charity that is required for a man's justification.

Charity, a virtue of the will, depends upon man's cooperation with God's grace. Although one can trace the cause of charity to God's efficacious grace, malice, which is the privation of charity, cannot be resolved into the divine action. Shakespeare often puts into the mouth of the foolish Polonius wisdom that Polonius can scarcely comprehend. Such is the case in his bumbling attempts at eloquence in describing the "cause" of Hamlet's madness:

Your noble son is mad:
Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad? (II.ii.102-104)

At the superficial level, Polonius is speaking a tautology: madness is merely to be mad. But if the third line has as its antecedent not "true madness," but "to define true madness," he speaks something more profound. It is madness to attempt to define madness. It is theologically impossible to trace the lack of charity to an external cause, for it is a privation, the cause of which lies in itself. The will is truly free to cooperate with or reject grace. Reason is stupefied when it attempts to get beyond the contingent act. By this observation, Polonius undoes Luther's doctrine of the will. He continues to bumble brilliantly in the unseen wisdom of his foolishness:

Mad let us grant him, then; and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause; (II.ii.111-114)

This "madness" is not an effect, but a defect, a privation of what ought to be present. It is therefore true that "this effect defective comes by cause." For the effect of God's sufficient grace is vitiated by cause of a man's failure to cooperate with that grace.

This madness in Hamlet is posterior to the act of faith, for Hamlet is "Excellent, i' faith." (III.ii.59) Polonius again manages to capture the essence of the problem verbally without so much a clue as to what he is saying: "Though this be madness, yet there is a method in't." (II.ii.205) Indeed, faith does have a method. Properly speaking, it is the acceptance of a truth on account of the authority of a revealer. Having a certainty of its own, it is far removed from unstable opinion. Divine faith, because its Revealer can neither deceive nor be deceived, is absolutely certain. Reason can demonstrate that there is a God, and that this God is all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful. Such truths belong to the preambles of faith. Man sees in the extrinsic works and miracles of Jesus Christ a divine character, thereby proving His divinity. Man then accepts Christ's teaching and moral imperatives as infallible. These include the establishment of the Church as caretaker of the deposit of Faith and governor of God's kingdom on earth. Hence it is that man submits his judgment to its doctrine and edicts. But, though entirely reasonable, faith does not arrive at its contents by an act of human reason: "by my fay, I cannot reason." (II.ii.238)

It is the divine origin of these doctrines that allows man to transcend reason in its natural capacity. In this vein Hamlet addresses the ghost of his father:

What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous; and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (I.iv.57-62)

What can these “thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls” be, except those doctrines revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church? What may this mean, but that by faith in God’s revelation man is enabled to transcend the limits of his own reason and read something of the thoughts of God? Polonius observes the results of this transcendence in Hamlet, though he understands it wholly in terms of a physical or mental ailment: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of.” (II.ii.207)

Polonius erroneously thinks that Hamlet’s “madness” is caused by the unrequited love he bears for Ophelia. Claudius sees through this claim in a way that Polonius cannot, and fears Hamlet accordingly:

Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And, I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; (III.i.145-150)

Claudius is correct that Hamlet’s affections do not tend toward love, especially if this be taken for divine love. What Hamlet speaks does lack form, for charity is the form of all the virtues. Polonius, for his part, will not abandon his suspicion:

but yet do I believe
The origin and commencement of his grief
Sprung from neglected love. (III.i.159-161)

Indeed, Hamlet’s grief does issue from neglected love. But it is not Ophelia’s neglect of Hamlet’s love that is the cause. It is Hamlet’s neglect of his own obligation to charity. Guildenstern observes of Hamlet:

Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state. (III.i.9-12)

Hamlet’s “true state,” his “crafty madness,” demands a “confession,” and here one must understand the Catholic sacrament.

The theological dimension to Hamlet's madness is also revealed in his explanation to Guildenstern that his mother and uncle are deceived: "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." (II.ii.272) The reference to a "southerly" wind is from Scripture. It alludes to the warning given by Christ to the hypocrites:

Then said he to the people, When ye see a cloud rise out of the West, straightway ye say, A shower cometh, and so it is. And when *ye see* the South wind blow, ye say, that it will be hot, and it cometh to pass. Hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the earth, and of the sky, but why discern ye not this time? (Luke 12:54-56)

The meaning of "hawk" is established in Hamlet's greeting to the players: "Masters, you are all welcome. We'll e'en to't like French falconers, fly at anything we see: we'll have a speech straight." (II.ii.301) So "hawk" is associated with straight flight. The exact sense of "handsaw" becomes clear when Hamlet advises the players on the proper method of acting:

Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. (III.ii.3)

When the wind, signifying also grace, comes from the South, he is able to distinguish between straight or honest action and excessive passion.

8. "Like Sweet Bells Jangled"

Charity is the form of all the virtues, and directs the faculties supernaturally toward God. Without this supervening virtue, infused by divine grace, the soul cannot attain its final end. The lower virtues, naturally intact by habit, but lacking the elevation of grace, are disordered and of no supernatural merit:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and Angels, and have not love, I am *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I had the *gift* of prophecy, and knew all secrets and all knowledge, yea, if I had all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and had not love, I were nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

Hamlet's lack of charity manifests itself in the corruption of these lower virtues. He has become a "sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal," as put in the mouth of Ophelia:

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh; (III.i.139-140)

Shakespeare cleverly expresses the consequence of this lack of charity for the other virtues, again through the plaintive voice of Ophelia:

O! what a noble mind is here o'erthrown:
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword; (III.i.132-133)

The mind instinctively and unconsciously reorders this, so that Hamlet once possessed the courtier's fluid tongue, the soldier's agile sword, and the scholar's penetrating eye. Such were the case if Hamlet had the virtue of charity. Without charity, the natural virtues are disordered. To follow the parallelism of the sentence exactly, Hamlet now possesses the courtier's eye, presumably envious, perhaps even lustful, the soldier's tongue, no doubt profane, and the scholar's sword, feeble and untrained.

9. "God's Bodikins"

Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," is oft quoted, but its theological significance is overlooked, because it is disguised by Shakespeare's verbal gymnastics. It is generally taken to describe the option of suicide as a means of coping with the evils of this world:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? (III.i.80-86)

Faced with copious and persistent suffering, would not man rather make his "quietus," his release and rest from trouble? A "bare bodkin," or a "mere sewing needle," does emphasize the fragility of a life that can be easily ended by so trivial an instrument. But Shakespeare demands a more profound understanding when Hamlet chides Polonius for the latter's strict justice in accommodating the acting troupe:

Pol. My lord, I will use them according to their desert.
Ham. God's bodikins, man, much better; use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. (II.ii.372-373)

"Bodikin" denotes the canopy of an altar. It is the equivalent of the modern English "baldachin," from the Italian, *baldacchino*. Hamlet, then, is swearing by God's altars. When the actor voices "bare bodkin," Shakespeare wishes the discerning auditor to also hear "bare bodikin" or "empty altar." In the context of the English Reformation, the meaning is clear: The Catholic can put an end to his persecution by submitting to the new communion around a mere supper table, neglecting the sacrificial character of the Mass indicated by the reference to an altar. This Protestant understanding of a Eucharistic service is also signified in Ophelia's blessing of Claudius and Gertrude: "God be at your table!" (IV.v.37)

Hamlet's command to Polonius to "use them after your own honor and dignity" is a recognition of the importance of charity, which goes beyond strict justice. By charity, man loves God and loves his neighbor for the sake of God. It is by this alone that mankind merits supernaturally and is rewarded with the vision of God in eternity: "the less they deserve, the

more merit is in your bounty.” And here also is buried a deep insight into Hamlet’s heart. When he swears by God’s altars, the relevant Scripture must be recollected:

Ye fools and blind, whether is greater, the offering, or the altar which sanctifieth the offering? Whosoever therefore sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whosoever sweareth by the Temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that sweareth by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. Woe *be* to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye tithe the mint, and anise, and cummin, and leave the weightier matters of the Law, *as* judgment, and mercy and fidelity. These ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other. Ye blind guides, which strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel. (Matthew 23:19-24)

Christ is condemning the Pharisees, who have neglected their highest duties. Shakespeare is saying that man must become an altar and offer himself to God in sacrifice. The altar being sanctified by grace, one’s sacrifices are also sanctified. A “bare bodkin,” then, is an empty altar, signifying the man without charity. Hamlet is himself the hypocrite that swears by the altar, but neglects “the weightier matters of the Law.” Since “quietus” means a legal settlement, one who makes his “quietus” with God in such a state will indeed face divine punishment.

Shakespeare takes up this theme of man as altar in Hamlet’s anticipation of why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have come to visit him:

I have of late,—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; (II.ii.250)

One is tempted to envision Hamlet gesturing to the canopy of the new Globe theater, on which were painted numerous stars, likely clouded with “a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” generated by the lighting and the unwashed “groundlings” (III.ii.3) on the floor. But this “most excellent canopy” is also the baldachin of God’s cosmic altar. In view of Hamlet’s further description of man, one must also see it as a description of Hamlet himself, who, as a man, is microcosm to the macrocosm of the sky and earth. Though “quintessence” can mean the concentrated essence of a thing, its original meaning, one still alive to Shakespeare’s hearers, is the incorruptible element of which the heavenly bodies are composed. Thus, “this quintessence of dust” signifies both man’s earthy nature and origin in dust and his spiritual and incorporeal element, namely, his eternal soul. Man is composed of body—“this goodly frame, the earth”—but also of soul—“this most excellent canopy.” Shakespeare’s cosmic vision of man may have been borrowed from one or another of the humanists, but its theological bearing is likely derived from the Argument to the Book of Genesis in the Geneva Bible:

Moses in effect declareth the things which are here chiefly to be considered: First, that the world, and all things therein, were created by God, and that man being placed in this great Tabernacle of the world to behold God's wonderful works, and to praise his Name for the infinite graces, wherewith he had endued him, fell willingly from God through disobedience; who yet for his own mercies' sake restored him to life, and confirmed him in the same by his promise of Christ to come, by whom he should overcome Satan, death and hell.

This theological vision also explains the repetitious use throughout the drama of “bawd,” which literally denotes a harlot. The term first appears in the warnings received by Ophelia from her father, Polonius, to beware of Hamlet:

Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,
The better to beguile (I.iii.135-139)

What, then, is a “sanctified and pious bawd”? By verbal association it is a “sanctified and pious altar.” In view of the Polonius's Lutheran character and associations, one may take this to be a theological warning to Ophelia to keep a distance from Catholicism and its altars. These altars are both the physical altars on which Our Lord is daily sacrificed and the sanctified altar of the soul, so inimical to the Lutheran understanding of justification. The two-fold sense of “bawd” is sustained later when Ophelia seeks to return Hamlet's gifts. At one level, Hamlet is calling Ophelia a harlot for returning them:

Oph. Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?
Ham. Ay, truly; for 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: (III.i.120-121)

But one may also understand that the power of beauty is what draws the man of faith to self-sacrifice in charity, transforming him into a living altar. Hamlet continues the play on words: “Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (III.i.125) “Nunnery” can mean “convent,” as it does even to this day, but in Elizabethan times it also meant “brothel.” A “bawd” in a “nunnery” can therefore signify either a harlot in a brothel or a nun in a convent. Hamlet's off-color and often off-putting humor thus has a wholly different spiritual dimension. The other terms with which Laertes urges Ophelia to steer clear of Hamlet likewise suggest his possible conversion:

Perhaps he loves you now,
And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will; (I.iii.19-21)

“Cautel” generally means “caution,” but in Elizabethan England it also referred to the “cautels of the Mass,” the rubrics that regulate the priest's offering of the Sacrifice. Laertes, like Polonius, is warning Ophelia of Hamlet's possible conversion, later to be effected symbolically in the drama.

He advises her not to listen to Hamlet's songs "with too credent ear" (I.iii.35), thereby suggesting that Hamlet may draw her toward the Catholic creed.

10. "The Indifferent Children of the Earth"

The Bard explores in depth the situation of the man without charity. The cause for such a state is expressed in Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be":

who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of? (III.i.86-92)

This puzzlement of the will is the subject of much reflection in the tragedy, whence some commentators have taken indecision to be Hamlet's tragic flaw. These interpreters are correct, inasmuch as Shakespeare connects Hamlet's lack of charity with a form of indecision. But Hamlet shows himself capable of acting in many circumstances; his indecision extends only to his inability to revenge the murder of his father. As has been argued, this revenge signifies his justification, the overcoming of original sin.

The key to understanding this paralysis of the will is fear. Man is prompted to correspond to God's grace, but in his fallen state, his will is divided. His motive is imperfect. He does not act out of love, but out of "the dread of something after death," a servile fear of punishment. It is this "dread" that "puzzles the will" and does not allow Hamlet to fulfill the command of heaven:

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 pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. (III.i.93-98)

These "enterprises of great pith and moment" recall the remarks made by Hamlet on the platform of Elsinore describing how the "vicious mole of nature" (I.iv.28) takes away "the pith and marrow of our attribute" (I.iv.26), the supernatural merit that would attend man's works. A man in the fallen state of nature has the fearful "conscience" of a slave. Man would be freed of his difficulties, but

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life; (III.i.75-79)

A “rub” is an impediment, but to stop here is to miss Shakespeare’s theological reference. Souls that repent of their sins for the love of God are in a state called “contrition.” But souls that repent for fear of divine punishment are in a state called “attrition,” which literally means rubbing or abrading. They seek forgiveness out of a form of self-love, one that certainly recognizes their true good, but which lacks something in the motive. “Attrition” is therefore sometimes called “imperfect contrition.” This “respect,” this backward glance out of servile fear, gives pause to the will, turning its enterprise aside and voiding its obligatory act of love. St. John addresses this in his first epistle: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear, for fear hath painfulness, and he that feareth, is not perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18) This should be compared to the advice given Ophelia concerning Hamlet by her brother Laertes:

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister;
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire. (I.iii.38-40)

And then the more general advice:

Be wary then; best safety lies in fear:
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near. (I.iii.48-49)

The Lutheran theology of justification, which denies the necessity of works performed in charity, can only offer fear as a preventative to immoral action. Fear is everywhere in *Hamlet*. To name but a few instances: Horatio is harrowed “with fear and wonder” (I.i.57) at the appearance of the ghost. The ghost itself, not yet perfected in charity by the fires of purgatory, “started like a guilty thing on a fearful summons.” (I.i.168-169) Marcellus and Bernardo are “distill’d almost to jelly with the act of fear.” (I.ii.213-214) Hecuba is “*in the alarm of fear caught up.*” (II.ii.360)

While charity extinguishes fear, self-love grows apace with it. That is the meaning of the thoughtful, but flawed, discourse that transpires between the player-queen and the player-king:

*For women’s fear and love holds quantity,
In neither aught, or in extremity.
Now, what my love is, proof hath made you know;
And as my love is siz’d, my fear is so.
Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;
Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.* (III.ii.114-119)

The love of the player-queen has proven to be self-love that seeks its own good, and therefore fears for its own loss. It distrusts the beloved and is ultimately faithful only to itself. Its calculations are “*base respects of thrift, but none of love*” (III.ii.131), which calls to mind the “respect that makes calamity of so long life.” (III.i.78-79) Such self-love is inherently unstable and subservient to changing fortune:

*This world is not for aye, nor ’tis not strange,
That even our love should with our fortunes change;
For ’tis a question left us yet to prove*

*Whe'r love lead fortune or else fortune love.
The great man down, you mark his favourite flies;
The poor advanc'd makes friends of enemies.
And hitherto doth love on fortune tend,
For who not needs shall never lack a friend;
And who in want a hollow friend doth try
Directly seasons him his enemy. (III.ii.148-157)*

The vows and intentions made under the influence of this earthly and transient love are such as destroy themselves by the grief and joy they engender:

*Most necessary 'tis that we forget
To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt;
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy;
Where joy most revels grief doth most lament,
Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident. (III.ii.140-147)*

Polonius understands love to be of the same nature:

When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows: these blazes, daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,
Even in their promise, as it is a-making,
You must not take for fire. (I.iii.124-128)

Claudius holds the love that Laertes bears toward his father, Polonius, to be that same sort of self-love. In order that the intention not be lost, Laertes must seek his revenge swiftly, before his love abates:

Not that I think you did not love your father,
But that I know love is begun by time,
And that I see, in passages of proof,
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,
And nothing is at a like goodness still,
For goodness, growing to a plurisy,
Dies in his own too-much. That we would do,
We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents;
And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh,
That hurts by easing. (IV.vii.122-135)

This “spendthrift sigh” issues from the tongue of that “prodigal” soul of which Polonius speaks, the soul that “lends the tongue vows.” And “goodness, growing to a plurisy, dies in his own too-much,” undone by the same “*violence of either grief or joy*” described by the player-king. “There lives within the very flame of love a kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,” reinforcing the observation of Polonius that these blazes of love are extinct in both light and heat, “even in their promise, as it is a-making.” All of these characterizations are true of self-love, which is indeed “begun by time,” not in eternity.

When Hamlet, the modern Pyrrhus who would revenge the murder of his father, is presented with an opportunity to act and to be revenged, his lack of charity impedes. The sword of Pyrrhus sticks in the air, and it is this that causes “*senseless Ilium*” to crash down:

*Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear: for lo! his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seem'd i' the air to stick:
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing. (II.ii.327-335)*

Likewise, Hamlet’s failure to avenge himself is the mediate cause of Denmark’s downfall. Hamlet, as a tyrant “*painted*” with words, “*like a neutral to his will and matter*,” is unable to act. His intention, contrary to his initial vow, is “mixed with baser matter” (I.v.112) and therefore marked with indifference. It is this indifference to which he refers when he tells Ophelia:

I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. (III.i.125)

Shakespeare is using “indifferent honest” in a more exacting, even technical, sense than would be suggested by translating it as “somewhat honest.” “Indifferent” honesty is a faith in which the believer is divided between the law of the spirit and the law of the flesh. This worldly indecision leaves man with the inclination to the worst of crimes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are certainly of this mold:

Ham. My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?
Ros. As the indifferent children of the earth.
Guil. Happy in that we are not over happy;
On Fortune’s cap we are not the very button.
Ham. Nor the soles of her shoe?
Ros. Neither, my lord. (II.ii.216-221)

Neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern has the virtue of hope. In response to Hamlet's observation that the world is a prison, Rosencrantz replies, "Why, then your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind." (II.ii.233) By "ambition," Shakespeare signifies hope, which those who inhabit the worldly prison-house share with those who inhabit the extra-worldly one, that is, purgatory. The subsequent turn of the conversation makes it clear that Shakespeare is using the term in this way:

Ham. O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Guil. Which dreams, indeed, are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

Ham. A dream itself is but a shadow.

Ros. Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow. (II.ii.234-237)

The "substance of the ambitious" signifies faith according to the formula: "And faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the argument of things not appearing." (Hebrews 11:1, Rheims 1582) Hamlet, in the spiritual signification, has faith, and his hopes could be realized, except that his will is indisposed: "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." These "dreams" are also cited in Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be":

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. (III.i.76-78)

Hamlet, himself "indifferent," remains divided in his will. He knows the doctrine and believes, but is unable to exercise his faith. Were he not bound in servile fear, he would act. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for their part, have fully accommodated themselves to this world. They do not seek salvation, but are pleased to reap as much enjoyment as possible from the present life. One may even say that they are practical atheists. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the "substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream." That is, "ambition" or hope, is a product of the fear of death, which is "a dream." Faith is merely a formula that undergirds those fear-born hopes, a "shadow" cast by them in the soul. Hamlet replies that a dream, or fear of death, is itself a shadow, as indeed it is. For it is an eclipse of man's heart.

11. "The Primal Eldest Curse"

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* mirrors the story of Cain and Abel, the sons of our first parents. The initial reference to this murder comes unwittingly at the expense of Claudius, who has murdered his own brother:

Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme

Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so.' (I.ii.105-110)

The "first corse" was not Adam, but his son, Abel. Hamlet's grief is thus connected to the guilt of Claudius in the murder of his brother. As though to reinforce the point, Claudius subsequently advises Hamlet: "We pray you, throw to earth this unprevailing woe." (I.ii.110-111) The "earth" calls to mind God's reply after Cain denied responsibility for his brother:

Then the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? Who answered, I cannot tell. Am I my brother's keeper? Again he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. Now therefore thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. (Genesis 4:9-11)

The reference is echoed in Hamlet's initial address to the ghost:

Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again. (I.iv.52-57)

These "ponderous and marble jaws," the very "mouth" of the earth that has received the blood of the elder Hamlet, now cry out against the fratricide. Paul's epistle to the Hebrews clarifies the motive Shakespeare had in making the ghost a bearer of the divine command:

By faith Abel offered unto God a greater sacrifice than Cain, by the which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts, by the which *faith* also he being dead, yet speaketh. (Hebrews 11:4)

The elder Hamlet's ghostly image continues to speak even after his death, and by this reference we also understand that Hamlet's father was "righteous." As has been shown, the elder Hamlet represents the Roman Church, which, though it has faults in its members, is nevertheless essentially just. Claudius, on the other hand, represents the Anglican communion, with an implication of essential injustice.

