A Study of the Philosophical Thought and Background in Hamlet

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Recommended Citation
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A STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL
THOUGHT AND BACKGROUND
IN HAMLET

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts

June

1954
LIFE

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CHAPTER I

THE MODERN TEMPER

There is a paradox that lies in the very heart of human existence. It must be apprehended before any lasting happiness is possible in the soul of a man. The paradox is this: man’s nature, by itself, can do little or nothing to settle his most important problems.1

This "paradox" succinctly states the modern approach to a philosophy of life. Contemporary thinkers have constructed an intellectual labyrinth from which they find it impossible to extricate themselves. By denying—for lack of visible proof—the bases for attaining philosophical certitude, they encounter a series of culs-de-sac when attempting to answer the pressing "whys" of existence. Of such a temper is the modern mind which has been wandering in the labyrinth for some five hundred years, groping for egress and finding none. Reason has failed the philosopher because the philosophers have failed reason. Man must look outside himself for aid; the problem for the man of "modern temper" remains: remains: where to look?

Since literature is a portrayal of life, it serves as commentary on such branches of science as philosophy and theology. Yet it belongs to a different order than either of these;

1 Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, New York, 1948, 169.
literature must construct human action from the stuff of experience while science, even the ultimate sciences, must analyze a single aspect of the whole experience. The function of literature is to portray human action, not to explain it; the function of science, on the other hand, is to explain, as far as the premises allow, the causes governing a given act or fact. Since the subject matter of both the literary and the scientific orders is the same human action or experience, the same basic human problems are grist for both mills and must be answered in diverse ways by the philosopher and the literateur. The fundamental difference in point of view lies precisely in this: the truth which the philosopher professes to explain is the truth embodied in an object; the truth of the literateur is truth embodied in a subject. Emmanuel Kant, then, in formulating his categories, was attempting to state laws of being as those laws actually exist; Shakespeare, in creating the personality of Hamlet, expresses the state of mind of his subject. The philosophy of Hamlet, as formulated by the author, is the philosophy of that character, and applies only to a person of Hamlet's temperament, condition of life, and state of mind. The solution, then of Hamlet's philosophical problems would apply, not to the world of men in general, but to an individual of the Prince's type in particular. In considering the thought of any literary work, it is essential that this difference in viewpoint be kept in mind.
The philosophy of Shakespeare's Hamlet, an example not chosen at random, is of interest to those most approximating the Dane's state of mind, a mind which many critics have closely identified with the "modern temper." As Dover Wilson states:

Hamlet is Shakespeare's most realistic, most modern, tragedy; the play of all others in which we seem to come closest to the spirit and life of his time, and he closest to the spirit and life of ours.²

This subject has been treated as such in a critical interpretation entitled "Hamlet and the Modern Temper" by Moody E. Prior of Northwestern University.³ It is this article that the author of this thesis intends to use as a basis for an investigation of the philosophical thought and background in Hamlet.

This article is in essence a comparison. Mr. Prior draws a parallel between Hamlet's state of mind during the play and that attitude which he describes as the "modern temper."

The term is borrowed from Joseph Wood Krutch's book of the same name where the modern temper is defined:

Skepticism has entered too deeply into our souls ever to be replaced by faith, and we can never forget the thing which the new barbarians never need to have known. This world in which an unresolvable discord is the fundamental fact is the world in which we must continue to live, and for us wisdom must consist, not in searching for a means of escape

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² J. Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, Cambridge, 1951, 52.

which does not exist, but in making such peace with it as we may. 

Roughly, then, the "modern temper" is a skeptical outlook on life initiating in a destructive analysis of the bases for truth and resulting in a stoical acceptance of fate. Hamlet's probing into the problems which he encounters in the course of the play, asserts Mr. Prior, leads him to a state of mind analogous to the "modern temper." Therefore, Mr. Prior's thesis is stated: "Hamlet's reflections on the fundamental questions of man's nature and destiny make the play the first great imaginative work of the post medieval world in which may be discovered those characteristics of thought and sensibility which have come to be identified with the modern temper."

The "fundamental questions" which Hamlet must face in the course of the action of the play are these: is man rational? has he any prerogatives denied the brute? what is the meaning of human action? Nor are these problems superimposed on the structure of the play; they arise directly from the dramatic action. Hamlet feels he must act—revenge the murder of his father, repair the incest of his mother's second marriage—yet he cannot. In seeking motives for action, his reflections lead him to an investigation of these "fundamental questions." The Prince

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is no Socrates sitting in the snow oblivious of the battle; his personal triumph or defeat depends on the resolution of his difficulties. In short, the play without the philosophy would be no play at all.

In his discussion of the play, Mr. Prior finds a philosophical progression in Hamlet's musing which he outlines in the following way. In the first of the great soliloquies "O that this too too solid flesh" the young Prince expresses a profound disillusionment with human nature in general and with his mother in particular. His comparisons show the trend of his thought:

O, God, a beast that wants a discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer . . .5

A later speech to Rosencrans and Guildenstern formulates his thesis in more definite terms. After listing the prerogatives of man and the nobility of his faculties, Hamlet continues: "... and yet to me the quintessence of dust: man delights not me... 6

Here he expresses explicitly his doubt concerning the rationality of man. On this foundation rests the dignity and worth of human choice and action, and so Hamlet undermines his ability to choose and act on the proper motivation.

6 Hamlet, II, ii, 329-331.
Mr. Prior continues his discussion with a consideration of the third soliloquy "To be or not to be." Here Hamlet considers the various alternatives open to him. Not convinced of the value of human existence, he turns over in his mind the possibility of seeking death as a solution. Mr. Prior's interpretation of the soliloquy is summed up thusly: to every man is open the choice of living or seeking death. Which is more noble? Having called man's rationality into question, he must find some conviction which will endow choice with meaning and human action with dignity. He comes to no conclusion at this point.7

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought... 8

This reflection, as the quotation shows, results in negative conclusions, so to speak, but it does effect one positive result—it eliminates suicide as a possible solution. There remains for Hamlet, concludes Mr. Prior, only two alternatives: endurance or purposeful action.

The last of the soliloquies "How all occasions do inform against me" considers these two possibilities. Prior deduces here that Hamlet precludes decisive action and adopts, in attitude, a mild form of fatalism.

8 Hamlet, III, i, 84-85.
• • • I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do it ... 9

Hamlet's inability to arrive at an answer stems from his fundamental difficulty about the nature of man. The problem of the bestiality or rationality of man has obsessed him to the exclusion of any action to preserve his own dignity; emotion drives him to determination, doubt and uncertainty hold him back. He cannot take arms; he can only endure. 10 These reflections, Prior concludes, have led Hamlet to a stoical attitude. "... Give me that aman, That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core...11 This passive acceptance to whatever Fortune sends him is the solution to his problems, according to Prior; it denies his will the ability to shape events and deprives of significance man's gift of looking before and after. 12 "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, it will come; the readiness is all. 13 This, then, is Mr. Prior's conclusion as to Hamlet's philosophy

9 Hamlet, IV iv, 43-46.
11 Hamlet, III, ii, 76-78
13 Hamlet, V, ii, 233-236.
expressed in the play. The Prince has resolved his difficulties by accepting a skeptical and stoical outlook on life.

The applicability of such a philosophy to modern time and time is patent. Mr. Prior shows that the significance of Hamlet's situation, as interpreted by the modern author, has not been overlooked in the symbolistic literature of today. James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Stephen Spender, T.S. Eliot and others, employ the Prince as a counterpart of their respective heroes. So Hamlet, Mr. Prior reasserts, can be said to be "the first post-medieval imaginative work in which may be discovered symptoms of the modern temper."¹⁴

Prior's article serves as a scholarly introduction to a difficult subject. The "most human" of Shakespeare's plays is as complex as human nature itself. The thought of Hamlet has disparate roots and causes. His emotional states, for instance, cannot be regarded as elements of his belief-pattern, yet they contribute substantially to it. In the following section of this thesis, these emotional states will be considered in relation to Hamlet's thought.

In considering Hamlet's philosophy as such, skepticism seems the predominant factor. The source and nature of this attitude in the Prince seems to be a distrust of human nature and especially of its rational character. The opinion that Shakespeare was a follower of Montaigne is worthy of some study in this regard. That theory is largely responsible for the pagan or neopagan interpretations of men like Middleton Murry. After the consideration of emotional elements in Hamlet's thought, this question will be investigated.