It is no accident that Shakespeare chose to enact these different communions in the persons of Cain and Abel. For the two brothers each offered sacrifice, and thereby signify the priesthood:

And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought an oblation unto the Lord of the fruit of the ground. And Abel also himself brought of the first fruits of his sheep, and of the fat of them, and the Lord had respect unto Abel, and to his offering, But unto Cain and to his offering he had no regard. Wherefore Cain was exceeding wroth, and his countenance fell down. (Genesis 4:3-5)

The difference in the nature of the offerings must be emphasized. Cain offered the “fruits of the earth,” signifying thereby gifts that are bound up in carnality and the attainment worldly ends. Abel offered the firstlings of his flock. As the flock is consistently used to signify Christian believers, Abel’s sacrifice can be understood as self-sacrifice on the part of the Christian, in imitation of and participation in the Redeemer’s primary and efficacious Sacrifice on Calvary. Claudius is aware of the similitude between Cain and himself. As he makes a vain attempt at contrite prayer, he observes:

O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t;
A brother’s murder! (III.iii.42-44)

But Shakespeare uses the story of Cain and Abel to greater effect than the distinction of kings and communions. Hamlet is urged to revenge by the ghost, yet with this caveat:

But, howsoever thou pursu’st this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; (I.v.92-96)

Hamlet, as the dead king’s son and presumably the direct heir to the kingdom, would have the political authority and right to dispense justice against his treasonous uncle. But the warning of the ghost remains. Hamlet must not “taint” his mind with hatred or an excessive anger. In doing so, he would exceed his mandate and become a murderer in his own right:

Whosoever hateth his brother, is a manslayer; and ye know that no manslayer hath eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15)

He has shown his lack of charity before, in a prophetic way, by announcing to Horatio:

Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Ere I had ever seen that day, Horatio! (I.ii.188-189)

Hamlet understands the revenge he is to seek as the satisfaction of his own hatred. He cannot appreciate mercy:

A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven. (III.iii.83-85)

With superlative irony, it is precisely at the moment that Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius, that he becomes guilty of spiritual murder:

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent;
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At gaming, 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.95-102)

This fatal resolution, deriving from Hamlet's lack of charity, will be punished severely as the drama progresses, in keeping with the Biblical account of Cain and Abel:

Behold, thou hast cast me out this day from the earth, and from thy face shall I be hid, and shall be a vagabond, and a renegade in the earth, and whosoever findeth me shall slay me. Then the Lord said unto him, Doubtless whosoever slayeth Cain, he shall be punished sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any man finding him should kill him. (Genesis 4:14-15)

Hamlet is indeed punished sevenfold for his lack of charity. Seven characters die in consequence of Hamlet's refusal of revenge: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself. When charity dies, so do the other virtues, namely, prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, and hope. Thus, the dependence of the other six virtues upon charity is made manifest in the death of seven principal characters.

12. "A King of Shreds and Patches"

If the elder Hamlet represents the Church and, in particular, its vicar, the Pope, then Claudius represents the king of England, Henry VIII. Claudius, like Henry, has married his brother's wife. At a superficial level, the determination by the Holy See that the marriage of Henry VIII was valid seems to run counter to the claim of adultery and incest. The ghost declares:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (I.v.50-54)

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest. (I.v.90-91)

Hamlet shares in this assessment of incest, both before and after his encounter with the ghost:

O! most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets. (I.ii.160-161)

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent;
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed, (III.iii.95-97)

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Danes,
Drink off this potion;—is thy union here?
Follow my mother. (V.ii.265-267)

Shakespeare is by no means defending the claim of Henry VIII that his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was invalid. Rather, he has translated the marital union into the spiritual realm, thereby making a devastating criticism under an outward guise of loyalty to the king.

Through his “oath of supremacy,” Henry VIII seized from the successor to Peter the keys of the kingdom. Gertrude, this “most seeming-virtuous queen,” represents England, which, by this oath, has transferred its loyalty from the Roman Catholic Church headed by Peter to a merely temporal and worldly king. While pricking the conscience of his mother, Hamlet describes Claudius in terms that specify the schismatic act:

Ham. A murderer, and a villain;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cut-purse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket!
Queen. No more!
Ham. A king of shreds and patches,— (III.iv.110-117)

Claudius is “a slave that is not twentieth part the tithe” of the elder Hamlet. The “tithe” denotes a contribution of money owed to the Church, but now appropriated by the English King after the Act of Supremacy of 1534. After the confiscation of ecclesiastical properties, the tithes once paid to the monasteries were transferred to the crown and the new secular owners. Claudius is also “a king of shreds and patches,” a reference to the division of Christ’s garments:

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments (and made four parts, to every soldier a part) and *his* coat; and the coat was without seam woven from the top throughout. Therefore they said one to another, Let us not divide it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be. *This was* that the Scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my garments among them, and on my coat did cast lots. (John 19:23-24)

The coat “woven from the top throughout” has been understood to signify the indissoluble unity of the Church founded by Christ. Claudius has severed England from One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to found a communion that does not possess the unity granted to the Church. He is thus a “king of shreds and patches.” Henry VIII is a “cut-purse” in two senses: First, he has snatched the “precious diadem,” that is, the authority signified by the papal tiara. Second, he has seized the property of the Church as booty to be distributed to his political supporters.

But the coat “woven from the top throughout” also signifies the virtue of charity, which gives integrity to all the virtues and cannot be divided from itself. Hamlet’s observations on acting can thus be applied to this “king of shreds and patches”:

O! it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o’er-doing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it. (III.ii.3)

Besides the “tatters” and “rags,” two other features of this speech point decisively to Claudius. First is the reference to “Termagant,” the god of the Muslims in English mystery plays. This recalls Hamlet’s denigration of Claudius as a “moor.” (III.iv.77) Second is the reference to Herod, who lived in an incestuous relationship with his brother’s wife.

To fix this historical and religious meaning in the ear of the listener, Shakespeare has Gertrude question Hamlet in her own self-defense:

Ay me! what act,
That roars so loud and thunders in the index? (III.iv.61-62)

The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, issued by Pope Paul IV in 1559, and renewed at the Council of Trent, proscribed heretical or dangerous books. By the queen’s objection, Shakespeare suggests the descent of England into the heresies of Protestantism. Hamlet counters Gertrude with the aforementioned comparison of Claudius to the elder Hamlet:

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? (III.iv.76-77)

“This fair mountain” is also the “heaven-kissing hill” (III.iv.69), signifying the Church founded by Christ. In comparing the “fair mountain” to a “moor,” Shakespeare suggests that Claudius is an infidel who wars against the Church. The warning of St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy is congruous: “If there be any that provideth not for his own, and namely for them of his household, he denieth the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” (1 Timothy 5:8) Shakespeare may also be invoking an anecdote transmitted in Francis Bacon’s *Essays*:

Mahomet made the people believe that he would call an hill to him, and from the top of it offer up his prayers for the observers of his law. The people assembled; Mahomet called the hill to come to him, again and again; and when the hill stood still, he was never a whit abashed, but said, *If the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the hill.*¹³

The Christian Gospel brings Mahomet’s lack of faith into the greatest relief:

And Jesus rebuked the devil, and he went out of him, and the child was healed at that hour. Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief; for verily I say unto you, if ye have faith *as much as is* a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. (Matthew 17:18-20)

The evil spirits afflicting England, which is personified in Queen Gertrude, cannot be cast out, because the nation lacks the Faith. An attempt is being made to establish society upon mercenary and utilitarian ends. Thus the call of Claudius to his “Switzers” in the face of Laertes’ insurrection (IV.v.68). These “Switzers” are those praised by Lord Bacon in the *Essays*: “We see the Switzers last well, notwithstanding their diversity of religion and of cantons. For utility is their bond, and not respects.”¹⁴

13. “Confess Yourself to Heaven”

The closet scene in which Hamlet upbraids his mother for her lack of fidelity bears a number of marks that suggest the sacrament of penance. The very term, “closet,” as an analogue of the confessional box, suggests that Shakespeare may have conceived the scene in such terms. After being reminded of his task by the ghost, Hamlet would have his mother confess her betrayal:

Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks;
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven; (III.iv.164-169)

Hamlet desires his mother to confess “for the love of grace.” This has a two-fold meaning. First, she should desire to be restored to a state of sanctifying grace, that she may be saved. Second, she ought to desire charity, the love of God, which is borne to her by divine grace. He presses her for three conditions that make for a good confession:

Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. (III.iv.170-172)

“Repent what’s past”: One must have godly sorrow deriving from true repentance. “Avoid what is to come”: One must make firm resolution not to sin again. “And do not spread the compost on the weeds to make them ranker”: One must intend to avoid the proximate occasions on which sin feeds. Hamlet’s urging continues. He would draw repentance from the queen. He would have her heart cease in its state of division and indifference:

Queen. O Hamlet! thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
Ham. O! throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half. (III.iv.176-178)

And then, unable to elicit a proper repentance, Hamlet, like a good confessor, advises his mother to form the outward habit of virtuous action, that it may prepare the way for true repentance:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night;
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And master ev’n the devil or throw him out
With wondrous potency. (III.iv.180-190)

This “stamp of nature” is the stain of original sin from the first act. Man’s fallen nature demands supernatural regeneration. This stamp, together with Satan’s mastery of the soul, can “almost” be overthrown by habit. But no purely natural “livery,” even if formed for some great temporal good, suffices to justify a man in the eyes of God. Divine grace is necessary. Shakespeare appears to be qualifying Lord Bacon’s doctrine:

Nature is often hidden; sometimes overcome; seldom extinguished. Force maketh nature more violent in the return; doctrine and discourse maketh nature less importune; but custom only doth alter and subdue nature.¹⁵

One can interpret the mere “outward habit of encounter” (V.ii.134) with which Hamlet charges Osric and others as a lack of supernatural virtue guised in pleasing countenance and manner. The hidden signification of Polonius’ advice to Laertes is now laid bare: “Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy.” (I.iii.77) Polonius is advising him to seek the reputation and outward show of virtue, not its underlying spiritual reality.

14. “Like Niobe, All Tears”

The queen’s failure to repent of her infidelity is suggested forcefully by Hamlet’s condition for receiving her blessing:

And when you are desirous to be bless’d,
I’ll blessing beg of you. (III.iv.191-192)

Besides evoking the withheld act of sacramental absolution, the text makes an obscure but important Scriptural reference:

Take heed, that no man fall away from the grace of God; let no root of bitterness spring up and trouble *you*, lest thereby many be defiled. Let there be no fornicator, or profane person as Esau, which for one portion of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward also when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place to repentance, though he sought *the blessing* with tears. For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, nor unto burning fire, nor to blackness and darkness, and tempest, Neither unto the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words, which they that heard it, excused themselves, that the word should not be spoken to them anymore, For they were not able to abide that which was commanded, Yea, though a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned... (Hebrews 12:15-20)

The “root of bitterness” is nothing but the “fat weed that roots¹⁶ itself in ease on Lethe wharf” (I.v.40), causing forgetfulness of the divine law. It is also the bitter “wormwood” (III.ii.129) of the *Mouse-trap*. England, in the person of Gertrude, has rejected the Catholic Faith and, desiring “to inherit the blessing,” is now refused, because it will not repent of its apostasy. Hamlet’s “whirlwind” (III.ii.3), the grace and Gospel of the Church, which is “trumpet to the morn” (I.i.170), have not produced a change of heart, “For they were not able to abide that which was

commanded, Yea, though a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned...” Gertrude, and with her England, is that “beast that wants discourse of reason.” (I.ii.154)

Hamlet describes his own mother in the figure of Niobe. The allusion has an offhand character, as though merely to emphasize the tears shed then in comparison with her all too quick oblivion of her former husband:

A little month; or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears; why she, even she,— (I.ii.151-153)

The allusion lays dormant for a couple of acts. It is only with the scene in the queen's closet that one finally apprehends its meaning. But one must first understand more fully the myth recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ Niobe, daughter of Tantalus, takes great pride in the number of children she has begotten, seven sons and seven daughters. Her hubris, the product of her great fortune, causes her to vie in honors with the goddess Latona, who has only two divine children, Apollo and Diana. Niobe, dressed in Phrygian robes, arrives in the midst of sacrifices to Latona, but extols her own divinity instead:

movensque decoro
cum capite inmissos umerum per utrumque capillos
constitit, utque oculos circumtulit alta superbos,
“quis furor auditos” inquit “praeponere visis
caelestes? aut cur colitur Latona per aras,
numen adhuc sine ture meum est?”¹⁸

And tossing with beauteous head her uncut hair upon each shoulder, she stops, and, standing erect as she bears about her haughty eyes, she says, “What madness is this, to prefer gods only heard of to those seen? Or why is Latona worshipped by altars, while my divinity is still without incense?”

Faith is by hearing, and goes beyond the natural limits of vision. Niobe forbids sacrifice to Latona, just as England forbids the Sacrifice of the Mass. She trusts unhesitatingly in her own good fortune, and considers herself beyond reach:

sum felix (quis enim neget hoc?) felixque manebo
(hoc quoque quis dubitet?): tutam me copia fecit,
maior sum quam cui possit Fortuna nocere,
multaque ut eripiat, multo mihi plura relinquet,
excessare metum mea iam bona.¹⁹

I am happy—for who can deny this?—and I shall remain happy—who can also doubt this? Abundance has made me safe; I am greater than he whom Fortune can harm, and as many the things that she snatches away, more by far will she leave behind for me. My goods have now banished fear.

But her happiness is short-lived, for she has angered Latona, who jealously guards her own prerogatives and sacrifices. For Niobe's insolence, her fourteen children are slain, her husband takes his own life, and she, who prided herself a god, is left with nothing but her own grief:

orba resedit
examines inter natos natasque virumque
deriguitque malis; nullos movet aura capillos,
in vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis
stant inmota genis, nihil est in imagine vivum.
ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato
congelat, et venae desistunt posse moveri;
nec flecti cervix nec brachia reddere motus
nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscera saxum est.
flet tamen et validi circumdata turbine venti
in patriam rapta est: ibi fixa cacumine montis
liquitur, et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant.²⁰

The bereft woman sat down among her lifeless sons, daughters, and husband, and grew stiff with evils. The wind moves no hair; in countenance her color is bloodless; the eyes of her sad face stand unmoved; nothing is alive in the scene. More inwardly, the tongue itself is frozen together with the hard palate, and the veins cease to be movable. Neither can the neck be bent, nor the arms render motion, nor the foot go. Within, her entrails are also stone. Nevertheless, she weeps and, whirled about by a strong wind, she is snatched up into her fatherland. There, fixed to the peak of a mountain, she flows, and the marble drips tears even now.

Shakespeare draws upon this image of Niobe to express the state of Gertrude's, and hence England's, soul. He invokes this image especially by his choice of diction. Gertrude's heart is hardened:

Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down,
And let me wring your heart; for so I shall
If it be made of penetrable stuff,
If damned custom have not brass'd it so
That it is proof and bulwark against sense (III.iv.42-46)

The Church, again in the guise of the ghost, alone can bring about her repentance:

His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stone,
Would make them capable. (III.iv.143-144)

Besides the connection to Ovid, the more obvious reference is to the words of Christ:

Bring forth therefore fruits worthy amendment of life, and begin not to say with yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father, for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. (Luke 3:8)

Christ's charity, "form and cause conjoin'd," has the power to melt the hardest of hearts. Hamlet also refers to the queen's pulse:

My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music. (III.iv.160-161)

But because Niobe's veins are immovable, Hamlet's pulse would seem to be no less rigid than the queen's. The queen later describes Hamlet to Claudius as:

Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend
Which is the mightier. (IV.i.9-10)

The passion of Hamlet is the very tempest that has swept up Niobe, in the person of Gertrude. But in this whirlwind Hamlet has failed to temper his speech with charity:

Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. (III.ii.3)

He has also failed to live up to the Church's example, exemplified in the his dead father's treatment of his mother:

so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. (I.ii.144-146)

These "winds of heaven," with which he upbraids his mother, also recall the Descent of the Holy Spirit: "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing *and* mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they sat." (Acts 2:2) "Spirit" (Πνεῦμα or *Spiritus*) means a blowing or breath. Gertrude is filled with remorse, but remains impenitent. By her own admission, she has not corresponded to the offer of grace:

Be thou assur'd, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me. (III.iv.218-220)

Gertrude is all tears, but her weeping is not efficacious. With eyes encrusted with the "salt of most unrighteous tears" (I.ii.158), she sorrows not for her sins, but for her punishment. Like Elizabethan England, she remains hardened, the "weeping rock" of Mount Sipylos.

15. "Contagious Blastments"

If "wind," "air," and "breath" signify a good spirit, even the Holy Spirit, then "blast" is reserved for the malicious or evil. Shakespeare establishes the connection early in the drama:

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: (I.iv.46-50)

Hamlet is doubtful of the ghost's provenance. "Airs" come "from heaven," whereas "blasts" are "from hell." They correspond to intentions that are, respectively, either "charitable" or "wicked." With the meaning of "blast" established metaphorically, Shakespeare is enabled to imply such sources without explicitly mentioning them in the new context:

*Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property,
On wholesome life usurp immediately.* (III.ii.195-198)

That which is "*thrice blasted*" is also "*thrice infected*," signifying the contagion that these blasts carry within them. This explains what must otherwise be taken for a confusion in the text:

This was your husband: look you now, what follows.
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. (III.iv.73-75)

"Like a mildew'd ear" refers to Claudius, though it is into the ear of the elder Hamlet that the poison is poured. Claudius has already been infected from elsewhere before killing his own brother. The evil is passed from one subject to another; it is contagious:

The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent. (I.iii.44-47)

"Morn" is used in *Hamlet* to describe the coming of the light of charity, a departure from the darkness and night of malice. Thus, by homonymy, Hamlet's "mourning duties" (I.ii.92) signify more than the need to lament his father's death. Hamlet is morally bound to act in charity. The "liquid dew of youth" signifies the hardened heart's melting in that charitable love. The "contagious blastments" from hell are intent on corrupting this burgeoning life, so that the "infants of the spring," flowers signifying moral purity, are cankered before their "buttons" are revealed. That is, purity is destroyed in its very blossom. Thus, "contagious blastments" are connected with "buttons." In response to Hamlet's questioning, Guildenstern reveals his own moral state, together with that of Rosencrantz:

Happy in that we are not over happy;
On Fortune's cap we are not the very button. (II.ii.218-219)

Overcome by these "blasts," the pair have yielded to concupiscence. Then follows a *risqué* exchange, confirming their corruption. As Hamlet later confesses, "is't not to be damn'd to let this canker of our nature come in further evil." (V.ii.75-77)

This hellish disposition is implied by both Ophelia and Gertrude to exist in Hamlet himself. Ophelia laments his spiritual state:

That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: (III.i.141-142)

“Blown youth” signifies the soul infused with the “breath” of grace, thereby possessing “form and feature,” that is, the supernatural habit of charity, together with its works. But Hamlet is “blasted with ecstasy.” The verbal link goes further:

This is the very ecstasy of love,
Whose violent property fordoes itself
And leads the will to desperate undertakings
As oft as any passion under heaven
That does afflict our natures. (II.i.114-118)

When Shakespeare employs “ecstasy” in the text, one may be sure that he is speaking of self-love, a “passion under heaven,” not the love of God. In this vein the queen accuses Hamlet:

This is the very coinage of your brain:
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in. (III.iv.156-158)

But this moral state does not preclude the free exercise of the will, as Luther had maintained in *The Bondage of the Will*.²¹ In describing the queen’s choice of Claudius over the elder Hamlet, the young Hamlet maintains:

madness would not err,
Nor sense to ecstasy was ne’er so thrall’d
But it reserv’d some quantity of choice,
To serve in such a difference. (III.iv.83-86)

Though the soul be mad, either “essentially” or “in craft,” and the sense enslaved to the passion of self-love, there remains grace sufficient to choose the good. The failure to do so is consequently blameworthy.

16. “Let the Devil Wear Black”

The doctrine of purgatory is critical to the reader who attempts to discern Shakespeare’s theological stance. Because Reformed theology does not recognize the existence of purgatory, a Protestant must conclude that the ghost heralds from hell. But, given the king’s own confession of guilt and the lack of any positive evidence to the contrary, Hamlet’s assertion must be taken at face value: “It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you.” (I.v.155) The question of purgatory is also taken up elsewhere under cover of the remembrance of the dead. Hamlet responds to Ophelia’s contention that his father has been dead for two months:

So long? Nay, then, let the devil wear black, for I'll have a suit of sables. O heavens! die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year; but, by'r lady, he must build churches then, or else shall he suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is, 'For, O! for, O! the hobby-horse is forgot.' (III.ii.84)

“Sables” are mourning garments, the dark furs of the weasel. Shakespeare establishes a physical distinction that serves to make a theological distinction. Black is the color of the devil and the damned, as when Hamlet, in his spite, wishes the damnation of Claudius:

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.100-102)

But Shakespeare connects sables directly to the suffering souls. To “suffer not thinking on” is to be forgotten by the living, whose prayers and sacrifices can expedite the soul's purification and entry into paradise. The reference to building churches is the most salient of all, for this was the spark that led Luther to break with the Catholic Church. The church in question was St. Peter's Basilica, for the construction of which the Pope had issued an indulgence. That is, in accord with Church doctrine, those who contributed monetarily to the building of the basilica would, by the superabundant merits of Christ and His saints, have some part of their temporal punishment in purgatory remitted. As Protestants do not accept the doctrine of purgatory, let alone that of indulgences, Hamlet is clearly expressing the Catholic doctrine. This also sheds light on another enigmatic utterance of Hamlet. Before he plunges his sword into the arras, thereby killing Polonius, he exclaims: “Dead, for a ducat, dead!” (III.iv.30) The Venetian ducat was the coin collected for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Dominican, Johann Tetzel, had traveled throughout Germany collecting such monies as part of the papal indulgence. He was accused of abusing the doctrine, even to the point of collecting ducats for the remission of temporal punishment due to future sins. Hamlet, in his lack of charity, would avail himself of such a bargain in this casual murder. Polonius is “dead, for a ducat, dead” because that is the temporal price of his death.

It must be recalled that the ghost of Hamlet's father was described in terms consistent with the distinction between “black” and “sable.” Horatio describes to Hamlet the ghost's beard: “It was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silver'd.” (I.ii.258-259) The silvered sable would seem to indicate a life that has progressed but part way in its purification, having yet much to purge before it enters into the presence of God. A long life can mean the accumulation of a great debt of temporal punishment, and thus,

youth no less becomes
The light and careless livery that it wears
Than settled age his sables and his weeds,
Importing health and graveness. (IV.vii.86-89)

The “graveness” of settled age implies not only “sables,” or penance, but also impending death and judgment. A “light and careless livery” is the habit of one who is under little debt of sin. Hamlet’s declaration of his change of dress corresponds to his new faith. Before his encounter with the ghost, Hamlet’s dress is the very black of death and damnation. He wears an “inky cloak” (I.ii.81) and “suits of solemn black” (I.ii.82), signifying the fate that awaits him on account of original sin. But now he has faith without the charity that ought to perfect it, and therefore will he henceforth wear sables.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is also signified through the use of imagery suggesting imprisonment, as when the ghost first announces to Hamlet his fate in purgatory:

I am thy father’s spirit;
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin’d to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg’d away. (I.v.15-19)

The ghost then describes his habitation as “my prison-house.” (I.v.20) Such a description is far from lacking a Scriptural warrant:

While thou goest with thine adversary to the ruler, as thou art in the way, give diligence in the way, that thou mayest be delivered from him, lest he draw thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the jailer, and the jailer cast thee into prison. I tell thee, thou shalt not depart thence, till thou hast paid the utmost mite. (Luke 12:58-59)

Because heaven cannot be called a prison, the Scripture cannot refer to heaven, and because the prisoner will ultimately be released, it cannot refer to hell. There is a place between for those who have not forfeited heaven, but need to pay their debts through purgatorial fire.

But Shakespeare uses the prison metaphor in contexts that do not appear immediately connected to the place of purgation:

Ham. Then is doomsday near; but your news is not true. Let me question more in particular: what have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?
Guil. Prison, my lord!
Ham. Denmark’s a prison.
Ros. Then is the world one.
Ham. A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ the worst.
Ros. We think not so, my lord.
Ham. Why, then, ’tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison. (II.ii.226-232)

Shakespeare begins Hamlet’s questioning with the suggestive use of “particular.” In connection to the “particular fault” (I.iv.40), it indicates the state not of souls in general, but that of the individual man. It also evokes the doctrine of the Particular Judgment that occurs immediately

after death, as opposed to the General Judgment that will occur at the end of time in the presence of all. When the General Judgment comes, purgatory will have been emptied, with the result that there will be only two classes of men, the saved and the damned.

The traditional notion of prison, as against the modern view, is that it is a place to expiate one's crimes. Shakespeare expresses through the mouth of Hamlet that the natural world, at least as it exists now, is a prison not wholly unlike that of purgatory. Figuratively speaking, a man may do his purgatory on earth by willingly suffering in a spirit of expiation for his sins. But this demands a certain subjective disposition. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to see Denmark, or the world for that matter, as a prison. When Shakespeare writes, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," he is expressing the truth that the real evils faced by man can be turned to good by offering them as sacrifices in the spirit of charity. God, in his eternal providence, does not allow evil, except that some greater good may be drawn from it. It is too much a projection of modern attitudes to see in this exchange a skepticism about objective reality or an affirmation of moral relativism.

17. "The Pale Cast of Thought"

Man's fallen nature engages in a continual struggle against the acceptance by faith of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* often expresses this struggle in military terms. Horatio's initial unwillingness to accept the reality of the ghost, soon to reveal itself to Hamlet, is portrayed by Bernardo as a battle of the senses:

Sit down a while,
And let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story,
What we two nights have seen. (I.i.41-44)

Indeed, all of Denmark is preparing for conflict. Marcellus asks Horatio if someone could explain this high degree of preparation:

And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
And foreign mart for implements of war; (I.i.89-90)

The "brazen cannon" recall the custom that has "brass'd" the heart, making it "proof and bulwark against sense." (III.iv.45-46) Horatio prefaces his story of the contest between the elder Hamlet and Fortinbras with a qualification, "at least, the whisper goes so." (I.i.97) This "whisper" signifies more than rumor. Claudius later gives it a precision that carries a heavy theological burden:

so, haply, slander,
Whose whisper o'er the world's diameter,
As level as the cannon to his blank
Transports his poison'd shot, may miss our name,
And hit the woundless air. (IV.i.44-48)

So “whisper” is the conveyor of “slander.” The secondary meaning is ascertained through the Geneva Bible that was in constant use at the time:

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, neither uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love. Ye did run well; who did let you, that ye did not obey the truth? *It is* not the persuasion of him that calleth you. A little leaven doeth leaven the whole lump. I have trust in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded; but he that troubleth you, shall bear *his* condemnation, whosoever he be. And brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the slander of the cross abolished. (Galatians 5:6-11)

Many modern translations have “the scandal of the cross,” which makes the reference opaque. The “slander” is made more explicit in First Corinthians:

For seeing the world by wisdom knew not God in the wisdom of God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Seeing also that the Jews require a sign, and the Grecians seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews, even a stumblingblock, and unto the Grecians, foolishness; (1 Corinthians 1:21-23)

The Crucifixion, whereby Christ suffered for man’s sins, and the command that each “take up his cross” (Mark 8:34) are “foolishness” to the Gentiles and a “stumblingblock” to the Jews.

The “woundless air” (IV.i.45) that Claudius wishes slander to strike is again that apparition of the elder Hamlet bringing the demand for spiritual revenge:

We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery. (I.i.163-166)

This battle against the doctrine of faith and works is also evident in the King’s drinking bout, which occasions Hamlet’s ruminations on the “particular fault” (I.iv.40):

No jocund health that Denmark drinks to-day,
But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the king’s rouse the heavens shall bruit again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder. (I.i.129-133)

The cannon is again aimed against the sky and strikes the “woundless air.” (IV.i.45) To return to the first scene, “cast” in “daily cast of brazen cannon” (I.i.89) has a double sense. It is the physical casting of cannon in bronze, suggesting a hardening of the heart, but it is also the throw of the cannon ball, signifying fallen reason’s defense against the faith. This casting is the projection of mere opinion, of which Polonius speaks concerning his faulty advice to Ophelia:

By heaven, it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion. (II.i.127-130)

Man sets his own opinions against divine revelation. Laertes would have his sister avoid entirely this conflict of arms, in which she may be struck with love and desire:

And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire. (I.iii.39-40)

The consequence of this unwillingness to love, to obey the ghost's command of spiritual revenge, is expressed most keenly of all by Hamlet in his soliloquy, "To be, or not to be":

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 pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. (III.i.93-98)

This "resolution" is of the heart that would "resolve itself into a dew." (I.ii.134) The "pale cast of thought" is reason's hubris, going beyond its limits in order to reject divine revelation. It is the foolishness of the world's wisdom and the "slander of the cross." As a consequence, man is unable to respond efficaciously to his Creator's offer of grace.

18. "Tomb Enough and Continent"

Francis Bacon's *Essays* occasionally drift into theological matters, revealing certain conceptions that the author holds concerning charity and love of neighbor. Shakespeare addresses these notions obliquely through his dramatic critique. Bacon expresses the relation between self-love and love of neighbor in terms that evoke the act of painting:

And beware how in making the portraiture thou breakest the pattern. For divinity maketh the love of ourselves the pattern; the love of our neighbours but the portraiture.²²

Bacon's philosophy diverges wildly from the Gospel: "Greater love than this hath no man, when any man bestoweth his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Indeed, it is not self-love, but love of God, that is the pattern for love of both self and neighbor:

Jesus said to him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and the great commandment. And the second is like unto this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hangeth the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Man is moved by an ineradicable self-interest, but can love for a higher motive, which is the love of God. This love of God, which is charity, subordinates and thereby elevates man's native self-love. It is this charity alone that merits for man eternal life. Shakespeare refers Bacon's worldly doctrine to the person of Laertes:

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: (V.ii.82-85)

Love of God is the cause of its “image,” which is love of neighbor for the sake of God. The neighborly love of Laertes is the “portraiture” of his own cause, which is self-love. This analogy of painting is used throughout the drama to describe the seeming-good in opposition to the truly good, as in this confession of Claudius:

The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word:
O heavy burden! (III.i.60-63)

Hamlet comes to recognize that the mutual love shared with Ophelia is really only a form of self-love. This recognition, which Ophelia does not understand, is expressed in the metaphor of drawing, with which she describes to her father her encounter with Hamlet:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard,
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And, with his other hand thus o’er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. (II.i.99-103)

Hamlet later chides Ophelia in language evoking these imitative arts:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. (III.i.131)

This outward show of goodness is ultimately of no value, as Hamlet remarks to the rotted skull of Yorick, the court jester: “Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that.” (V.i.80) The purely natural show of virtue must finally yield to those temporal elements of which it is composed. It is swallowed up in death.

Lest one think that this reference to the *Essays* is casual or accidental, Shakespeare reinforces it with a further use of Bacon’s terminology:

Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes; believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing; indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry, for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see. (V.ii.102)

Laertes is a man of “great showing,” a simulacrum of true goodness. Osric’s use of “continent” is unusual, except that it evokes Bacon’s doctrine of neighborly love:

The parts and signs of goodness are many. If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shews he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins to them.²³

A true gentleman is a man who uses “all gently” (III.ii.3), who works by charity. He would see in this “citizen of the world”—as opposed to a citizen of the heavenly country—the “continent” of outward courtesy and manner. But this continent is also a “tomb,” like the plot,

Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain (IV.iv.68-70)

It is the reputation of natural goodness through human sympathy, but without the inward justification of the man. Hamlet corrects Osric’s “definement” of Laertes through a tortuous *double-entendre* that draws on many of the figures used elsewhere:

Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you; though, I know, to divide him inventorially would dizzy the arithmetic of memory, and yet but yaw neither, in respect of his quick sail. But, in the verity of extolment, I take him to be a soul of great article; and his infusion of such dearth and rareness, as, to make true diction of him, his semblable is his mirror; and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more. (V.ii.103)

Again, one must “trace” Laertes. The “arithmetic of memory” recalls the “numbers that cannot try the cause” (IV.iv.68) and the “tallies” of Shakespeare’s *Sonnet CXXII*. These are the “adjunct” that imports “forgetfulness.” The “dearth and rareness” of Laertes’ “infusion” imply a high price, but also indicate economic scarcity: Laertes lacks the “infusion” of divine grace. In Hamlet’s own “definement,” Laertes will indeed suffer “perdition” if he does not convert, and, as if to put the Church’s seal upon his judgment, Osric replies unwittingly, “Your lordship speaks most infallibly of him.” (V.ii.104) Hamlet further points out to Osric the fault of judging another man’s merits:

Osr. You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is—
Ham. I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence; but, to know a man well, were to know himself. (V.ii.114-115)

Hamlet is paraphrasing Second Corinthians, in which St. Paul declares that man must not make another man his measure, but must be a measure of his own moral successes and failures:

For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or to compare ourselves to them, which praise themselves; but they understand not that they measure themselves with themselves, and compare themselves with themselves. (2 Corinthians 10:12)

St. Paul is warning of “boasting of things which are without *our* measure, *that is*, of other men’s labors.” (2 Corinthians 10:15) But Osric fails to apprehend Hamlet’s meaning. He departs by commending his duty to Hamlet, which is followed by a biting observation of Osric’s failure: “He does well to commend it himself; there are no tongues else for ’s turn.” (V.ii.132)

19. “To Thine Own Self Be True”

The manner in which Shakespeare upends Lord Bacon’s philosophy is perhaps clearest in the diabolically deceptive counsel given to Laertes by his father, Polonius:

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.85-87)

The reference to the *Essays* is unmistakable: “Divide with reason between self-love and society; and be so true to thyself, as thou be not false to others; specially to thy king and country.”²⁴ “Divide with reason” is mirrored in Shakespeare’s “to divide him inventorially.” (V.ii.103) This is a purely rational doctrine ordered to the benefit of “king and country.” One loves society out of natural self-love, because it collectively cares for man’s temporal needs. But the supernatural imperative is to love both self and neighbor for the love of God. Polonius takes it for certain that being true to one’s neighbor will follow immediately from love of oneself, and, naturally speaking, it can be said that night does follow day. But it is theologically false: “And God called the Light, Day, and the darkness he called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:5) It is day that follows night, not night the day. Polonius has inverted the order between self-love and love of neighbor. To be true to self, in the highest sense, follows from being true to one’s neighbor. Self-interest is not negated, but elevated by charity. Those who would derive the Baconian “portrait” from its “pattern” will end in spiritual darkness, realized permanently in their perdition.

Self-love puts sacrifice of one’s neighbor above self-sacrifice. Polonius is thus cast in the role of “Jephthah, judge of Israel,” whose treasure consisted in “*one fair daughter and no more.*” (II.ii.288) Hamlet quotes from the following “pious chanson” (II.ii.299):

*I HAVE read that many years agoe,
When Jepha, judge of Israel,
Had one fair daughter and no more,
Whom he loved passing well.
And as by lot, God wot,
It came to passe most like it was,
Great warrs there should be,
And who should be the chiefe, but he, but he.*²⁵

Jephthah, in return for victory over the Ammonites and the chief position in Israel, had vowed to God a burnt offering of the first who came out of his home to greet him:

Now when Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and dances, which was his only child: he had none other sons, nor daughters. And when he saw her, he rent his clothes, and said, Alas my daughter, thou hast brought me low, and art of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and cannot go back. (Judges 11:34-35)

Polonius, in his own manner, sacrifices his daughter by forbidding her to return Hamlet's love. Ophelia is cast in the role of Eve, who was seduced by the serpent to eat of the forbidden fruit. As recounted by Polonius:

And my young mistress thus I did bespeak:
'Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star;
This must not be:' and then I precepts gave her,
That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.
Which done, she took the fruits of my advice; (II.ii.149-154)

And thus through Ophelia fell Hamlet, like Adam through Eve:

And he, repulsed,—a short tale to make,—
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness; and by this declension
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we wail for. (II.ii.155-160)

Jephthah was himself the son of a harlot, and had been cast out from his father's house:

Then Gilead begat Jephtah, and Jephtah the Gileadite was a valiant man, but the son of an harlot. And Gilead's wife bare him sons, and when the woman's children were come to age, they thrust out Jephtah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house: for thou art the son of a strange woman. (Judges 11:1-2)

This serves as a figure of Luther and the other excommunicated leaders of the Reformation, who waged "great wars" to determine "who should be the chiefe." Horatio explains to Marcellus and Bernardo that this

Is the main motive of our preparations,
The source of this our watch and the chief head
Of this post-haste and romage in the land. (I.i.122-124)

The clever insinuation of "romage" makes it clear that the struggle is that between Protestant England and the Roman Catholic Church, between the spiritual primacy of king and pope.

20. "To Find Quarrel in a Straw"

Martin Luther's theological insurrection not only ran counter to the traditional Catholic interpretation of Scripture, but called into question the very Scripture that had served the Church from its earliest times. The Canon of the New Testament had been defined in 397 at the Council of Carthage. Luther denigrated Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, the Epistle of Jude, and the Book of the Apocalypse, less because the authenticity of these books had been

debated in antiquity than that they refuted his doctrine of justification *sola fide*, and undermined his *sola Scriptura* conclusions. In his first soliloquy Hamlet laments:

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! (I.ii.133-136)

This “self-slaughter” or self-sacrifice is justification by works of charity. The “canon” referred to here could plausibly be the canon of the Mass, in which Christ’s Self-Sacrifice is confectioned by the ministering priest. In this case, one may read it to mean that only Christ’s Sacrifice, renewed on the altar in unbloody manner, satisfies divine justice. This interpretation validly defends a traditional Catholic doctrine. But at another level, “canon” refers to the new canon of Scripture, which excised those books that show forth most clearly the need for works moved by charity. There is inadequate evidence that “fix” had attained in the time of Shakespeare one of its modern meanings, namely, “repair.” But the humor of such a reading, implying that God somehow had to correct His canon of Holy Scripture, is a matter worth considering. Either way, the Scriptural interpretation stands.

Of special importance to Shakespeare’s dramatic critique is a scandalous assertion made by Luther in his preface to the New Testament:

St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s Epistle—these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James’ Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind.²⁶

Luther called into question the authority of this book because he perceived it to lack evangelical character, that is, conformity to his own understanding of the Gospel. In this Epistle of St. James we find an absolute refutation of Luther’s doctrine:

Even so the faith, if it have no works, is dead in itself. But some man might say, Thou hast the faith, and I have works; shew me thy faith out of thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well, the devils also believe it, and tremble. But wilt thou understand, O thou vain man, that the faith *which is* without works, is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified through works, when he offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou not that the faith wrought with his works? And through the works was the faith made perfect. And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God. Ye see then how that of works a man is justified, and not of faith only. (James 2:17-24)

Shakespeare makes a subtle but rich use of this infamous denigration of the Epistle of St. James through the figure of straw:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. (IV.iv.58-61)

The “argument” of which Shakespeare speaks is the written preface to the books of the Geneva Bible summarizing and, in many cases, interpreting to the reader the matter in question. Shakespeare is rejecting the deceptive argument to the Epistle of St. James according to which man is not justified by works, but must “declare a true faith by lively fruits.” (Argument to the Epistle of St. James) Works, according to this argument, are a sign of justification, but not essential to it. This doctrine aligns with the observation of Polonius that “the apparel oft proclaims the man.” (I.iii.79) One also finds this doctrine in another Calvinist argument:

He exhorteth the faithful to deny themselves, and to contemn the world, that being delivered from all carnal affections and impediments, they may more speedily attain to the heavenly kingdom of Christ, whereunto we are called by the grace of God revealed to us in his Son, and have already received it by faith, possessed it by hope, and are therein confirmed by holiness of life. (Argument to the First Epistle General of St. Peter)

The argument states that “the kingdom of Christ” is already received by faith, and only “confirmed by holiness of life.” In view of these Calvinist commentaries in the Geneva Bible, one may appreciate the grave implication of Hamlet’s response to Claudius:

King. Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in 't?
Ham. No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world. (III.ii.181-182)

Shakespeare’s use of “offence” derives its peculiar meaning from “*se offendendo*” (V.i.7), literally “by offending oneself,” which signifies the self-sacrifice of love. There is no “offence” in the argument, because it teaches justification *sola fide*. St. Paul writes:

But yet the gift is not so as is the offence. For if through the offence of one, many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. Neither is the gift *so*, as *that which entered in* by one that sinned; for the fault *came* of one *offence* unto condemnation, but the gift *is* of many offences to justification. (Romans 5:15-16)

There is one offence through Adam, by which all men fell. But Paul ties justification to “many offences,” which Shakespeare understands as the self-sacrifice of many men. It is to this epistle that Shakespeare refers when Hamlet corrects Horatio, his friend from Wittenberg:

Hor. These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.
Ham. I am sorry they offend you, heartily;
Yes, faith, heartily.
Hor. There's no offence, my lord.
Ham. Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much offence, too. (I.v.149-154)

These “wild and whirling words” signify, once again, grace and the Gospel. The “much offence” can be understood as the great weight of the world’s sin, but the deeper sense, connecting it with the principal theme of *Hamlet*, is Shakespeare’s reading of St. Paul’s “many offences.” Shakespeare is saying that there is Adam’s “offence.” There is also “much offence,” that is, the justification of many in self-sacrifice. Returning to Hamlet’s reply to Claudius, one may apply to this “poison in jest” the words of Hamlet to that fellow of “infinite jest” (V.i.80), the dead Yorick:

Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that. (V.i.80)

Physical death is the “favour” to which all must come, and spiritual death will come to those who do not perform works in charity.