The stoicism which Prior proposes as Hamlet's solution to his problems is that of the "antique Roman"—a passive acceptance of fortune. This opinion seems to neglect the basic conflict of the play, or, at least, it does not sufficiently emphasize the interior struggle of the Dane. The major conflict of the drama lies in the main character's effort to find himself, to discover within his own soul a maturity of judgment and a balance of emotion and intellect. The dramatic interest of the play is centered in the progress of that struggle. This "passive acceptance of the stoic reductions the catastrophe to a deus-ex-machina device which merely concludes the play. The tragic element in the dénouement is not underscored in such an interpretation.

The point, then, at which this treatment will diverge from Mr. Prior's opinion is this: Mr. Prior states that "it
Hamlet's solution is not a religious resolution of the problem. Since the dramatic problem of the play is centered in Hamlet's motivation, this question of a "religious resolution" is of major importance. If certain vital speeches of the Prince are interpreted in their entirety with attention to the connotation of the figures and the speaker's attitude of mind, then the solution becomes specifically religious—if there is a solution at all. Some attention, therefore, must be directed to the religious content of Hamlet's philosophy of life.

These factors, then, will be considered in this thesis: the emotional roots of Hamlet's philosophical difficulties, the philosophy or belief-pattern of the Prince, the religious attitudes which his belief-pattern contains. Since these problems of Hamlet's thought-progression are so bound up with the dramatic content of the play, the net result should be a theory, more or less complete, which embraces the whole structure of the play.

CHAPTER II

THE EMOTIONAL ROOTS

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, under ordinary circumstances, would have been a perfectly normal individual. Free from the stress of circumstance, he was, in fact, a brilliant, imaginative, devoted young Prince, the pride of his family and the hope of the nation. The action of the play, well under way at the Prince's first appearance, produces in him unnatural pressures under which his personality is distorted and his normal balance disturbed. The hypertensions at work in his character give the impression that he is unstable and abnormal. If Hamlet be considered a potential lunatic or a schizoid in his ordinary condition, then this "most human" of Shakespeare's plays looses much of its universal character. It becomes a Freudian study in abnormal psychology with tragic undertones rather than a tragedy with which the ordinary individual can sympathize. This abnormality, evident in the play, can be explained by certain factors in the play itself.

The first of these factors to be considered in a treatment of Hamlet's emotional state is one which at first glance
seems irrelevant: the question of Hamlet's age. A definite resolution of this problem is vitally important to both the interpretation of the character and the significance of the play. If Hamlet is an older man, say thirty or more, many of his actions become inexplicable except as the manifestation of a fundamentally abnormal personality. The question of age is important because it is directly connected with the question of Hamlet's emotional maturity. His extraordinary reactions to unexpected situations for example, his bandaging with Polonius, betray an emotional unbalance—the "madness" to which Polonius refers. Hamlet's reactions to his father's "foul and unnatural murder" and his mother's "o'er-hasty marriage" reveal a personality not yet quite formed, not yet capable of autonomy. The following sections take up these points.

The question of Hamlet's age has been complicated by the fact that Shakespeare indirectly answers it. The lines involved are found in Act V, scene i, the graveyard sequence. The gravedigging Clown and Hamlet are speaking:

Hamlet. How long hast thou been a gravedigger?
Clown. I came to 't that day that our last king o'ercame Fortinbras... It was the very day that young Hamlet was born...

... I have been sexton here, man and boy, for thirty years.
This statement, on the face of it, seems to decide the case without question. Hamlet, by simple mathematical calculation, is thirty years old. A later statement by the Clown corroborates this one. Remarkling on the skull which he shows Hamlet, he continues:

Here's a skull now; this skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty years.

_Hamlet._ Whose is it?

_Clown._ This same skull, sire, was Yorick's skull the king's jester.

_Hamlet._ Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well... 2

This is the reading of the authoritative First Folio, and it seems conclusive. However, the less reliable, but sometime more illuminating First Quarto, on which Dover Wilson, for example, bases many of his emendations, reads "this dozen years" for "three-and-twenty." On the strength of this latter reading, some critics have seen fit to alter the Clown's "thirty year" tenure of office as sexton to "twenty." 3 Such a change seems, in the face of the evidence, too radical, but the very attempt points to some difficulty in maintaining the text.

It is, in the first place, to be noted that the statement about Hamlet's birth and that about the sexton's tenure of

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2 _Hamlet, V, i, 188-191, 197-198, 202._

office stand some ten lines apart. The intervening lines contain a change of subject and a very diverting (for an Elizabethan Englishman) bit of byplay.