“Great ones” (III.i.172) are finding “quarrel in a straw,” that is, in the Epistle of St. James and, by extension, the other books that Luther wished to diminish. This “quarrel” has several senses, all of which are operative in Shakespeare’s art. First, it means a violent disagreement, in which case, Shakespeare refers to the arguments over the canonicity and theology of these sacred books. Second, “quarrel” denotes the bolt fired from a crossbow. Thus, “quarrel in a straw” signifies the weapons drawn from that epistle in defense of the Catholic doctrine of justification. Third, “quarrel” is also another form of “quarry.” So Shakespeare evokes the Scriptural image of the ground: “Now faith is the ground of things which are hoped for, and the evidence of things which are not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) This image naturally extends to the act of digging:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hid in the field, which when a man hath found, he hideth it, and for joy thereof departeth, and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. (Matthew 13:44)

Then said he unto them, Therefore every Scribe which is taught unto the kingdom of heaven, is like unto a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things both new and old. (Matthew 13:52)

Thus, Shakespeare is calling “great” that “Scribe” who draws wisdom from the treasure of Holy Scripture. This gives a more determinate sense to the sin of Hamlet’s father:

Or if thou has uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth (I.i.154-155)

The Church has hoarded the treasure of the Gospel by failing to proclaim it adequately. But now “honour’s at the stake” (IV.iv.61), because those in England who persist in their Catholic interpretation of Scripture are persecuted, even unto death.

It is also worth examining the manner in which Shakespeare prefaces Hamlet’s “quarrel in a straw.” The spirit of Fortinbras,

with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event, (IV.iv.54-55)

The “invisible event” is the infusion of charity by divine grace. Fortinbras is the nephew of Norway and, as Bacon observes, “the king of Spain’s surname, as they say, is ‘Norway.’”²⁷ Spain seeks a military solution to a question that cannot be resolved by the clash of armies:

Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
Will not debate the question of this straw:
This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies. (IV.iv.29-33)

To “debate the question of this straw” with wealth and numbers misses the nature of problem, which derives from love of “wealth and peace.” The inward man is corrupted by an “imposthume” or abscess, even as the outward man shows a healthy face. Such is also, incidentally, the nature of the justified man according to Lutheran theology.

Ophelia has been schooled in this Lutheran doctrine, which ultimately leads to her madness. Having lost the Faith, she is not “mad in craft,” but essentially in madness. (III.iv.208-209) Her raving is described to the queen in exact terms:

She speaks much of her father; says she hears
There’s tricks i’ the world; and hems, and beats her heart;
Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks, and nods, and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV.v.7-16)

Ophelia “spurns enviously at straws.” That is, she scornfully rejects the Catholic canon of Scripture. She “speaks things in doubt,” that is, things that are either of doubtful veracity or positively contrary to the Faith. What she does speak, flowing from a corrupted understanding of Scripture, has “but half sense.” Its fluid and “unshaped” character allows hearers to interpret it according to their own intentions and thus “botch the words up fit to their own thoughts.” This perfectly characterizes the private interpretation of Scripture unleashed by the Reformation. Horatio warns the queen of the potential harm that may come by this:

’Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds. (IV.v.17-18)

Again, “strew” connects her ranting with the “stave-epistle” of Luther. “Ill-breeding minds” recalls the warning Hamlet has previously given to her: “Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (III.i.125) He also warned Polonius of the same: “Let her not walk i’

the sun: conception is a blessing; but not as your daughter may conceive.” (II.ii.198) Shakespeare is indicating the corrupted character of Ophelia’s thinking, and thereby the corrupting character of Protestantism generally.

The “tricks” of which Ophelia speaks have a deeper meaning than “deceptions.” “Tricked” also means dressed or covered, as when Hamlet recites the description of Pyrrhus as “*horridly trick’d with blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons*” (II.ii.311-312) The use of “*trick*” indicates to the reader, once again, the outward covering of virtue without regard for that which lies within. The two meanings meet when Claudius praises Lamord’s prowess:

That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
Come short of what he did. (IV.vii.97-98)

The “forgery of shapes and tricks” is the feigning of “form,” by which Shakespeare indicates the virtue of charity. So also, Hamlet marvels at:

The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds (IV.iv.65-67)

This “trick of fame” is Luther’s doctrine of justification, the mere covering or imputation of justice that posits nothing of true interior virtue. Laertes asserts of Ophelia:

It is our trick, nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will; when these are gone
The woman will be out. (IV.vii.205-207)

He acknowledges his sister’s outer covering of virtue, “our trick,” which is fallen nature’s “custom.” He acknowledges his sister’s grave sins: “Let shame say what it will.” Yet she will be saved after nature and custom have passed away. This is a natural expression of Calvin’s doctrine of “total depravity” joined to “unconditional election.”

21. “The Hatch and the Disclose”

The fervent theology that permeates *Hamlet* finds another outlet in the life-cycle of birds. As already argued, the “bird of dawning” (I.i.180) signifies the Catholic Church, which, as “trumpet to the morn” (I.i.170), announces the Gospel of charity to mankind, fulfilling thereby the evangelical role assigned to it. Shakespeare’s choice of this metaphor may have been influenced by a saying current in the sixteenth century: “Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched a cockatrice!” Erasmus of Rotterdam, having produced a Greek edition of the Bible, and having written a scathing rebuke of the worldliness of the Church in his *Praise of Folly*, was considered by many a precursor of Luther. The latter’s savage pen made short work of the anemic defense of the Church tardily undertaken by Erasmus. Shakespeare’s reference is even clearer in *Richard III*: “A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world.” (*Richard III*, IV.i.54) The cockatrice was a legendary creature, the upper body of which was a rooster, but the lower body a serpent. It aptly

signifies a diabolical corruption of Catholic doctrine. This figure of the cockatrice was certainly derived from Scripture:

No man calleth for justice: no man contendeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak vain things: they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity. They hatch cockatrice eggs, and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs, dieth, and that which is trode upon, breaketh out into a serpent. Their webs shall be no garment, neither shall they cover themselves with their labors: for their works are works of iniquity, and the work of cruelty is in their hands. (Isaiah 59:4-6)

The hatching of the cockatrice is not only a figure of Luther's "vanity" and "iniquity." It also expresses the Lutheran doctrine of justification *sola fide*: "neither shall they cover themselves with their labors: for their works are works of iniquity."

Luther had urged his followers to disregard their own sinfulness. Indeed, interpreting Scripture in a wholly new and heretical way, he considered sin a necessity:

Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides.²⁸

Laertes certainly adopts this advice to "sin boldly":

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. (IV.v.109-111)

Besides this doctrine of "total depravity," Laertes also expresses the Calvinist doctrine of "limited atonement." He does this by taking upon himself the image of the mystical pelican, symbolizing Christ. For the pelican was thought to feed its young with its own blood, just as Christ redeemed and literally feeds his flock with His Blood. But Laertes will succor only his father's friends:

To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms;
And like the kind life-rendering pelican,
Repast them with my blood. (IV.v.126-128)

There will be no mercy for his father's enemies. In other words, Christ's Blood was shed only for the elect of God.

Polonius, representing Luther and Lutheranism, warns Laertes, his son, representing Calvin and Calvinism, of the dangers that Catholics pose for him:

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd comrade. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in,
Bear 't that th' opposed may beware of thee. (I.iii.71-74)

A “new-hatch’d, unfledg’d comrade” is, in this reading, a Catholic convert. To “dull thy palm” means to surrender one’s heavenly reward, and thus is he admonishing Laertes that such companionship endangers his soul. The “quarrel” is again the “quarrel in a straw,” which Polonius would have his son avoid. But, once in, Laertes must fight strenuously for Reformed theology. He must enter into the lists against the Catholic Church, which battles against him,

Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. (IV.iv.56-58)

Shakespeare also plays with the metaphor of the egg after the death of Polonius, when Laertes complains to Claudius:

His means of death, his obscure burial,
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o’er his bones,
No noble rite nor formal ostentation,
Cry to be heard, as ’twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call ’t in question. (IV.v.175-179)

The “hatchment” is a coat-of-arms to be laid “o’er his bones.” But, in view of the symbolism of the egg, this passage insinuates that Polonius, or Luther, died outside of the Church. It cries to be heard “from heaven to earth” because the Catholic Church, the mouthpiece of heaven, had denounced Luther’s doctrines as heretical.

Hamlet’s faith is treated with the same metaphor. After spying upon Hamlet’s conversation with Ophelia, Claudius remarks to Polonius:

There’s something in his soul
O’er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And, I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; (III.i.147-150)

The “hatch and disclose,” doubtful at this point, will be Hamlet’s justification in faith and charity. Upon his return from conversing with his deceased father, Hamlet tells his own interior man, Horatio, “come, bird, come” (I.v.126). He knows already what is required of him. Osric, the courtier who becomes the target of Hamlet’s wit, is also characterized in a way consistent with the metaphor: “This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head.” (V.ii.133) But here Shakespeare is denigrating the man, for a “lapwing” is one of the unclean birds mentioned in Leviticus 11:19 and Deuteronomy 14:18. He runs away because he cannot fly with “wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love.” (I.v.35-36) The reader ultimately receives avian reassurance of Hamlet’s good end through the mouth of that “antique Roman” (V.ii.283), Horatio: “Now cracks a noble heart.” (V.ii.304) The reference to the Fifty-First Psalm is clear enough: “The sacrifices of God are a contrite spirit: a contrite and a broken heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalms 51:17) Hamlet has made a sacrifice of self in true contrition: “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!” (I.ii.163)

22. “Rich Gifts”

As Polonius and Claudius spy upon Hamlet and Ophelia from behind an arras, Hamlet expands upon his relationship with her in a way that lays bare her inadequacies, or rather, the consequences of Reformed theology. She desires to return his gifts, but he denies that he has given her anything. She insists:

My honour'd lord, you know right well you did;
And, with them, words of so sweet breath compos'd
As made the things more rich: their perfume lost,
Take these again; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. (III.i.109-113)

That Ophelia speaks of “words of so sweet breath compos'd,” one may be sure that the “breath” spoken here has a deeper spiritual significance than the physical breath that is necessary to the body. In keeping with the use established in the queen’s closet, this must be read at a more profound level as “spirit.” The gifts of which Ophelia speaks signify, therefore, the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the perfumed words with which they are composed signify faith sanctified by charity. At the level of natural love, which is ultimately self-love, it is indeed true that “rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.” Their power to please depends upon the disposition of the giver.

However, the gifts of the Holy Spirit become poor not on account of the giver, but on account of the receiver. It is when the receiver becomes uncharitable that the gifts are vitiated. The Catholic Church teaches that God, with Whom man cooperates, is responsible for man’s good actions. But the cause of sin is in man alone when he does not cooperate. At the spiritual level, Ophelia has reversed everything, blaming God for man’s evil. In consequence of the Reformed theology, she is blasphemously faulting God for human sin.

23. “Couched in the Ominous Horse”

The Lutheran theology of justification, which, while justifying man in the eyes of God, leaves corrupt the interior man, is made concrete through the metaphor of the Trojan horse. The character of Hamlet is revealed in the person of Pyrrhus:

*The rugged Pyrrhus, he, whose sable arm,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smear'd
With heraldry more dismal; (II.ii.306-310)*

The Trojan horse, which outwardly appears pleasing, in fact houses men whose intentions are black and murderous. It thus becomes the figure of Hamlet himself, whose outward profession of just cause disguises his inward lack of charity. When man is unrestrained by the moral law within, he must be fettered from without. Such is the natural deduction according to which

Polonius advises his daughter, Ophelia. Her moral obligation is expressed with an insinuation of the hooves of a horse:

I must tell you,
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour. (I.iii.103-105)

Polonius then follows with a description of Hamlet's license which, if utterly servile, is yet more extensive than that of Ophelia:

For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him, that he is young,
And with a larger tether may he walk
Than may be given you: (I.iii.131-134)

Without inward moral restraint, but rather with a belly like that of the Trojan horse, neither Ophelia nor Hamlet can live in the "Law of liberty" (James 1:25). Each remains a slave to passion, not a friend in charity, and therefore must be tethered like a horse. Shakespeare borrows a figure from Francis Bacon to extend the equine theme:

There is a master of scoffing, that in his catalogue of books of a feigned library sets down this title of a book, *The morris-dance of Heretics*. For indeed every sect of them hath a diverse posture or cringe by themselves, which cannot but move derision in worldlings and depraved politics, who are apt to contemn holy things.²⁹

Bacon refers to the "hobby-horse" of the morris-dance during the May Day celebration. A Catholic must believe that the man who dies in a pertinacious state of heresy is eternally damned. Though prayers can help those in purgatorial fire, prayers for the damned are useless:

O heavens! die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year; but, by'r lady, he must build churches then, or else shall he suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is, 'For, O! for, O! the hobby-horse is forgot.' (III.ii.84)

Through the hobby-horse, Shakespeare has figured the destiny of those that have no one to pray for them, either because they are damned, or because their loved ones are ignorant of purgatory. Hamlet's reply to Rosencrantz concerning his "advancement" continues this theme: "Ay, sir, but 'While the grass grows,'—the proverb is something musty." (III.ii.252) Hamlet lacks the grace of sanctification. He has the promise of it, as do all men who have received the Gospel, but, as the proverb says, "While the grass grows, the steed starves." His spiritual life depends upon that grace, without which he is bound to die the second death.

The "hobby-horse" makes an appearance later in the drama when Claudius and Laertes discuss their means of killing Hamlet. Claudius has previously met Lamord, a Norman rider of unparalleled skill, who has praised the fencing skill of Laertes:

Here was a gentleman of Normandy:
And they can well on horseback; but this gallant
Had witchcraft in 't, he grew unto his seat,
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,
As he had been incorp's'd and demi-natur'd
With the brave beast; so far he topp'd my thought,
That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
Come short of what he did. (IV.vii.90-98)

The “hobby-horse” of the May Day celebration was a man dressed as the rider of a horse, with the horse itself built around him. The rider described by Claudius “grew unto his seat” and rode as if “he had been incorp's'd and demi-natur'd with the brave beast.” Beast and rider have become one, and each contributes half a nature, as it were, to the composite. By this figure and its relation to the “hobby-horse,” Shakespeare draws attention to the manner of union of the dead soul with to the body of corruption it serves. The will is enmeshed in matter.

24. “Business and Desire”

The distinction between self-love and divine love is aptly expressed in the contrast introduced by Hamlet between “business” and “desire”:

I hold it fit that we shake hands and part;
You, as your business and desire shall point you,—
For every man hath business and desire,
Such as it is,—and, for mine own poor part,
Look you, I'll go pray. (I.v.144-148)

The man who is most engrossed in self-interest and “business” is the foolish Polonius, who meddles continuously in the lives of those around him, with results always at odds with his intentions. Quick to dispense his worldly wisdom, he demonstrates his own imprudence by his failure to attain the ends he sets. His language, in the face of Ophelia's unchecked affection for Hamlet, smacks of economic exchange from beginning to end:

Oph. He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me.
Pol. Affection! pooh! you speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
Oph. I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
Pol. Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a baby,
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly;
Or,—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus,—you'll tender me a fool. (I.iii.107-117)

When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows: (I.iii.124-125)

Be somewhat scanted of your maiden presence,
Set your entreatments at a higher rate
Than a command to parley. (I.iii.129-131)

Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,
The better to beguile. (I.iii.135-139)

The willingness of Polonius to barter his daughter's love for material advantage fully justifies Hamlet in calling him a "fishmonger" (II.ii.190), which also means a panderer. In many respects, Polonius is one who has followed the advice of Lord Bacon:

They do best, who if they cannot but admit love, yet make it keep quarter; and sever it wholly from their serious affairs and actions of life; for if it check once with business, it troubleth men's fortunes, and maketh men that they can no ways be true to their own ends.³⁰

Such would indeed be the case were there no higher form of love than the earthy sort that disorders the passions. Bacon's sensual conception of love is confirmed by his approval of a very worldly saying:

For there was never proud man thought so absurdly well of himself as the lover doth of the person loved; and therefore it was well said, *That it is impossible to love and to be wise.*³¹

Shakespeare meets this objection by using the following words of Bacon against him:

Wisdom for a man's self is, in many branches thereof, a depraved thing. It is the wisdom of rats, that will be sure to leave a house somewhat before it fall. It is wisdom of the fox, that thrusts out the badger, who digged and made room for him.³²

When Polonius, the purveyor of Bacon's doctrine, is discovered by Hamlet behind the arras of his mother's chamber, Hamlet exclaims, "How now! a rat?" (III.iv.30) True to Bacon's claim, Polonius leaves the house shortly before it collapses entirely. Indeed, his departure has much to do with that collapse. But Shakespeare calls Polonius a fox as well:

Ros. My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the king.

Ham. The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing—

Guil. A thing, my lord!

Ham. Of nothing: bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after. (IV.ii.19-22)

Hamlet has cast the search for Polonius under the guise of a fox hunt. To leave no doubt as to the spurious nature of Polonius' wisdom, Shakespeare has Hamlet address him in terms that evoke that distinction between business and desire:

I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune;
Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger. (III.iv.40-41)

Fortune, a theme that appears both literally and figuratively throughout the drama, is the life and fate of those who are attached to the material world.

25. "The Sheeted Dead"

Shakespeare's description of Pyrrhus as "*couched in the ominous horse*" (II.ii.308) carries with it another fruitful association. The "couch" is another part of the vast web of interrelated figures:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest. (I.v.90-91)

The ghost's equation of the couch with concupiscence and unnatural infidelity colors the auditor's understanding of the Trojan horse, in which is "*couched*" Pyrrhus—or Hamlet. This moral link is also evoked by "sheet." Hamlet rails against his mother's infidelity:

O! most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets. (I.ii.160-161)

These "sheets" are closely related to descriptions of the dead. For example, the soldiers of Norway and Poland "go to their graves like beds" (IV.iv.67) Likewise, before Caesar's death,

The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets; (I.i.132-133)

The "sheeted dead," signifying both the physically and the spiritually dead, are connected to Hecuba, "*the mobled queen*" (II.ii.353), a figure of Gertrude. In like manner, the first clown uses "sheet" to designate a death shroud:

A pick-axe, and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet;
O! a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet. (V.i.39)

The shroud covering a corpse symbolizes the man who gives outward show of goodness, but is inwardly rotten. The words of the Savior cannot have been far from Shakespeare's mind when he forged these links:

Woe *be* to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited tombs, which appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and all filthiness. So are ye also, for outward ye appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:27-28)

Luther's doctrine of justification recapitulates the spiritual state of the scribes and Pharisees. The idea that man is merely a pile of dung covered with snow describes perfectly those who, like the Pharisees, appear just from without, but are inwardly corrupt. Whether this analogy of the snow is truthfully attributed to Luther, or merely apocryphal, it does accurately sum up his doctrine.

The figure of the shroud blends smoothly into that of wax. Shrouds were often made of cerecloth, a waxen cloth. Hamlet's father, now a ghost, has burst these "cerements":

Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again. (I.iv.52-57)

This bursting of cerements, which signifies a resurrection or return to life, is associated with the melting of wax:

For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but, as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal. (I.iii.16-19)

One must understand this association when Hamlet expresses his wish:

To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
And melt in her own fire: (III.iv.94-95)

When the soul burns with divine love, the hardened heart melts as wax.