Hamlet. ...How long hast thou been gravedigger?
Clown. Of all the days, I can to 't that day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras.
Hamlet. How long is that since?
Clown. Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that; it was the very day that young Hamlet was born; he that is mad and sent into England.
Hamlet. Ay, marry; why was he sent into England?
Clown. Why, because he was mad; he shall recover his wits thence, if he do not, 'tis no great matter there.
Hamlet. Why?
Clown. 'Twill not be seen in him there: there the men are as mad as he.
Hamlet. How came he mad?
Clown. Very strangely, they say.
Hamlet. How strangely?
Clown. Faith, e'en with losing his wits.
Hamlet. Upon what ground?
Clown. Why here in Denmark: I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years.4

Only the most intent of audiences would catch the reference and make the round-about calculation required by the nature of the scene. If Shakespeare were really concerned about the mathematics of Hamlet's age, he would, as a good dramatist, have found a more emphatic way of putting it. On the same point, it has been suggested that "thirty years" represents a good, round Elizabethan number, and nothing more. Tillyard remarks that to fix Hamlet's age is "to ignore the Elizabethan habit for speaking

4 Hamlet, V, i, 188-202.
in round numbers which were never meant to be precise."\(^5\)

Granville-Barker makes equivalently the same point when he states: "Shakespeare's true concern is with tempo, not time."\(^6\) This critic ignores the division of the play into acts and makes his own division into three "movements."\(^7\) He uses the lapses in time which occur during the play as his basis for this division. In Act I, for example, which he terms the first "movement," Laertes sets off for Paris to begin his studies. The second "movement" (Act II) opens with Polonius' sending money and advice after his son and commissioning the messenger to check on his conduct. The interim, therefore, allowed Laertes time to arrive in Paris and settle there. The interval between the second and third "movements" allows time for Hamlet's sea-voyage, Polonius' burial, and Ophelia's distraction. Tillyard adds this to his commentary on Granville-Barker's "movements": "between the parts there are long lapses on time."\(^8\) It is noteworthy that Shakespeare does not indicate any such time lapses explicitly.


\(^7\) Granville-Barker, *Hamlet*, 34.

\(^8\) Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, 19.
He shows the same indifference to accuracy in this matter of time as, for instance, Aeschylus in the Agamemnon. For dramatic purposes the dramatist must condense periods of time as well as eliminate superfluous action. Shakespeare is concerned with "tempo, not time." Therefore, even if the poet's reference in the fifth Act be taken literally, the lapses in time would make the Hamlet of the first Act decidedly younger.

The relationship of the Prince to the other characters of the play supports the argument for a youthful Hamlet. The opening lines which the King addresses to his "cousin and his son" reveal a condescending paternalism with which one would treat a pouting child. In the following scene, Hamlet is referred to by Laertes as "a violet in the youth of primy nature," hardly a description fitting a man of thirty. Bradley, who holds to the "thirty years" of the text most religiously, makes the following statement: "but I think we naturally take him to be as old as Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and take them to be less than thirty." The Prince is continually addressed throughout the play as "young Prince Hamlet." This emphasis on his youth carries more dramatic emphasis than any indirect references to his age at the tag end of the drama.

9 In the Agamemnon, the Grecian war-fleet returns from Troy to Mycenae in the time taken to deliver some two hundred lines of dialogue.
10 Hamlet, I, ii, 64. 11 Ibid., I, iii, 7.
11 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 407.
It seems probable, also, that Shakespeare was more concerned about Hamlet's mental and emotional age than about his precise physical age. Spencer sums it up this way:

In fact there can be little doubt that Shakespeare thought of Hamlet as growing much older emotionally, intellectually, and even physically during the course of the play. At the beginning he is about twenty. In the graveyard... thirty. Perhaps Spencer has put it too strongly; the "long lapses of time" between movements scarcely total ten years. It would be more accurate to say that Shakespeare thought of Hamlet as aging ten years, not that he actually did so.

If, then, Hamlet be considered a young man, his lack of emotional balance and maturity is nothing abnormal or unusual. Most critics, in evaluating Hamlet's character, have noted this emotional unbalance:

His outstanding characteristic... we have seen to be one of emotional instability, an oscillation between intense excitement on the one hand and profound depression on the other. ..

Hamlet has proved himself capable... of profound thought and of intense emotion, but not of the equilibrium of the two. ..