26. "This Eternal Blazon"

Shakespeare employs arms and heraldry to signify faith exercised in good works. This is brought forth most clearly in the conversation of the clowns in the final act:

First Clo. ... There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession.
Sec. Clo. Was he a gentleman?
First Clo. A' was the first that ever bore arms.
Sec. Clo. Why, he had none.
First Clo. What! art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says, Adam digged; could he dig without arms? (V.i.13-17)

Digging can mean the investigation of Scripture, as has been argued. But in a more general sense it signifies the performance of good works. Thus, by extension, the man who performs works must bear the “arms” of faith, and is thereby a “gentleman.”

The question of arms is sustained through the drama, but most obviously in the recitation of Aeneas’ tale to Dido. Shakespeare uses this classical context to establish once again Hamlet’s journey toward the Catholic Church. Ophelia and Hamlet reenact the grievous romance of Dido and Aeneas. Rome beckons for Hamlet, as the future Rome did for Aeneas; Ophelia is bereft of Hamlet’s love and, like Dido, ends her life in apparent suicide. The tension lies in the divine necessity of Hamlet’s (or Aeneas’) departure, despite whatever earthly love he may bear for Ophelia (or Dido). The Catholic element is reinforced by the tale itself, which is worth quoting in length:

*The rugged Pyrrhus, he, whose sable arm,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smear’d
With heraldry more dismal; head to foot
Now is he total gules; horridly trick’d
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Bak’d and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and damned light
To their vile murders: roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o’er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks. (II.ii.306-318)*

There is a transformation of Pyrrhus, who is a figure of Hamlet himself. If “*ominous horse*” and “*dread and black complexion*” signify the Protestant religion, this “*heraldry more dismal*” signifies the Catholic: “*head to foot now he is total gules.*” This is the “eternal blazon” (I.v.27) of the Roman Catholic Church. In the context of the tale, “*total gules*” signifies bloodiness, but it also specifies the solid red arms of the city of Douai in northern France, the blazon of which is *gules simple*. Douai was renowned as a center for Catholic refugees and as the training ground of English priests who were to return to England. It was the home of an English college and of Jesuit, Benedictine, and Franciscan houses of study. The connection with the Catholic Church is further reinforced by the qualification “*head to foot.*” Horatio describes the elder Hamlet, whose connections with the Church and St. Peter in particular have been established, as “armed at points exactly, cap-a-pe” (I.ii.209), as opposed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are neither the “button” on “Fortune’s cap” nor the “soles of her shoe.” (II.ii.219-220) Shakespeare repeats the expression in Hamlet’s questioning of Marcellus and Bernardo:

Ham. Arm’d, say you?
Mar. & Ber. Arm’d, my lord.
Ham. From top to toe?
Mar. & Ber. My lord, from head to foot. (I.ii.239-242)

But if Hamlet has come to the Faith, he does not yet have charity, and consequently the “*blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,*” is “*bak’d and impasted with the parching streets*” and “*roasted in wrath and fire.*” One must here recall those “funeral bak’d meats” that “did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.” (I.ii.186-187) Pyrrhus is “*o’ersized with coagulate gore,*” as is the hand of Claudius with the blood of the elder Hamlet:

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? (III.iii.49-52)

One may add “let her paint an inch thick” (V.i.80) to the chorus of fatal associations. This thickness is to be contrasted with the “thin and wholesome blood” (I.v.78) which flowed in the veins of the elder Hamlet before he was poisoned. The first player supplies further:

*Unequal match’d,
Pyrrhus at Priam drives; in rage strikes wide;
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
The unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus’ ear:* (II.ii.324-330)

The sword of Pyrrhus is “*fell*” in the sense of “dangerous,” but “*fell*” also suggests the fallen human nature which causes a man to miss the mark in all his actions. Like Pyrrhus, Hamlet “*strikes wide.*” But to read the consequence correctly, one must not identify the “*unnerved father*” with Claudius. In striking wide, in failing to revenge himself upon Claudius, Hamlet kills Polonius, Ophelia’s father. This slaying of Polonius precipitates Denmark, that modern Ilium, into collapse. But once again will Pyrrhus, and by extension Hamlet, take up arms:

*so, after Pyrrhus’ pause,
Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work;
And never did the Cyclops’ hammers fall
On Mars’s armour, forg’d for proof eterne,
With less remorse than Pyrrhus’ bleeding sword
Now falls on Priam.* (II.ii.340-345)

The “*aroused vengeance*” that “*sets him new a-work*” is Hamlet’s ultimate justification by works. He has no “remorse” because he has been justified, thereby freeing him from congenital guilt. And like a Cyclops, his eye is “single” (Matthew 6:22), so that his whole body is now light. For this reason Hamlet receives full military rites of burial:

For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov’d most royally: and, for his passage,
The soldiers’ music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.

Take up the bodies: such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot. (V.ii.348-354)

This should be contrasted with the dishonorable end of Polonius, who is buried without “hatchment,” that is, without coat of arms:

His means of death, his obscure burial,
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o’er his bones,
No noble rite nor formal ostentation. (IV.v.175-179)

Without faith and the charity by which it works, the soul is damned.

27. “The Fatness of these Pursy Times”

Many of the themes in *Hamlet* are so succinctly expressed in *Piers Plowman*, that Shakespeare may have been consciously alluding to the work. Both emphasize the transitory nature of any earthly paradise. The reference to “liquor” parallels Claudius’ “custom” (I.iv.19) of drinking, and the rotting of “what lances up lightly” parallels “the fat weed that rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf” (I.v.39-40):

Lo, lords, lo, and ladies I witness
That the sweet liquor lasts but a little season,
Like peapods, and early pears, plums and cherries.
What lances up lightly lasts but a moment,
And what is readiest to ripen rots soonest.³³

In *Piers Plowman* there is also the articulation of pride and humility, rank weeds fed by dung, and corruption by the love of money:

A fat land full of dung breeds foul weeds rankly,
And so are surely all such bishops,
Earls and archdeacons and other rich clerics
Who traffic with tradesmen and turn on them if they are beaten,
And have the world at their will to live otherwise.
As weeds run wild on ooze or on the dunghill,
So riches spread upon riches give rise to all vices.
The best wheat is bent before ripening
On land that is overlaid with marle or the dungheap.
And so are surely all such people:
Overplenty feeds the pride which poverty conquers.³⁴

The moral is again paralleled in *Hamlet*:

Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue;

For in the fatness of these pury times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good. (III.iv.170-175)

The “fatness of these pury times” is the source and occasion of the corruption infecting England, as Shakespeare makes clear through the observation of Hamlet on the dead Polonius:

Not where he eats, but where he is eaten: a certain convocation of politic worms are e’en
at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and
we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service;
two dishes, but to one table: that’s the end. (IV.ii.26)

Polonius is a “dead dog” (II.ii.196) in which the sun of goodness breeds only maggots. By the reference to the Diet of Worms (1521), presided over by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, Shakespeare insinuates the Lutheran character of Polonius and the worldliness of this Lutheran virtue. The “table” once again recalls mankind’s forgetfulness of the divine law. Hamlet’s observation also puts a rather gruesome and sobering spin on Guildenstern’s obsequious reply to Claudius:

Most holy and religious fear it is
To keep those many many bodies safe
That live and feed upon your majesty. (III.iii.11-13)

The connection is not a casual one, for Hamlet also emphasizes that a king is no less destined for corruption than a commoner: “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.” (IV.ii.28) The king fattens himself, but the fisherman ultimately fattens himself on the king: “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.” (IV.ii.30)

The “pury times” to which Hamlet refers recall the decadent state of the kingdom ruled by King Claudius,

A cut-purse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket! (III.iv.113-115)

The purse, representing wealth, also bears within it the false treasure of fine rhetoric, which covers over the moral wasteland within: “His purse is empty already; all ’s golden words are spent.” (V.ii.110) But, just as so many other symbols in *Hamlet* are subject to ironic inversion, so the purse becomes the source of Hamlet’s redemption: “For ye are bought with a price.” (1 Corinthians 6:20) Carrying in his purse his “father’s signet” (V.ii.55), Hamlet changes the death sentence pronounced by King Claudius, and seals it. The new “stamp” that will be put on his soul, which now melts with charity like wax, is the mark or character of baptism.

28. “A Bare Bodkin”

A “bare bodkin” can, indeed, mean a “mere sewing needle” or “an empty altar,” but it can also mean an “unthreaded sewing needle.” By this polyvalent expression, Shakespeare imbues Hamlet’s soliloquy with yet another level of meaning:

When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? (III.i.85-86)

This third reading can only be appreciated only by reference to a well-known Scripture:

Then Jesus said unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:23-24)

The “eye of the needle” is said to have been one of the gates of Jerusalem, through which a camel could not pass without first being disburdened of its load. This signifies the need for poverty of spirit, a detachment from the world and its physical goods. Only by ridding himself of the attachment to wealth, and oftentimes the wealth itself, can man enter the kingdom of heaven. This expression, “a bare bodkin,” or, an “unthreaded needle,” signifies the man who is attached to riches. Therefore, by association, to “inoculate our old stock” (III.i.123) also means to thread the eye of the needle, to become poor in spirit. The obscure and seemingly out-of-place incident in which Hamlet discusses the shapes of clouds with Polonius acquires a new significance:

Ham. Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
Pol. By the mass, and ’tis like a camel, indeed. (III.ii.268-269)

This discussion takes place as Hamlet departs to take revenge upon Claudius. The apparent Scriptural reference is to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews:

Wherefore, let us also, seeing that we are compassed with so great a cloud of witnesses, cast away everything that presseth down, and the sin that hangeth so fast on, let us run with patience the race that is set before us... (Hebrews 12:1)

When Polonius swears “by the mass,” Shakespeare subtly insinuates the weight of the “vicious mole of nature.” (I.iv.28) Man must “cast away everything that presseth down,” just as a camel is unloaded of its cargo. St. Paul writes:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses, in the cloud, and in the sea, And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink (for they drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them; and the Rock was Christ.) But with many of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:1-5)

Hamlet will, in fact, fail in his appointed duty of revenge, making him one of those with whom “God was not pleased.” But Shakespeare uses “this cloud of witnesses” to still greater purpose. Upon the agreement of Polonius, Hamlet changes his mind:

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Pol. It is backed like a weasel.

Ham. Or like a whale?

Pol. Very like a whale. (III.ii.270-273)

“Weasel” connects the cloud to the fur of the weasel, which is sable. As sable signifies a defect of charity, either in this life or in purgatory, the cloud progresses from the attachment to riches to this incomplete charity.

Then the cloud becomes like a whale. The manifest Scriptural reference is the history of Jonas, who was swallowed by a whale as a punishment for his unwillingness to preach penitence to Nineve. Like Jonas, Hamlet has refused his God-assigned duty. As Jonas fled to Tarshish, so Hamlet, in a manner, flees to England. Like Jonas, Hamlet is cast forth onto the shore, after which he performs his duty. But the whale evokes another myth, one that appears in the drama’s astronomical references. Cassiopeia boasted that both she and her daughter, Andromeda, were more beautiful than the Nereids, the fifty sea-nymph daughters of Nereus and Doris. To avert the punishment of Poseidon, god of the sea, Cassiopeia and her husband, Cepheus, attempted to sacrifice Andromeda by binding her at the seashore, where the monster, Cetus, the “whale,” would devour her. Mention of the whale thus reinforces the difference between sacrifice of another and self-sacrifice, between self-love and charity.

29. “The Poor Advanc’d”

Through an exchange between Rosencrantz and Hamlet, Shakespeare offers a meditation upon the nature of grace in opposition to all Pelagian understandings of justification:

Ros. Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? you do surely bar the door upon your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend.

Ham. Sir, I lack advancement. (III.ii.249-250)

Hamlet’s lack of charity, his closure to the “Law of liberty” (James 1:25), derives from his lack of “advancement,” that is, divine grace. Man cannot rise above his fallen state without the aid of that grace. He cooperates with it, but without it he can do nothing of supernatural merit.

“Advancement” is a theme taken up in the *Mouse-trap* during the player-king’s discourse to the player-queen:

*This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange,
That even our love should with our fortunes change;
For 'tis a question left us yet to prove
Whe'r love lead fortune or else fortune love.*

*The great man down, you mark his favourite flies;
The poor advanc'd makes friends of enemies.
And hitherto doth love on fortune tend,
For who not needs shall never lack a friend;
And who in want a hollow friend doth try
Directly seasons him his enemy. (III.ii.148-157)*

The theological question is whether “*love lead fortune or else fortune love.*” In the superficial sense of the passage, which is that of worldly love, the answer is clear: Love follows upon one’s fortune. One whose fortune improves will find many new “*friends*” to celebrate it with him. But, “*the great man down, you mark his favourite flies.*” And here one may example, at least to Hamlet’s mind, Ophelia, who has fled from Hamlet, “the observ’d of all observers, quite, quite down.” (III.i.136) “Fortune” can mean worldly eminence and riches, which often accrue unjustly. As Claudius reflects:

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; (III.iii.63-66)

In other words, the fruits of the crime supply the means to escape punishment.

But there is also a love prior to fortune, the charity that is crowned with a heavenly reward. The player-king’s discourse can be read theologically to mean that, by the divine “advancement” of sanctifying grace, one is enabled to merit supernaturally. In this second sense the symbolic meaning of “offence” is disclosed. “Offence” certainly refers to sin, but it also refers to self-sacrifice. “Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice” means that Christ’s Self-Sacrifice has opened the gates of divine mercy, which now overreaches divine justice. It also means for “particular” men that “love shall cover the multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8) “*The great man down, you mark his favourite flies,*” is subject to another interpretation. Christ, “*the great man,*” having redeemed mankind by His suffering and death, now elevates his “*favourite*” to fly “with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love.” (I.v.36) The poor in spirit, who are detached from the world, now make for themselves “friends with the riches of iniquity” (Luke 16:9), conforming themselves to Paul’s epistle: “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with goodness.” (Romans 12:21) Thus, “*the poor advanc’d, makes friends of enemies.*” On the other hand, “*who in want a hollow friend doth try directly seasons him his enemy.*” That is, those who lack this interior renewal will become enemies even of their supposed friends.

Hamlet’s praise of Horatio discloses this spiritual sense of “advancement” and the kind of riches upon which it depends:

For what advancement may I hope from thee,
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits
To feed and clothe thee? Why should the poor be flatter’d? (III.ii.21-23)

Worldly advancement may consist in the accumulation of riches. But spiritual advancement, which can only accrue to those who are detached from those riches, imparts a new and higher “revenue,” namely, these “good spirits” and “rich gifts” (III.i.113) As St. James writes:

Hearken my beloved brethren, hath not God chosen the poor of this world, *that they should be* rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him? (James 2:5)

The grasping self-love that thieves “by these pickers and stealers” (III.ii.248) knows nothing of this treasure. Of this same Horatio, Hamlet says:

and bless'd are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well comingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. (III.ii.32-35)

But the image of a pipe is also that whereby Shakespeare, through the mouth of Hamlet, expresses the need of divine grace:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. (III.ii.264)

Man is not so “unworthy” that his interior life may be manipulated by another man. There is a “mystery” within man, inasmuch as he may be ordained to the divine, but only by the divine. This is the higher fortune which is prior to man's acts. Only God can infuse man with true music through the virtue of charity, so that he ceases to be “like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh.” (III.i.140) Man does not know the stops, and hence can play no music. The quotation ends with another of Shakespeare's puns: “though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.” To “fret” is to cause anxiety. In that sense, Hamlet is indeed fretted by his false friend. But to “fret” also means to string an instrument. In that sense, man can only supply the instrument upon which divine grace may play, but not the proper music. Finally, “fret” calls to mind the fretting upon the canopy of the heavens:

this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. (II.ii.250)

Here, “fretted” means painted. Man can only force an outward show of natural virtue. Without the true fire of charity, man is but a painted star.

30. “Thieves of Mercy”

Shakespeare indicates moral rectitude by the “straight” and “even.” The clowns debate in such language whether Ophelia is to be given a Christian burial:

First Clo. Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?

Sec. Clo. I tell thee she is; and therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial. (V.i.3-4)

Sec. Clo. Will you ha’ the truth on ’t? If this had not been a gentlewoman she should have been buried out o’ Christian burial.

First Clo. Why, there thou sayest; and the more pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even Christian. (V.i.12-13)

But if “straight” and “even” indicate justice, the “bent” and “odd” signify not only injustice, but mercy. This is the implication of Claudius’ attempt at repentance and prayer:

Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe. (III.iii.76-77)

In view of this, one can interpret Hamlet’s refusal to “crook the pregnant hinges of the knee” (III.ii.25) as his refusal of repentance. It is only with Hamlet’s strange and tumultuous adventure at sea that his transformation begins. From the very beginning, this journey is marked by the character of mercy, rather than justice:

The bark is ready, and the wind at help,
The associates tend, and every thing is bent
For England. (IV.iii.39-41)

The “bark,” a common symbol of the Church, is ready. The “wind,” that is, the Holy Spirit, is “at help,” and everything is “bent” for England, that is, prepared for the divine mercy. Here again Shakespeare makes material use of Bacon’s *Essays*:

It was a great blasphemy when the devil said, *I will ascend and be like the Highest*; but it is greater blasphemy to personate God, and bring him in saying, *I will descend and be like the prince of darkness*: and what is it better, to make the cause of religion to descend to the cruel and execrable actions of murdering princes, butchery of people, and subversion of states and governments? Surely this is to bring down the Holy Ghost, instead of the likeness of a dove, in the shape of a vulture or raven; and set out of the bark of a Christian church a flag of a bark of pirates and assassins. Therefore it is most necessary that the church by doctrine and decree, princes by their sword, and all learnings, both Christian and moral, as by their Mercury rod, do damn and send to hell for ever those facts and opinions tending to the support of the same; as hath been already in good part done.³⁵

Bacon's condemnation is most surely directed at the Catholic recusants of England, some few of whom, rightly or wrongly, had entered into plots to overthrow the Protestant government and restore a Catholic monarchy. Far from shunning the similitude, Shakespeare embraces it, and, in doing so, transforms it into a vehicle for the saving mercy of God:

Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very war-like appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour; in the grapple I boarded them: on the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did; I am to do a good turn for them. (IV.vi.12)

The "pirate" ship that Hamlet boarded is the Roman Catholic Church. The pirates are "*thieves of mercy*," obtaining God's mercy for themselves and others when they "crook the pregnant hinges of the knee." (III.ii.25) As Hamlet tells Polonius, "conception is a blessing." (II.ii.198) Indeed, Hamlet faults himself for being "unpregnant" of his cause (II.ii.401) For a man to be justified, Christ must be born within him. In one of the numerous ironies of Shakespeare's imagery, the choice of "crook" and the theme of piracy link criminal activity to divine mercy. This, however, is not wholly without Biblical warrant, for the only person promised eternal life by Christ happened also to be a repentant thief condemned to death. (Luke 23:39-43) These pirates have a certain expectation: "*I am to do a good turn for them.*" This "*good turn*" can plausibly mean a favor, but in the more important theological sense, it refers to Hamlet's conversion, which means literally a "turning about."

31. "Adam Digged"

The conversation between the clowns in the first scene of the final act is crucial to understanding the moral outcome of the drama. Shakespeare thought it sufficiently important to alert the audience through Hamlet's advice to the acting troupe:

And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered; that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (III.ii.7)

Through this self-reference, the drama draws our attention to a scene which the principal character himself can hardly have foreseen. When Hamlet comes upon the clowns, one must be prepared to see in the exchange a meaning beyond the humorous.

The clowns begin with a discussion of the burial of Ophelia. To be exact, they are debating whether she is to be buried in a proper Christian manner:

First Clo. Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?
Sec. Clo. I tell thee she is; and therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial.

First Clo. How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?

Sec. Clo. Why, 'tis found so.

First Clo. It must be *se offendendo*; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly it argues an act; and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, and to perform: argal, she drowned herself wittingly. (V.i.3-7)

The conversation begins with a double-reference. To willfully seek one's own salvation can mean suicide, as the context demands, but it can also be taken theologically as the desire for baptism. The grave is to be made straight, that is, in the east-west direction, in expectation of the Second Coming of Christ. However, this is also a Biblical pun upon the Rheims New Testament that again suggests baptism: "But I have to be baptised with a baptisme: and how am I straitened until it be dispatched?" (Luke 12:50, Rheims 1582). Shakespeare piles allusion upon allusion to tell the auditor or reader that he is concerned with baptism. When the first clown states, "an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, and to perform," Shakespeare invokes the dogma of the Blessed Trinity, whereby one God subsists in three divine Persons. A valid baptism must invoke the three divine Persons by name: "Go therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." (Matthew 28:19) Now, if it were found that Ophelia had taken her own life, she could not be given Christian burial. The question therefore becomes whether she drowned herself in self-defense, a question that becomes convoluted if one takes seriously the implication of baptism. The underlying meaning is made clearer as the banter proceeds:

First Clo. Give me leave. Here lies the water; good: here stands the man; good: if the man go to this water, and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that? but if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself: argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

Sec. Clo. But is this law?