That Hamlet possesses this characteristic of emotional immaturity or unbalance is not the point in question here. The matter to be

14 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 213.
decided is whether or not it is an understandable reaction of a basically normal character to an unusually strained situation. Tillyard puts it this way: "Hamlet is in his normal self well-equipped to reflect an abundant human experience."16 Bradley adds: "he Shakespeare gives to Hamlet a temperament which would not develop into melancholy unless under some exceptional strain."17 This "exceptional strain" disturbs his progress toward a complete emotional maturity, and so lays the groundwork for the tragedy.

At the outset of the drama, Hamlet is shown in solitary mourning for "a most excellent king and father." Claudius and the Queen attempt, in condescending fashion, to draw the Prince from his melancholy.

Claudius. But you must know, your father lost a father; That father lost his...18

This banter of the King's only serves to deepen Hamlet's sense of loss and sharpen his feeling of solitary mourning. The very reasonableness of the King's words repulses the Prince and causes him to brood overmuch on the situation. He cannot adopt the King's attitude, and, therefore, he suspects the king with all his "prophetic soul." The fact that his mother reveals much the

17 Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 110.
18 *Hamlet*, I, ii, 89-90.
same attitude doubles the intensity of his black mood.

That is should come to this!
But two months dead; nay, not so much, not two
So excellent a king; that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr...

A little month; or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body

... she married with mine uncle

He cannot view the case objectively; he is too much taken up with
his own emotional state. His father's death was a shock whose
effects might have worn off naturally were he given the sympathetic
treatment youth demands. Reflecting in the soliloquy on the
reaction to the old King's death, the callousness of his uncle,
coupled with his mother's apparent indifference, intensifies his
emotional disturbance.

Hamlet receives a second shock on the battlements when
he, along with Horatio and the guard, encounters his father's
ghost. Here his suspicions about the treachery of his uncle and
the infidelity of his mother are confirmed. The demand of the
spectre, that Hamlet revenge his father's "foul and unnatural
murder," has a double effect; it places a grave duty on young
Hamlet's shoulders and it increases his revulsion for his uncle
and his mother. With this shock to his emotional nature, there
first appears his "antic disposition," a matter of debate among

19 Hamlet, I, 44, 137-140, 147-148, 151.
the critics. - On meeting Horatio and Marcellus after the disappearance of the Ghost, Hamlet manifests signs of "madness":

**Marcellus.** How isn't, my noble lord?
**Horatio.** What news, my lord?
**Hamlet.** O wonderful.
**Horatio.** Good my lord, tell it.
**Hamlet.** No, you'll reveal it.
**Horatio.** Not I, my lord, by heaven!
**Hamlet.** How say you, then; would heart of man once think it?
But you'll be secret?
**Horatio and Marcellus.** Ay, by heaven, my lord.
**Hamlet.** There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark
But he's an errant knave.20

Horatio's reaction to this "madness" of Hamlet's echoes the mature man's judgment on Hamlet's state of mind: "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord."21 Horatio's practical outlook on the situation makes a sharp contrast with the Prince's near-hysteria. Even if Dover Wilson's ingenious interpretation of the scene by accepted,22 Hamlet gives no indication that he is merely playacting. His theatria contain too many signs of real hysteria. Goddard's explanation seems to be closer the truth:

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22 According to this theory, Hamlet's pose is a sop to the curious Marcellus. Horatio will be told of the Ghost's message directly after Marcellus' retreat. However, while Marcellus is within earshot, Hamlet treats the Ghost not as a true messenger from "St. Patrick's purgatory," but as a devil in human form. That the Ghost drops into the cellarage seems to lend support to Hamlet's playacting. In a word, father and son seem to be giving an amazing performance to hoodwink an inconvenient witness. Cf. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 78-83.
'It is just like one of us,' I heard a young reader of the play remark, 'when we want to scream--only we don't.' Hamlet assumed his antic disposition and under cover of it could scream all he wanted--and thus get rid of his nervous hysteria.23

Hamlet assumes this "antic disposition" to release an overwrought nervous system. It is a young man's escape from a burden under which his mind would crack.