First Clo. Ay, marry, is 't; crowner's quest law. (V.i.9-11)

A man cannot "drown" himself if this drowning be taken for baptism; baptism is only valid when another person performs it. Thus, the man may "go to this water," but it is necessary that "the water come to him." A "crowner" is a coroner, but the significance is theological as well. It is Christ who crowns the elect in heaven for their supernatural merits here on earth. The religious sense is therefore that one must be baptized to be saved; the "crowner's" law is baptism:

Jesus answered, Verily, verily I say unto thee, except that a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh, is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit. (John 3:5-6)

He that shall believe and be baptized, shall be saved; but he that will not believe, shall be damned. (Mark 16:16)

Shakespeare surely intends this *double-entendre* of suicide and baptism. The theological reading is confirmed when the first clown asks the second to fetch a "stoup of liquor" (V.i.28). A "stoup" can mean a drinking vessel of sorts, but it also denotes a basin for baptismal water. The first

clown later evokes the very action of baptizing by his recollection of Yorick: “A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! a’ poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once.” (V.i.77)

The theologizing continues as the two delvers extend their seemingly insignificant, if yet humorous, banter:

First Clo. ... There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam’s profession.

Sec. Clo. Was he a gentleman?

First Clo. A’ was the first that ever bore arms.

Sec. Clo. Why, he had none.

First Clo. What! art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says, Adam digged; could he dig without arms? (V.i.13-17)

“Adam digged” alludes to the famed speech given by the renegade Lollard and priest, John Ball (1338-1381), at Blackheath during the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381:

When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?³⁶ From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.³⁷

The leading question has survived down to the present day, but the subsequent argument is not generally remembered. The context of the speech makes it clear that John Ball is speaking of liberty and bondage in worldly terms. He is quoting Scripture to a non-Scriptural end:

For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succored thee; behold now the accepted time, behold now the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Shakespeare uses the association to mold the religious drama that is unfolding. He announces to the audience that the “acceptable time” for Hamlet’s salvation has arrived: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty.” (2 Corinthians 3:17) It is time for Hamlet to become a “doer of the work”: “But who so looketh in the perfect Law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he not being a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, shall be blessed in his deed.” (James 1:25) The Lutheran doctrine of divine election is excluded: “For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free.” God permits a man to sin, but does not condemn him before he sins.

Shakespeare also gives the auditor a clue as to the meaning of his repeated military references: “could he dig without arms?” To be “armed” is to be applied to works. The ghost of Hamlet’s father appears fully armed, which signifies that he died in a state of charity, having some works to show. But the sword of Priam is “*rebellious to his arm*” (II.ii.323) indicating a lack of charity. Hamlet’s soliloquy now takes on a fully theological meaning:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? (III.i.66-70)

The suicide or “self-slaughter” (I.ii.136) of which Hamlet speaks is self-sacrifice, and “to take arms” is to exercise faith in charitable works. Hamlet has now done this very thing. He has taken arms in his voyage to England, that is, “against a sea of troubles.” And soon he will put an end to his troubles by finally revenging himself, which signifies his justification before God.

32. “To O’er-top Old Pelion”

Hamlet’s symbolic baptism takes place when he leaps into Ophelia’s grave. The grave has a special significance for baptism:

Know ye not, that all we which have been baptized into Jesus Christ, have been baptized into his death? We are buried then with him by baptism into his death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we be planted with him to the similitude of his death, even so shall we be *to the similitude* of his resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5)

In that ye are buried with him through baptism, in whom ye are also raised up together through the faith of the operation of God, which raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

Hamlet’s death to this world, signified by his entry into the grave, is followed by his symbolic resurrection as he emerges from it. The motion is also like that of baptism by immersion. Henceforth Hamlet’s “veiled lids” (I.ii.73) will no longer droop:

Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
Until my eyelids will no longer wag. (V.i.152-153)

Shakespeare has been punning all along. When Gertrude speaks of his “veiled lids” (I.ii.73), one is surely meant to hear “veiled lids” as well. The veil has a wholly Scriptural foundation:

Therefore their minds are hardened; for until this day remaineth the same covering untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament, which *veil* in Christ is put away. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is laid over their hearts. Nevertheless when their *heart* shall be turned to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:14-16)

By such allusion, Shakespeare reinforces the significance of the dramatic moment and the transformative power involved in Hamlet’s leap into Ophelia’s grave. Not to belabor a point, with the veil removed from Hamlet’s eyes, he is able to look into “the perfect Law of liberty.”

(James 1:25) In leaping into Ophelia's grave, Laertes alludes to the classical myth of the giants, Otus and Ephialtes:

Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
Till of this flat a mountain you have made,
To o'er-top old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus. (V.i.133-136)

Otus and Ephialtes wished to ascend to the Olympian heaven by piling Mount Ossa upon Mount Olympus and then Mount Pelion upon Mount Ossa. The allusion serves for more than an emphasis on the depth of burial. Shakespeare turns the piling of dirt upon the grave into the image of spiritual regeneration and resurrection. The allusion to the giants is not lost on Hamlet, who contests the exclusive right of Laertes:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do:
Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine;
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I:
And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart! (V.i.160-169)

The reference to Ossa completes the triad of mountains. But Hamlet goes further, by conjuring the image, already seen, of a mountain topped with fire. This image appeared first in "the morn in russet mantle clad" (I.i.186), signifying the beginning of charity. Baptism, which Shakespeare symbolizes here, does by the infusion of sanctifying grace implant an initial charity into the soul. Weeping, fasting, and tearing oneself are all associated with penance. The reference to "eisel," that is, vinegar, likewise extends this theme. One must first recall the *Essays* of Francis Bacon, in which he likens delay in justice to the souring of wine:

*There be (saith the Scripture) that turn judgment into wormwood; and surely there be also that turn it into vinegar; for injustice maketh it bitter, and delays make it sour.*³⁸

The justice of which Bacon speaks is that of the law courts, but Shakespeare has once again appropriated Bacon for spiritual purposes. Shakespeare is speaking of the justice of the soul in "faith which worketh by love" (Galatians 5:6), a justification long delayed by Hamlet's malice. Vinegar was also taken in Elizabethan England as a preventative for the plague, which calls to mind "the imposthume of much wealth and peace." (IV.iii.31) Shakespeare demonstrates a similar spiritual appropriation in *Sonnet CXI*:

O, for my sake do you with fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide

Than public means which public manners breeds.
 Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
 And almost thence my nature is subdued
 To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.
 Pity me then, and wish I were renewed,
 Whilst, like a willing patient, I will drink
 Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection;
 No bitterness that I will bitter think,
 Nor double penance, to correct correction.
 Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye
 Even that your pity is enough to cure me.

The poet, who has the stamp or “brand” of original sin, is “subdued” by the law of his members, “like the dyer’s hand.” Having been taught only the outward show of “public manners,” he was left unprotected. But, “like a willing patient,” he drinks “potions of eisel” to fight this inward infection through his “penance.” Thus, by extension to *Hamlet*, the vinegar signifies the penitential spirit of a soul that has accumulated a great debt of sin. The speaker’s “friend” is none other than Christ, Whose pity can restore him to spiritual health.

With an irony typical of *Hamlet*, Ophelia symbolizes the Blessed Virgin. In Ophelia’s burial, she is granted rites that would have been denied to anyone who had taken his life:

for charitable prayers,
 Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her;
 Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,
 Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
 Of bell and burial. (V.i.108-112)

These “maiden strewments” recall the “straw” at which she herself spurned. But the priest has added that Ophelia deserved “shards, flints, and pebbles,” rather than flowers. In light of the “quarrel in a straw,” specifically the sense of quarry, one can see Ophelia’s “doubtful” death in a second light. If Ophelia represents the first Eve, she also, by similitude represents the Second Eve. The “virgin crants” and “maiden strewments” certainly suggest this, as does the bell, reminiscent of the *Angelus* prayer. Laertes calls her the “rose of May” (IV.v.141), specifying both the month and flower of the Mother of God. “Ophelia,” meaning help, not only recalls Adam’s helpmate, Eve, but also Mary under the title “Help of Christians.” If, then, the former Hamlet is corrupted through Ophelia, the new Hamlet will likewise come to salvation through her intercession: “O heavenly powers, restore him!” (III.i.130). The priest pronounces:

her death was doubtful,
 And, but that great command o’ersways the order,
 She should in ground unsanctified have lodg’d
 Till the last trumpet; (V.i.105-108)

The plain meaning is that, due to the likelihood of suicide, Ophelia would not have been given a Christian burial in sanctified ground. Nevertheless, this normal procedure has been overruled by

the king's command. But these lines also refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose death is theologically doubtful. Catholic Tradition has always taught that she was assumed body and soul into Heaven, for which reason there are no bodily relics of the Virgin. Yet, it has been debated whether she actually died prior to the Assumption, or whether she merely fell asleep (the Dormition). The Church has never declared for one understanding over another. The "great command that o'ersways the order" is the edict of God whereby her body, sharing in the perfection of her Immaculate Conception, never knew bodily corruption.

33. "On Lethe Wharf"

Water figures prominently in Shakespeare's off-staging of Ophelia's death. The queen's description of her drowning is worth recalling in detail:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come,
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indu'd
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (IV.vii.183-200)

The brook signifies the "corrupted currents of this world." (III.iii.63) The willow grows "aslant," not "straight," which, in keeping with the use already considered, suggests she is not without guilt in her own death. The "hoar leaves," that is, leaves whitened with age, invoke Shakespeare's metaphor of youth and old age, implying a death forgetful of charity. The "dead men's fingers" recall the "damn'd fingers" (III.iv.206) of Claudius that stroked the neck of Gertrude, and a coarse name for them suggests Ophelia's lack of chastity. They also imply that, unlike Horatio, she is a "pipe for fortune's finger" (III.ii.34). She sings "like a creature native and indu'd unto that element," which element is water, signifying especially the sin of sensuality. Laertes recognizes this:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears; (IV.vii.203-204)

The delver informs Hamlet: “Water is a “sore decayer of your whoreson dead body” (V.i.73), indicating sensuality as a source of moral and physical corruption. Ophelia is gradually drawn down “to muddy death.” One must keep in mind the association established by Hamlet, when he upbraids himself for being “a dull and muddy-mettled rascal” (II.ii.400). Shakespeare makes it clear that this mud is metaphorical when Claudius laments of his kingdom: “the people muddied, thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers.” (IV.v.50-51)

But the figure in Ophelia’s death that receives the most sustained treatment is that of weeds. The figure is introduced in the first act, when the ghost urges Hamlet to revenge his murder:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this. (I.v.39-40)

Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, formed for the Greeks the boundary between the land of the living and the dead. This weed of oblivion appears not only here, but throughout Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Indeed, the entire drama works out the consequence of Hamlet’s failure to “remember” the command of his father. The weed thus becomes a symbol of man’s corruption through failure of charity, and rankness signifies the gravity of the sin. Claudius poisons the elder Hamlet with a “*mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected.*” (III.ii.195) He recognizes the nature of this mortal sin: “O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;” (III.iii.42) Hamlet likewise describes Gertrude’s sin as “rank”: “Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen.” (III.iv.168-169) Any further denial of guilt will only fertilize those rank weeds:

Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. (III.iv.170-172)

“Rank” means both “smelly” and “overgrown.” The latter meaning recalls the “habit that too much o’er-leavens the form of plausible manners” (I.iv.33-34), as well as the “pales” (I.iv.32) of reason overrun by the “particular fault” (I.iv.40). It fittingly describes the state of grave sin, which is indeed foul, for it spreads throughout the soul like a disease. Hamlet has thus warned Gertrude against falling ever deeper into mortal sin by multiplying its occasions. When Hamlet warns Gertrude against “the rank sweat of an enseamed bed” (III.iv.104), this figure is combined with that of the deathbed and seams (or seems), each of the three reinforcing the meaning of the others. This corruption began in the Garden of Eden, ruined through the sin of our first parents:

Fie on ’t! O fie! ’tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (I.ii.139-141)

“Things rank and gross in nature” have taken possession of the garden. It is unweeded, because the separation of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30) has yet to take place. This casts serious doubt on the moral quality of those “in France of the best rank and station” (I.iii.80). One may also legitimately doubt the moral judgment of Polonius, who would put “forgeries” upon his son,

Laertes, but “none so rank as may dishonour him” (II.i.23-24). It is difficult to conceive how “drabbing” (II.i.30) would not fall under the class of “rank” or mortal sins.

But if “Lethe wharf” (I.v.40) signifies a man’s forgetfulness of “what manner of one he was” (James 1:24), it also indicates forgiveness out of divine mercy, and the subsequent cleansing and regeneration of man. Thus, the “willow that grows aslant a brook” (IV.vii.183) also indicates baptism. It is worth recalling Bacon’s observation that Lethe flows in the world of the living no less than that of the dead:

Salomon saith, *There is no new thing upon the earth*. So that as Plato had an imagination, *That all knowledge was but remembrance*; so Salomon giveth his sentence, *That all novelty is but oblivion*. Whereby you may see that the river of Lethe runneth as well above ground as below.³⁹

Hamlet’s capture by pirates leaves him “*naked*” (IV.vii.50) upon the shore. He has become the “fat weed that roots⁴⁰ itself in ease on Lethe wharf” (I.v.39-40)—not with the ease of slothfulness, but the ease of a cleansed conscience and renewed virtue. His “vicious mole of nature” (I.iv.28) has been translated into the mole forming this harbor: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one, shall many also be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19)

34. “As Patient as the Female Dove”

As Hamlet’s emerges from Ophelia’s grave, Gertrude predicts that Hamlet’s fury will eventually subside:

And thus a while the fit will work on him;
Anon, as patient as the female dove,
When that her golden couplets are disclos’d,
His silence will sit drooping. (V.i.172-175)

This dove recalls the baptism of Christ:

And Jesus when he was baptized, came straight out of the water. And lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and *John* saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him. And lo, a voice *came* from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3:16-17)

Though Christ had no need of baptism, the Scripture refers by analogy to the sanctifying grace that makes a soul pleasing to God. After Hamlet leaps into Ophelia’s grave, his character changes radically. He is no longer “mad in craft,” as he was from the moment he accepted the words of the ghost in true faith. Under the cover of madness, Shakespeare has all along been speaking more profound matters. This remains so even as Hamlet lays aside that madness. One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit obtained with and through charity is patience:

Knowing that the trying of your faith bringeth forth patience, And let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking nothing. (James 1:3-4)

Hamlet spoke of such patience when describing Horatio:

As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; (III.ii.30-32)

Now Hamlet remembers what sort of man he is, namely, a Christian. He is at peace, and displays that willingness to suffer that was lacking before. Immediately, Hamlet's attitude toward Laertes changes. He now professes his love for him:

What is the reason that you use me thus?
I lov'd you ever: but it is no matter;
Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew and dog will have his day. (V.i.177-180)

In this profession is found the reason for Hamlet's change. He had previously denied his connection to Hercules, who was famous for his twelve labors:

My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules: (I.ii.156-157)

But now, as if to emphasize the "faith which worketh by love" (Galatians 5:6), Shakespeare puts Hamlet in the role of Hercules, that doer of heroic works. Hamlet is now able to pity those with whom he previously clashed:

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 count his favors. (V.ii.82-85)

By his ability to put himself in the place of another, Hamlet is able to live compassionately. He publically asks the forgiveness of Laertes:

Give me your pardon, sir; I've done you wrong;
But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman. (V.ii.150-151)

In language reminiscent of St. Paul, he denies that it is he who has performed such actions; it is the madness itself that has performed them:

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'en 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.154-163)

Like St. Paul, Hamlet has no power over the ends he wishes to accomplish:

For I allow not that which I do, for what I would, that do I not, but what I hate, that do I.
If I do then that which I would not, I consent to the Law, that *it is* good. Now then, it is
no more I, that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know, that in me, that is, in my
flesh, dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but I find no means to
perform that which is good. For I do not the good thing, which I would, but the evil,
which I would not, that do I. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but
the sin that dwelleth in me. (Romans 7:15-20)

Hamlet's inability to accomplish that which he would do leads to his sometimes violent outbursts of self-accusation and self-loathing. (II.ii.382-422, IV.iv.37-71) It is worth considering the relevant part St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans in fuller scope, for the relationship of the Law to justification is central to the debate between Protestants and Catholics:

For sin took occasion by the commandment, and deceived me, and thereby slew *me*.
Wherefore the Law *is* holy, and the commandment *is* holy, and just, and good. Was that
then which is good, made death unto me? God forbid; but sin, that it might appear sin,
wrought death in me by that which is good, that sin might be out of measure sinful by the
commandment. For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.
(Romans 7:11-14)

It is indeed from the moment that the ghost reveals to Hamlet the truth about his father that Hamlet's actions become exaggerated, even outrageous. The message given by the ghost proved to be true, and his command to Hamlet consequently just and obligatory. It is through the commandment of the ghost that Hamlet becomes "out of measure sinful," for he remains carnal in his hatred.

But if man lacks the power to do that which he wills, God makes use of this imprudence to bring about those ends which He would accomplish:

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (V.ii.10-13)

Though a man may "rough-hew" his ends with a "handsaw" (II.ii.272) because he is "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (II.ii.400), these missteps serve some greater end that has been foreseen by divine providence. It is a mystery why one man should be taken in his sins, while another is given ample time for repentance: "I do not know why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'" (IV.iv.48-49) The player-king echoes these same sentiments about human intention and our presumption in thinking that we shall be successful in achieving our own ends:

*But, orderly to end where I begun,
Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown,
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own:* (III.ii.158-161)

Man ends where he begins, traveling in circles. When Horatio bids Hamlet reconsider the fencing match with Laertes, Hamlet resigns himself to the divine will:

there's 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. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.147)

Interpreters of all persuasions agree that Shakespeare is paraphrasing Matthew's Gospel:

And fear ye not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him, which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father? Yea, and all the hairs of your head are numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:28-31)

What is perhaps less appreciated is the context in which Christ's admonition takes place. He has only just finished describing to His disciples how they will be persecuted by the faithless, and immediately He returns to the theme. This is surely the manner in which Shakespeare intended the reference to be understood:

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace into the earth; I came not to send peace, but the sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's enemies *shall be* they of his own household. (Matthew 10:32-36)

The enemies of English Catholics were indeed "they of their own household," their fellow Englishmen who had betrayed the Faith and the Church. The sword-fight that closes and resolves the tragedy fittingly highlights this Biblical lesson by recalling the "sword" that Christ has sent into the world.

35. "Doubt that the Sun Doth Move"

Donald Olson, Marilyn Olson, and Russell Doescher⁴¹ argue convincingly that the "star that's westward from the pole" (I.i.48), of which Bernardo speaks in the opening scene of the drama, is none other than the star that appeared in Cassiopeia in early November of 1572. It is now known that this "star" was a supernova, and it is accordingly designated SN1572. These authors consider evidence for its hour and time of year from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, comparing this with the calculated location of its historical appearance. The significance of this star can

scarcely be overestimated, for it proved to Renaissance minds that the heavens do undergo corruption and generation, a claim rejected by Aristotelian science. The Dane, Tycho Brahe, the most famous astronomer of his generation, was inspired by this event to devote his whole life to astronomical observation. He published his observations in 1573 under the title *De nova et nullius aevi memoria prius visa stella* (“Concerning a New Star Never Before Seen in the Memory of Any Age”).

Peter Usher also maintains that Shakespeare had these observations in mind.⁴² For the family names, “Rosenkrans” and “Guldensteren,” appeared on the engraved frontispiece of Tycho’s collected letters, and Elsinore, though itself a real Danish castle, seems more inspired in its details by Tycho’s Uraniborg observatory at Hven. Usher has argued, not without reason or support, that the cosmological revolution that unfolded prior to Shakespeare’s writing of *Hamlet* informs and structures the tragedy.⁴³ He argues that Shakespeare was aware of the four primary cosmological doctrines, and that *Hamlet* enacts a progression through these cosmologies. To summarize: The Ptolemaic system dating to Claudius Ptolemy (A.D. 90-168) places the earth at the center and the spheres of the seven “planets” (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), together with the sphere of fixed stars, revolving about it. The system of Nicolaus Copernicus (A.D. 1473-1543) is heliocentric, putting Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in orbit about the sun, with the moon orbiting about the earth. Mathematically convertible with the Copernican system is the geocentric system of Tycho Brahe (A.D. 1546-1601). The earth is again at the center as the sun and moon travel about it, but the other planets orbit about the sun. The fourth cosmology, that of Thomas Digges (A.D. 1546-1595), is Copernican in its heliocentrism, but shatters the dome of the fixed stars common to the other three cosmologies. It replaces this shell with an infinite universe filled with stars, each like the sun.

Usher claims that by the deaths of prominent characters the drama passes from one system to the next. His method is most successful in accounting for the names of the principal characters of the drama and in identifying a general drift away from the geocentric and toward the heliocentric models, especially that of Digges. Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius, signifies the system of Claudius Ptolemy; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are closely connected to the Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe. Not only do these family names of Tycho appear on his engraved portrait,⁴⁴ but Frederick Rosenkrantz and Knud Gyldenstjerne had visited England in 1592 on diplomatic business from Denmark, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Usher therefore assigns to the Danish pair the Tychonic cosmology. But while Usher’s assignments, building on the work of Olson, Olson, and Doescher, appear plausible, Usher’s belief that Shakespeare intended to defend a particular cosmological doctrine is highly improbable. The dramatic means at Shakespeare’s disposal would have been clumsy and inept in such a task. These astronomical references must subserve a higher purpose expressible in drama.

Tycho Brahe, in fact, outwardly resembles Hamlet. During his time as a student, Tycho had visited Wittenberg, which was not only a center of Lutheranism, but also the first center of heliocentric astronomy, established by Rheticus after the visitation of Copernicus in 1541.⁴⁵

Usher rightly sees in Gertrude's urging an astronomical reference, but this reference coincides with a theological warning against Lutheranism:

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg. (I.ii.122-123)

Having been snatched from his parents and raised by his aunt and uncle, Tycho fell in love with a certain Kirsten, the daughter of Jørgen Hansen, the Lutheran minister in Knudstrup. Because she was a commoner, they never formally married, but, according to Danish law, the open habitation of a nobleman and a common woman attained the status of a morganatic marriage after three years. When Polonius relates to Claudius what he said to Ophelia, "Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star," (II.ii.150) one may appreciate the clever reference to Tycho. The nature of the morganatic marriage was such that the children born of the union did not inherit the father's social rank or property. This adds to Hamlet's observation to Polonius another meaning: "conception is a blessing; but not as your daughter may conceive." (II.ii.198) That Kirsten's father was a Lutheran minister also reinforces the evidence that Polonius upholds the Lutheran doctrine.

Through temporal calculation one may also recognize in Hamlet a certain similitude to Tycho. The first clown began his job as sexton on the very day when Hamlet was born, thirty years earlier, which also coincided with the day on which the elder Hamlet overcame Fortinbras. If one adds "these three years" (V.i.56) that passed after Hamlet's exile to the date of Tycho's publication in 1573, one gets 1576. Subtracting the thirty years then yields a birth date of 1546. This is the year of Tycho's birth. Noteworthy as well, it is the year in which Thomas Digges, the English astronomer, was born. To Hamlet's conversion in faith and charity there is a parallel transformation from the Ptolemaic or Tychonic to the Diggesian system of the universe. The theological parallel is especially clear in the Rheims New Testament:

but now he promiseth, saying, Yet once: and I will move not only the earth, but heaven also. And in that he saith, Yet once, he declareth the translation of the moveable things as being made, that those things may remaine which are unmoveable. Therefore receiving an unmoveable kingdom, we have grace: by the which let us serve pleasing God, with feare & reverence. For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:26-29, Rheims 1582)

Divine grace is not a moveable creature, but a participation in the divine, which is immovable. The heliocentric model places the sun at the center, as divine grace places God, "a consuming fire," at the center of man's life. Francis Bacon invites such a figure by his own political analogy in the *Essays*:

And certainly men that are great lovers of themselves waste the public. Divide with reason between self-love and society; and be so true to thyself, as thou be not false to others; specially to thy king and country. It is a poor centre of man's actions, *himself*. It is right earth. For that only stands fast upon his own centre; whereas all things that have affinity with the heavens, move upon the centre of another, which they benefit.⁴⁶

Bacon suggests that men must imitate the heavenly orbs that circle about and benefit the earth. But Bacon's conception is centered upon a temporal end: "public," "king," and "country." The center is benefitted, not the source of benefits. Bacon extends the analogy to consider the disruption of the harmonious motions of the state:

Also, when discords, and quarrels, and factions are carried openly and audaciously, it is a sign the reverence of government is lost. For the motions of the greatest persons in a government ought to be as the motions of the planets under *primum mobile*; (according to the old opinion,) which is that every of them is carried swiftly by the highest motion, and softly in their own motion. And therefore, when great ones in their own particular motion move violently, and, as Tacitus expresseth it well, *liberius quam ut imperantium meminissent*, it is a sign the orbs are out of frame. For reverence is that wherewith princes are girt from God; who threateneth the dissolving thereof; *Solvam cingula regum*.⁴⁷

But superstition hath been the confusion of many states, and bringeth in a new *primum mobile*, that ravisheth all the spheres of government.⁴⁸

Each of the planets travels in its own slower epicycle, superimposed upon a swifter cycle about the earth. If the celestial body is moved too violently in its own epicycle, *liberius quam ut imperantium meminissent* ("too freely to be mindful of those governing"), it disturbs the harmonious revolution of the spheres. God threatens: *Solvam cingula regum*. ("I shall loose the belts of kings.") The "superstition" that "hath been the confusion of many states" is clearly, from the context of the times in which Bacon writes, the Catholic religion. The urging of Claudius is even more patently astronomical than Gertrude's:

For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire; (I.ii.116-118)

Shakespeare's reference is once again to the *Essays*, in which Bacon advises:

Therefore it is good for princes, if they use ambitious men, to handle it so as they be still progressive and not retrograde; which because it cannot be without inconvenience, it is good not to use such natures at all.⁴⁹

The more "violently" a planet moves in its epicycle, the more retrograde will its motion appear. The godly man must appear retrograde, for his true motion is about the sun, "a good kissing carrion." (II.ii.196) Some editors have "god" for "good," and the theological meaning is surely the same. This retrogression is not, as Bacon describes it, an irregular motion of the planet or kingly subject, but an illusion due to one's earthly frame of reference. There is a reality that underlies the seeming, or, as the engraved motto of Tycho Brahe has it: *Non Haberi, Sed Esse* ("Not to be held [so], but to be [so].") Shakespeare's Copernican revolution of the Baconian political system will dethrone the temporal government, putting God, the primary Good and Unmoved Mover, at the center of all motion: "*Doubt that the sun doth move.*" (II.ii.126)

36. “Sick Almost to Doomsday with Eclipse”

Hamlet’s character is closely allied to that of the moon. The connection is established early in the first act, when Claudius, signifying the earth and an earth-centered universe, implores Hamlet to cease mourning for his father:

We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As a father; for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne; (I.ii.110-113)

The moon, according to the Ptolemaic system, is indeed in the sphere “most immediate” to the earth. The theme is developed further in the warning issued by Laertes to his sister, Ophelia. Describing Hamlet, he observes:

For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but, as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal. (I.iii.16-19)

Just as the moon in its crescent phase waxes larger, so also does Hamlet’s soul, the temple within which the divine service is enacted. This identification is made again:

The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon; (I.iii.41-42)

Ophelia must beware of Hamlet’s favor, because it, like the moon, is changeable.

The analogy, suitably extended, also sheds light upon the relationship between Hamlet (moon), Claudius (earth), and the elder Hamlet (sun). Claudius and Gertrude beg of Hamlet:

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Ham. Not so, my Lord; I am too much ‘i the sun.
Queen. Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust: (I.ii.69-74)

Hamlet is not occluded with clouds. This is a celestial, not a terrestrial, phenomenon. Yet Hamlet is darkened, either in accordance with the natural waxing and waning of the moon, or by eclipse. The latter is implied by the expression, “veiled lids,” suggesting also “veiled lids.” There is something, namely Claudius, that intervenes between Hamlet and the sun:

He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between the election and my hopes, (V.ii.71-72)

The earth stands between the sun and moon, darkening the latter by its “umbrage.” (V.ii.103) According to the Ptolemaic system, this is due to the relative motions of sun and moon about the motionless earth. And so Shakespeare is punning when he puts into the mouth of Claudius:

For what we know must be and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? (I.ii.102-105)

Hamlet’s “peevish opposition” is more than his personal attitude. It is an astronomical “opposition,” which means that the sun and the moon are on opposite sides of the earth. But from Hamlet’s Copernican point of view, it is the mobile earth that has come between the sun and the moon. Hamlet refers to these troubles at the sudden termination of the *Mouse-trap*:

Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers, if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me,
with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?
(III.ii.210)

Hamlet’s fortunes turning “Turk” is a reference to the astrological prediction made by Tycho Brahe when the moon was eclipsed on 28 October, 1566. Tycho interpreted this to mean that the Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, was soon to die, something that had already happened on 7 September 1566, almost two months before the eclipse. Beyond reinforcing the aforesaid analogy, it gives a rather humorous turn to Hamlet’s first encounter with the ghost:

Ghost. The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
Now wears his crown.
Ham. O my prophetic soul! My uncle! (I.v.47-48)

The murder preceded the ghost’s revelation by the same measure as the death of Suleiman had preceded Tycho’s prediction: “But two months: nay, not so much, not two.” (I.ii.142) Hamlet, Like Tycho, has the gift of prophecy *post factum*.

In view of his assimilation to the moon, it is Hamlet who is described when Horatio recalls the patently apocalyptic prodigy that occurred before the death of Caesar:

and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse; (I.i.135-137)

“Neptune’s empire” signifies the ocean. The moon, the “moist star” that produces the tides of that ocean, has been eclipsed. By the reference to “doomsday,” the image Shakespeare paints is explicitly apocalyptic:

And immediately after the tribulations of those days, shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken. (Matthew 24:29)

A lunar image also expresses Hamlet's interior agony over both the faithlessness of his mother and her marriage to the very man who has murdered his dear father:

heaven's face doth glow,
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act. (III.iv.57-60)

Beyond the clear expression of heaven's repugnance for Gertrude's act, "heaven's face" refers to the moon, as it is commonly perceived to bear a "tristful visage." But the appearance of the ghost has begun to shed some light on the once wholly darkened, but now crescent, moon:

What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous; (I.iv.57-60)

The elder Hamlet, is therefore the sun "that usurp'st this time of night" (I.i.60) and now "revisit'st" Hamlet, who is figured by the moon.

37. "The Mobled Queen"

Hamlet is filled with incidents that seem disconnected, pointless, and downright weird, if not decoded through Shakespeare's punning ciphers. One of these baffling exchanges describes Hecuba at the death of Priam:

First Play. But who had seen the mobled queen—
Ham. 'The mobled queen?'—
Pol. That's good; 'mobled queen' is good. (II.ii.353-355)

Beyond the analogy to the garment draped about Eve after the fall, there is an astronomical pun based upon the homonymy of "moble" and "mobile." The *primum mobile*, or "first mobile," was understood in ancient and medieval cosmology to be the outermost sphere on which the fixed stars traveled in their diurnal motion. The "mobled queen" is therefore Cassiopeia, the constellation proximate to the polestar, in which the *stella nova*, or "new star," observed and described by Tycho Brahe, blazed forth in early November of 1572. One can understand, therefore, why Claudius explains to Laertes his relation to the queen in astronomical terms:

She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her. (IV.vii.18-20)

Claudius receives his motion from Gertrude, just as the earth and all the lower spheres receive their motion from the sphere of the fixed stars.

Additional evidence pointing to Gertrude's cosmological role as the *primum mobile* is found in the first player's recitation concerning Hecuba:

*But if the gods themselves did see her then,
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,
The instant burst of clamor that she made—
Unless things mortal move them not at all—
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods. (II.ii.363-369)*

That is, the wailing of Hecuba would have made the stars weep milk. The obvious reference is to the Milky Way (*Via Lactea*). According to Greek mythology, Zeus (Jupiter) had a son, Heracles (Hercules), by a mortal woman named Alcmene. In order to give Heracles godlike powers, Zeus gave him to Hera (Juno) to suckle while she slept. Startling as she awoke to find an unfamiliar babe at her breast, Hera pushed off Heracles, with an attendant loss of milk, which milk became the Milky Way. Francis Bacon had compared Fortune to this *Via Lactea*:

Therefore if a man look sharply and attentively, he shall see Fortune: for though she be blind, yet she is not invisible. The way of fortune is like the milken way in the sky; which is a meeting or knot of a number of small stars; not seen asunder, but giving light together. So are there a number of little and scarce discerned virtues, or rather faculties and customs, that make men fortunate.⁵⁰

Modern telescoping had already shown the Milky Way to be a vast assemblage of scarcely discernible stars that together yield a milk-white glow. Worldly success and good fortune, Bacon posits, is the result of innumerable customs, the “damned custom” (III.iv.45) that Shakespeare so roundly condemns. Bacon's “Fortune” is revealed to be none other than the Ilium—or Denmark—that falls headlong into collapse:

*Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steep'd,
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounc'd: (II.ii.361-362)*

And, indeed, when Hamlet kills Claudius, all tongues pronounce “treason” (V.ii.263) against “*Fortune's state*.” It is also with this metaphor in mind that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Hamlet this critique of Osric:

He did comply with his dug before he sucked it. Thus has he—and many more of the same bevy, that I know the drossy age dotes on—only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter, a kind of yesty collection which carries them through and through the most fond and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out. (V.ii.134)

Osric acquiesced to his mother's nipple, until it was time to perform his duty. Unlike Hercules, he will not drink. All is outward show, lacking the interior substance. This figure of milk links symbolically Christ's Crucifixion to the reception of grace. As already shown, the elder Hamlet's death parallels the death of Christ, and his return from the grave, Christ's Resurrection. Just as

the Blood of Christ has become the spiritual drink of Christians, so the blood of Hamlet's father, turned to milk, has become a source of Herculean strength:

And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine; (I.v.76-78)

That Osric "did comply with his dug before he sucked it" means that he received the Gospel, and perhaps intended to fulfill it, but turned aside from it. Milk thus doubles as the higher form of fortune. Hamlet's reference is likely to Christ's parable of the two sons:

A certain man had two sons, and came to the elder, and said, Son, go and work today in my vineyard. But he answered, and said, I will not; yet afterward he repented himself, and went. Then came he to the second, and said likewise. And he answered, and said, I will, Sir; yet he went not. Whether of them twain did the will of the father? They said unto him, The first. Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the Publicans and the harlots go before you into the kingdom of God. (Matthew 21:28-31)

Hamlet plays the part of the first son, Osric the second.

The queen's association with Cassiopeia reinforces the apocalyptic elements of the drama. The reader is prepared for this when the ghost says of his former queen: "O Hamlet! what a falling-off was there;" (I.v.55) This "falling-off" is a relatively close translation of "apostasy" (ἀπόστασις). This apostasy is what is commonly understood in the Biblical passage:

And there appeared another wonder in heaven: for behold, a great red dragon having seven heads, and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads; And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. (Revelation 12:3-4)

One third of the stars, signifying the faithful, are drawn down from heaven and cast to the earth. The admonition of Claudius in the face of Hamlet's grief thus takes on a more sinister aspect:

We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father; (I.ii.110-112)

Claudius, "the serpent" (I.v.46), symbolizes Satan, the "father of lies." This cosmological interpretation is sustained by another episode, which takes place in the *Mouse-trap*, as the player-king explains to the player-queen why her vows of fidelity must ultimately yield:

*Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity;
Which now, like fruit unripe, sticks on the tree,
But fall unshaken when they mellow be. (III.ii.136-139)*

This calls to mind another image of falling stars described in the Book of Revelation: "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, as a fig tree casteth her green figs..." (Revelation 6:13) England, signified by Gertrude and Cassiopeia, has defected from the Faith, thereby falling from

the sphere of the fixed stars. Gertrude's own unfaithfulness is brought to the fore of conscience by Shakespeare's drama within the drama:

*P. Queen. O! confound the rest;
Such love must needs be treason in my breast:
In second husband let me be accurst;
None wed the second but who kill'd the first.*
Ham. [Aside.] Wormwood, wormwood. (III.ii.125-129)

Hamlet adverts to the bitterness that such words must produce in the queen's conscience. But, here again, Shakespeare does not fail to give Hamlet's words an astronomical and eschatological sense. "Wormwood" refers to yet another apocalyptic punishment:

Then the third Angel blew the trumpet, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell into the third part of the rivers, and into the fountains of waters. And the name of the star is called Wormwood; therefore the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter. (Revelation 8:10-11)

Apostasy from Christ and His Church is again represented by a star falling from the heavens.

But the apocalyptic imagery of the queen goes beyond the astronomical. She dies drinking from the chalice poisoned by the king himself. One cannot miss the likeness to the Whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation:

Come, I will shew thee the damnation of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters, With whom have committed fornication the Kings of the earth, and the inhabitants of the earth are drunken with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away into the wilderness in the Spirit, and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, which had seven heads, and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and gilded with gold, and precious stones, and pearls, and had a cup of gold in her hand full of abominations, and filthiness of her fornication. And in her forehead *was* a name written, A mystery, great Babylon, the mother of whoredomes, and abominations of the earth. (Revelation 17:1-5)

Insular England does indeed "sitteth upon many waters." England has mixed the poison of Protestantism with the wine of the genuine Faith. The errors that she exports to the world are now destroying her from within:

Reward her, even as she hath rewarded you, and give her double according to her works; *and* in the cup that she hath filled to you, fill her the double. In as much as she glorified herself, and lived in pleasure, so much give ye to her torment and sorrow; for she saith in her heart, I sit being a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no mourning. (Revelation 18:6-7)

The reason for her punishment calls to mind Queen Gertrude: "for she saith in her heart: I sit being a queen, and am no widow; and shall see no mourning." To quote the player-queen:

*Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,
If, once a widow, ever I be wife!* (III.ii.170-171)

The Whore of Babylon also calls to mind Niobe, that other unrepentant widow.

38. “Indued unto that Element”

Each of the primary characters has an astronomical identity. Already noted are the identities of Hamlet with the moon, Claudius with the earth, the elder Hamlet with the sun, and Gertrude with the orb of the fixed stars, especially the constellation of Cassiopeia. The planetary identities of Ophelia, Laertes, and Polonius can also be lifted easily from the text, whereas the identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are more subtly encoded. In Aristotle’s physics, there are four elements, each possessing two attributes drawn from contraries: Fire is hot and dry; air is hot and moist; earth is cold and dry; water is cold and moist. Each element had been astrologically assimilated to the planets: fire to Mars, air to Jupiter, earth to Saturn, and water to Venus. The “nymph,” “fair Ophelia” (III.i.99) is clearly identified with Venus, goddess of physical love and sensuality. Not only is she “*celestial*” and the “*soul’s idol*” (II.ii.120) of Hamlet, but she is closely connected to water, the element assimilated to Venus. Laertes laments over Ophelia’s drowning in the “weeping brook” (IV.vii.192):

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears. (IV.vii.203-204)

According to Gertrude, she drowned, “like a creature native and indued unto that element.” (IV.vii.196-197) Laertes, for his part, is characterized as another Mars, both hot and dry:

O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven times salt,
Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye! (IV.v.138-139)

He simmers in the thought of his revenge upon Hamlet, whom he will mercilessly compel “even to the teeth and forehead of our faults to give in evidence” (III.iii.69-70):

It warms the very sickness in my heart
That I shall live and tell him to the teeth,
“Thus diddest thou.” (IV.vi.58-60)

Claudius clearly recognizes this igneous character of Laertes: “Why art thou incensed?” (IV.v.102) He explains to Laertes:

Not that I think you did not love your father,
But that I see, in passages of proof,
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it. (IV.vii.122-127)

Shakespeare goes so far as to bring these two elements, water and fire, into a clash of properties. After Laertes is informed of Ophelia's drowning, he exclaims, "I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze, But that this folly douts it." (IV.vii.208-209) News of Ophelia's drowning douts his fiery speech, just as water extinguishes fire. It also "doubts" it, rendering it uncertain. The observation of Claudius thus rings true of Laertes: The drowning of Ophelia is the "wick or snuff" that "abates" his fire.

Polonius is assigned the role of the planet Mercury. The Roman Mercury, or Greek Hermes, is the god of commerce, fittingly for Polonius, whose conception of human relations is entirely mercantile. Mercury is primarily the messenger god, a role which Polonius relishes: "Give first admittance to the ambassadors; My news shall be the fruit to that great feast." (II.ii.57-58) As messenger to the gods, Mercury also governs human speech and rhetoric:

The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father. (I.ii.49-51)

If Claudius is the "head" and "hand" of Denmark, signifying authority and power, then Polonius is its "heart" and "mouth," the instrument of persuasion. His rather humorous rhetorical exercises do not fail to gain the attention of his hearers:

Queen. More matter, with less art.
Pol. Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity;
And pity 'tis 'tis true: a foolish figure;
But farewell it, for I will use no art. (II.ii.106-110)

Polonius had already admitted some such expertise, having just prefaced his remarks:

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief. (II.ii.100-102)

The art of rhetoric is often accompanied by duplicity and cunning. Twice hiding behind an arras to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversations, Polonius is clearly corrupted by this bad companion. But his calculating nature is most evident in his instructions to Reynaldo to sound out the behavior of Laertes. He concludes:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses, and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out: (II.i.69-72)

When Shakespeare composed these verses, a critique of the *Essays* of Francis Bacon was likely intended:

For to him that opens himself men will hardly shew themselves adverse; but will (fair) let him go on, and turn their freedom of speech to freedom of thought. And therefore it is a shrewd proverb of the Spaniard, *Tell a lie and find a troth*.⁵¹

If truth is a “carp,” then the “fishmonger” (II.ii.190), Polonius, is a panderer not only in regard to his daughter, Ophelia, but with regard to the truth generally.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be identified with the two remaining planets in the Ptolemaic system, Saturn and Jupiter. They are “the indifferent children of the earth” (II.ii.217), signifying these two titans born of Gaia, the earth goddess. Which is to be identified with which is, as may be expected, ambiguous. They are not, like the moon, “most immediate to our throne” (I.ii.113), that is, to the earth. As they themselves express it:

Guil. Happy in that we are not over happy;

On Fortune’s cap we are not the very button.

Ham. Nor the soles of her shoe?

Ros. Neither, my lord.

Ham. Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

Guil. Faith, her privates we.

Ham. In the secret parts of Fortune? O! most true; she is a strumpet. (II.ii.218-224)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lie within “the secret parts of Fortune,” more distant from the earth and therefore more mysterious to the astronomer. Claudius is the “button” on Fortune’s cap, being at the center like the “button” of a flower (I.iii.45). The “soles of her shoe” recalls the “shoes” with which Gertrude followed the body of her dead husband, thus putting her at the other extreme of the world system, that is, the sphere of the fixed stars. Jupiter was associated with prosperity and fortune, Saturn with duty, ambition, and social conformity. These are precisely the topics that Shakespeare chooses to examine through these two characters, and this it is that makes each of them, to the mind of Hamlet, a servile “sponge” (IV.ii.16).

39. “Out, Out, Thou Strumpet, Fortune!”

The condemnation of fortune in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is no mere lament over the vain or inequitable outcome of actions and lives. It is foreseen as a real event, the apocalyptic end of the present world and the descent of a new Jerusalem. But the enormity of the event, expressed in subtle astronomical images and puns, is difficult to discern within the drama. Tycho Brahe’s given name is derived from Τυχή, the Greek goddess of fortune. The collapse of “*Fortune’s state*” (II.ii.362) is therefore paralleled by the Copernican revolution, completed in the system of Thomas Digges. Eight of the principal characters die in the complete collapse of the government of Denmark. Each has been mapped onto some part of the cosmic machinery.

Fortune is commonly described as a revolving wheel that raises a man only to lower him again. Thus the destruction of Fortune “in general synod” (thereby also suggesting the Council of Trent) is signified by the breaking up of a wheel:

*Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod, take away her power;
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,
As low as to the fiends! (II.ii.346-350)*

This wheel of fortune is the whole apparatus of the geocentric cosmos. The “*fellies*” designate the outer rim of the wheel, while the “*nave*” is the central fixture on which the “spokes” converge. Another common form of “*fellies*” was “*felloes*.” Shakespeare’s clever punning is again in evidence when he puts into the mouth of Hamlet this warning to Ophelia: “What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us.” (III.i.125) The planets travel in epicycles about their centers or naves, attached to the *felloes* of great orbs, which in turn revolve about the earth. Since they wander about the heavens, these naves on which the *felloes* turn are fittingly called “*arrant*.” Hamlet is therefore describing himself as a part of that world system. Again Shakespeare seems to be putting an image of Francis Bacon to theological use:

In other things the predominancy of custom is every where visible; insomuch as a man would wonder to hear men profess, protest, engage, give great words, and then do just as they have done before; as if they were dead images, and engines moved only by the wheels of custom.⁵²

The whole world-machine moves by this “damned custom” (III.iv.45), which is the mere outward show of virtue, lacking precisely the charity that makes acts pleasing to God. In *Hamlet* there are innumerable “*fellows*” (I.ii.183), (I.v.172), (III.ii.91), (V.i.30), (V.i.40), (V.i.44), (V.i.80) and bonds of “*fellowship*” (II.ii.246), (III.ii.210). All find their proper place in the vast cosmic machinery, and all are doomed to final destruction:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone, but, like a gulf doth draw
What’s near it with it; it is a massy wheel,
Fix’d on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis’d and adjoin’d; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan. (III.iii.18-26)

The kingdom is again compared to the world machine that was thought to turn on poles affixed to the highest mountains. On these poles turned first the *primum mobile*, the sphere of the fixed stars, and, through it, motion was conveyed down by stages to the lowest of the spheres. The destruction of this primary mechanism entails the destruction of the whole machine. The image of the wheel appears once again in Hamlet’s description of the cloud:

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.
Pol. It is backed like a weasel. (III.ii.270-271)

Fortune is suggested by a second meaning of “weasel,” which is a wheel-like device with spokes, on which was wound yarn. The device, common in Shakespeare’s time, was used to measure out lengths. It suggests the Greek Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who would spin, measure, and cut the yarn that measured a man’s life. Fortune was also quite often portrayed as dangling puppets, the hapless victims of her whims. It is this capricious and worldly aspect of Ophelia’s love that Hamlet criticizes: “I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.” (III.ii.188)

40. “A General Groan”

The calamitous end of “*Fortune’s state*” (II.ii.362) is accompanied by “a general groan” (III.iii.26). The groan can be taken at one level to express despair over the temporal order. Hamlet writes to Ophelia:

*O dear Ophelia! I am ill at these numbers:
I have not art to reckon my groans;* (II.ii.129-130)

The bawdy element in his letter is brought out more clearly in his conversation with Ophelia during *The Mouse-trap*:

Oph. You are keen, my Lord, you are keen.
Ham. It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge. (III.ii.189-190)

It has already been seen that this bawdiness is a cover and code for the Catholic religion. At the death of Claudius a “general groan” (III.iii.26) ensues for the whole state. These groans are in fact an allusion to St. Paul’s letters, an allusion that is even more evident in the Rheims translation than the Geneva, for the latter uses both “groan” and “sigh”:

For we know that every creature groneth and travaileth, even till now. And not only it, but we also our selves having the first frutes of the Spirit, we also grone within our selves, expecting the adoption of the sonnes of God, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:22-24, Rheims 1582)

And in like manner also the Spirit helpeth our infirmitie. For what we should pray as we ought, we know not: but the Spirit him self requesteth for us with gronings unspeakeable. (Romans 8:26, Rheims 1582)

For we know that if our earthly house of this habitation be dissolved, that we have a building of God, a house not made with hand, eternal in heaven. For in this also do we grone, desirous to be overclothed with our habitation that is from heaven: yet so, if we be found clothed, not naked. For we also that are in this tabernacle, grone being burdened; because we would not be spoiled, but overclothed, that that which is mortal, might be swallowed up of life. (2 Corinthians 5:1-4, Rheims 1582)

Thus the “general groan” (III.iii.26), while bidding farewell to one order, ushers in an entirely new and spiritual order in which the children of God will be glorified. They will put on a new garment, thereby clothing the nakedness which stems from Adam’s fall.

41. “King of Infinite Space”

Hamlet’s cosmological “transformation” from Tychonic to Diggesian is suggested in several ways. Hamlet’s symbolic year of birth, as has already been noted, corresponds not only to Tycho’s, but to that of Thomas Digges. Digges was the son of Leonard Digges (1515-1559), a mathematician, surveyor, and military engineer, who is credited with the invention of the theodolite, and by some historians with an early form of the telescope. The elder Hamlet shares some prominent characteristics with the elder Digges. Hamlet describes him as an “old mole” (I.v.184) that can work quickly in the earth, and a “worthy pioner” (I.v.185) or military engineer of mines. Thomas, himself a mathematician and astronomer, published his father’s works, and ultimately became an important proponent of the heliocentric system of Copernicus.

The Copernican system of the world, as completed by Thomas Digges, posits a new heaven, extending infinitely in all directions and filled with a universe of stars not unlike our sun, together with a new earth, now circling the sun. To quote Digges:

Heerein can wee never sufficiently admire thys wonderfull & incomprehensible huge frame of goddes woork proponed to our senses, seinge fyrst thys baulle of ye earth wherein we move . . . we may easily consider what litle portion of gods frame, our Elementare corruptible worlde is, but never sufficiently be able to admire the immensity of the Rest. Especially of that fixed Orbe garnished with lightes innumerable and reachinge up in Sphaericall altitude without ende.⁵³

Digges himself viewed the new cosmology in theological terms:

This orbe of starres fixed infinitely up extendeth hit self in altitude sphericallye, and therefore immovable the pallace of foelicitye garnished with perpetuall shininge glorious lightes innumerable, farr excellenge ovr sonne both in quantitye and qualitye, the very court of coelestiall angelles, devoyd of greefe and replenished with perfite endlesse joye, the habitacle for the elect.⁵⁴

The analogy with the apocalyptic vision of St. John could not have been lost on Shakespeare, who was familiar with Digges’ writing:⁵⁵

And I saw a new heaven, and a new earth; for the first heaven, and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city new Jerusalem come down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride trimmed for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the Tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be their God with them. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, neither crying, neither shall there be anymore pain; for the first things are passed. (Revelation 21:1-4)

The stars of the Diggesian system, being suns in their own right, rather than a “majestical roof fretted with golden fire” (II.ii.250), are a corrective to the Lutheran and Reformed notions of total depravity. These stars are indeed “fire.” (II.ii.125) Being justified by God, a man burns with charity, a real participation in God’s own Charity. Carrion, when kissed by the sun of God’s Goodness, can be raised to a higher state. In the new heaven and earth, man becomes like another sun, lesser to be sure, but bearing within himself something wholly divine and supernatural:

There *are* also heavenly bodies, and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly *is* one, and *the glory* of the earthly *is* another. There is another glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from *another* star in glory. So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, *and* is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, *and* is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, *and* is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, *and* is raised a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:40-44)

The Diggesian modification of the Copernican theory thus becomes the model of Catholic justification, in which a soul may suddenly ignite with the love of God. The heavens are not immutable; they admit of novelty. The “star that’s westward from the pole” (I.i.48), which appeared in Cassiopeia in 1572 and was also observed by the young Thomas Digges, signifies the transformed Hamlet. Having overcome his “bad dreams,” his servile fear, he has become a “king of infinite space.” (II.ii.234)

42. “The Rest is Silence”

Peter Milward, *S.J.*, has called attention to the conversion and good end made by Hamlet, expressed by Horatio’s paraphrase of *In Paradisum* from the traditional Requiem Mass: “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” (V.ii.304)⁵⁶ Hamlet’s last words point to the same when he closes his life with “the rest is silence.” (V.ii.303) This “rest” is more than a remainder of his existence, the continuity of his person after death. It is even more than the rest of “peace-parted souls” (V.i.117) as they lay in the bosom of their Redeemer. It is ultimately God’s rest after the six days of creation, and it is “silent” because God has ceased to speak forth creatures by his *fiat*. Shakespeare once again works Bacon’s reflections into his dramatic expression:

Merit and good works is the end of man’s motion; and conscience of the same is the accomplishment of man’s rest. For if a man can be partaker of God’s theatre, he shall likewise be partaker of God’s rest. *Et conversus Deus, ut aspiceret opera quae fecerunt manus suae, vidit quod omnia essent bona nimis; and then the sabbath.*⁵⁷

“And God, having turned that he might regard the works of His hand which He made, saw that all things were exceedingly good; and then the sabbath.” From the coming of first light, “the morn in russet mantle clad” (I.i.186), to Hamlet’s final “rest,” Shakespeare includes in his drama the whole of God’s creation, as recounted in Genesis. On the first day, God separated light from darkness (I.i.186, I.iii.86). On the second day, He placed a firmament to divide the waters (II.ii.250). On the third day, God separated dry land from the sea (II.ii.250), and created seed-

bearing plants (I.ii.139-140) and grasses (III.ii.252). On the fourth day, He created the lights (II.ii.250) in the firmament: the sun (I.i.135, I.ii.70, II.ii.126, II.ii.196, III.ii.108, IV.i.32, IV.v.41), moon (I.i.134, I.iii.42, I.iv.59, III.ii.104, III.ii.108, III.iv.231, IV.vii.159), and stars (I.i.48, I.i.134, I.iv.136, I.v.23, II.ii.125, II.ii.150, IV.vii.19, V.i.139, V.ii.183). On the fifth day, God created water creatures (II.i.69, II.ii.190), fowls (I.i.167, II.ii.261, II.ii.301, V.ii.134), and the great whales (III.ii.272-273). On the sixth day, God created cattle (III.ii.65), creeping creatures (III.i.125), and all beasts (I.ii.154, I.v.50, II.ii.304, IV.iv.40, IV.v.55, IV.vii.96, V.i.44, V.ii.93) that move on the earth, and concluded by creating man (I.ii.194, II.ii.250) to His own image and likeness.

Shakespeare does demonstrate the error of Bacon's vision in one important respect. Bacon would have the seventh day to be a day of work:

The first creature of God, in the works of the days, was the light of the sense; the last was the light of reason; and his sabbath work ever since, is the illumination of His Spirit.⁵⁸

Bacon would turn the divine rest and changelessness into endless striving and effort. It is Bacon that is being criticized through the mouth of Marcellus:

Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day: (I.i.91-94)

The "sore task," produced by the "rub" (II.i.75) of fearful conscience, joins Sunday to the rest of the week, and makes night a "joint-laborer" with the day. All is business. Nothing is left for God. But, regardless of Bacon's misconception, Hamlet has finally entered into the divine Sabbath. He has played his assigned part in "God's theatre" and has revenged himself:

And I saw the dead, both great and small stand before God, and the books were opened, and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life, and the dead were judged of those things, which were written in the books, according to their works. (Revelation 20:12)

Hamlet has departed this world justified by that "faith which worketh by love." (Galatians 5:6)

Conclusion

Tragedy is a vital element in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. One may even say that the work, in a theological sense, is the most tragic of all dramas. For the "particular fault" (I.iv.40) afflicting Hamlet is metaphysically deeper than the tragic flaw described by the literary critic. Original sin is the very source of tragedy, of the hubris that leads man beyond the limits set for him by God. But there is more than tragedy in *Hamlet*. Read correctly, it is also comedic, for Hamlet dies well. As the drama progresses, he makes a conversion, one that assures his attainment of beatitude in the vision of God. *Hamlet* is also an historical drama, not only in its concrete setting, but in its recapitulation of man's spiritual history from fall to salvation. It is, moreover, in both a theological and literary sense, a pastoral drama. Theologically speaking, it concerns the pastoral guidance of the Christian flock. But Shakespeare also pits country against city, wildness against tameness, and weed against flower, to signify the battle between faith and fallen human reason.

Shakespeare artfully mixes buffoonery with high seriousness by boasting to the audience of these manifold dramatic elements through the foolish mouth of Polonius:

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited (II.ii.284)

Indeed, *Hamlet* is all of this. Shakespeare refuses the confines of any one genre, preferring to express the whole complexity of human life upon his stage. It is this variety, as Johnson justly remarks, that gives the drama its unique charm. But it is Shakespeare's theological vision that gives *Hamlet* its unity.

End Notes:

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- a. All excerpts of Shakespeare's Hamlet are from the Oxford Edition, 1914, with an emendation from the *First Folio* where noted.
 - b. Scriptural excerpts are from the 1599 Geneva Bible except where the Douai New Testament is noted.
 - c. All Latin translations are those of the author.

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- ³ Pearce, Joseph, *Through Shakespeare's Eyes* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010)
- ⁴ Johnson, Samuel, *The Preface to Shakespeare* (Hard Press Publishing, 2010)
- ⁵ Eliot, T. S., "Hamlet and His Problems" in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1921) pp. 87-94
- ⁶ *Ibid.* 4
- ⁷ Bacon, Francis, *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. Scott, Mary Augusta, (New York: Scribner's, 1908)
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 3, p. 120-121
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 3, p. 120
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3, p. 162
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 7, IV. *Of Revenge*, p. 19
- ¹² *Ibid.* 7, X. *Of Love*, p. 43
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 7, XII. *Of Boldness*, p. 52
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 7, XIV. *Of Nobility*, p. 58
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 7, XXXVIII. *Of Nature in Men*, p.178
- ¹⁶ *Quarto* variant
- ¹⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Books I-VIII*, Latin text edited by Ehwald, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 42 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994)
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17, VI.167-172, pp. 298 & 300
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 17, VI.193-197, pp. 300 & 302
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* 17, VI.301-312, p. 308
- ²¹ Luther, Martin, *The Bondage of the Will*, Tr. Packer, J. I., and Johnston, O. R. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957)
- ²² *Ibid.* 7, XIII. *Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature*, p. 56
- ²³ *Ibid.* 7, XIII. *Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature*, p. 57
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* 7, XXIII. *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*, p. 106
- ²⁵ Evans, Thomas, and Evans, R.H., *Old Ballads, Historical and Narrative*, Vol. I (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1810)
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- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 7, XXXV. *Of Prophecy*, p. 168
- ²⁸ Luther, Martin, *Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften*, Letter 99, Paragraph 13, translated by Erika Bullmann Flores, Dr. Johann Georg Walch Ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, N.D.), Vol. 15, cols. 2585-2590.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* 7, III. *Of Unity in Religion*, pp. 12-13
- ³⁰ *Ibid.* 7, X. *Of Love*, pp. 44-45
- ³¹ *Ibid.* 7, X. *Of Love*, p. 44
- ³² *Ibid.* 7, XXIII. *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*, p. 108
- ³³ *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, translated by H. W. Wells (New York, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935), and published in *The Portable Medieval Reader*, edited by James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 197.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 32, p. 197.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* 7, III. *Of Unity in Religion*, pp. 18-19

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- ³⁶ BBC: Voices of the powerless - readings from original sources (*nota bene*: some sources have “digged” for “delved.”)
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- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 7, *LVI. Of Judicature*, p. 252
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* 7, *LVIII. Of Vicissitude of Things*, pp. 261-262
- ⁴⁰ *Quarto* variant
- ⁴¹ Olson, Donald W., Olsen, Marilyn S., and Doescher, Russell L., “The Stars of Hamlet,” *Sky and Telescope*, 96, No. 5 (1998), pp. 67-73
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- ⁴³ Usher, Peter, *Hamlet’s Universe*, (San Diego: Aventine Press, 2007)
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- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 7, *XV. Of Seditions and Troubles*, pp. 62-63
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 7, *XVII. Of Superstition*, p. 77
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 7, *XXXVI. Of Ambition*, p. 171
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 7, *XL. Of Fortune*, p. 185
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.* 7, *VI. Of Simulation and Dissimulation*, p. 28
- ⁵² *Ibid.* 7, *XXXIX. Of Custom and Education*, p. 182
- ⁵³ From “A Perfit Description of the Caelestiall Orbes,” added as an appendix to *Prognostication Everlasting*, 1576, in Olson, Donald W., Olsen, Marilyn S., and Doescher, Russell L., “The Stars of Hamlet,” *Sky and Telescope*, 96, No. 5 (1998), p. 72
- ⁵⁴ Illustration of the Copernican universe from *A Perfit Description of the Caelestiall Orbes according to the most aunciente doctrine of the Pythagoreans, lately revived by Copernicus and by Geometricall Demonstrations approved (1576)* in Olson, Donald W., Olsen, Marilyn S., and Doescher, Russell L., “The Stars of Hamlet,” *Sky and Telescope*, 96, No. 5 (1998), p. 71
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 42
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1, p. 171
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 7, *XI. Of Great Place*, p. 47
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 7, *I. Of Truth*, p. 5