The scenes in which Hamlet encounters Claudius give a sample of the "antic disposition" at work. For instance, after the dumb-show of the "play with the play:"

Claudius. What do you call the play?
Hamlet. The mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna; Gonzago is the duke's name; his wife, Baptista. You shall see anon; 'tis a knavish piece of work: but what of that? your majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not; let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.24

Tillyard has called this type of speech by the Prince "histrionic, artificially self-excited, and even hysterical."25 Certainly it can be said that the speech does not manifest a normal state of mind. The Prince, in his role of madman, cannot resist playing cat-and-mouse with the King. His pun on "mouse-trap"--"tro(a)pically," the disjointed criticism with its double entendre" 'tis

23 Goddard, Meaning of Shakespeare, 353.
24 Hamlet, III, ii, 249-257.
25 Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, 23.
a knavish piece of work," and the climactic sarcasm, very thinly veiled, of "let the galled jade wince" are all cases in point; there is "method in his madness." The King, confident of his own cleverness, may have missed the point of the dumb-show or he may have been in conversation with Gertrude during it; Hamlet, in either case, draws his attention to the personal content to be contained in the speech the Prince has inserted. However, it would be a mistake to place all the emphasis on the "method" and so ignore the "madness." Hamlet's reply to the King is openly impudent and reveals his disgust with and his dislike of his foster-father. The sight of Claudius so revolts Hamlet that he resorts to sarcasm to avoid screaming.

In the later scenes with the King, when Hamlet is certain of his uncle's guilt, this sarcasm glitters with a touch of hysteria. After telling the King of Polonius' dinner "not where he eats, but where he is eaten"; he continues:

**Hamlet.** A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a King
and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.
**Claudius.** What dost thou mean by this?
**Hamlet.** Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

... Farewell, dear mother.

**Claudius.** Thy loving father, Hamlet. **Hamlet.** My mother: father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother. 26
This first conceit is certainly morbid, and the second almost hysterical in tone. The King's appearance consistently draws this type of reaction from Hamlet—he uses the "antic disposition" as an outlet for the emotion which he is powerless to repress altogether.

Some historically minded critics have treated Hamlet's "antic disposition" as a type of physical disorder known to the medieval physician as "melancholia." An individual suffering from this disorder, which is the result of too much "black bile" being distilled into the system, suffers from mental depression and black moods. Schücking, for example, makes this statement: "that Hamlet is to be accepted as essentially melancholic can be no longer doubted now that the contemporary sources dealing with that type have been fully explored."27 The physiological background for the theory of "bodily humours" has been completely exploded by science, so that there can be no question of a real explanation emanating from that quarter. Shakespeare may have considered his hero "melancholic," but he does not use him to explore the theory behind the disease. Marchette Chute sums up present opinion:

A competent London physician...would have diagnosed Hamlet as a melancholic and put much of his internal darkness down to physical causes. This sort of information was useful to Shakespeare as a kind of springboard, but it was no more

than that. He was not like George Chapman who was very learned in Elizabethan psychology and loaded his heroes with it. Shakespeare did not work from theories but from people. 28

The roots of Hamlet's depression dig deep into the mind; they are not the product of anything so simple as a glandular secretion.

Hamlet is like a drunken man. . . . To select his melancholy as the key to his conduct, is to offer the drunkard's fall as an explanation of his conduct. 29

The question of Hamlet's melancholy as the basis of his emotional trouble, then, makes an interesting subject for historical research, but it does not go to the root of the problem.

This emotional unbalance in the Prince is more readily understood if another prominent trait of his be considered. He is a youth of high ideals. This idealism is a root difficulty.

He idealized his father:

So excellent a king! That was to this Claudius
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother. . . . 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.

He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again. 30


29 Goddard, Meaning of Shakespeare, 354.

30 Hamlet, I, ii, 39-40; III, iv, 55-62; I, iii, 187-188.
This admiration for his father is heightened, in contrast, by his dislike for his uncle:

Here is your husband Claudius: like a mildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother.

...A murdered and a villain;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A king of shreds and patches... 31

In Hamlet's eyes, his father was a paragon and his uncle the blackest villain. Youth tends to see all as black or white; it is incapable of distinguishing shades of grey. There are two sides to the picture:

...the Elder Hamlet as a ghost at any rate... has no such notions of his own perfection... 'Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purged away.'
...and Hamlet's astonishing admission--or slipp--in the prayer scene: 'He took my father grossly, full of bread... 32

But the injustice of it all has taken such a hold on the Prince that he sees only one side of the canvas. Therefore, it is easy to see how Hamlet's depression increased with his uncle's usurpation and his mother's marriage to him. The Prince's simultaneous admiration of his father and hatred for his uncle, though it has a rational basis, seems almost unreasoning.

31 Hamlet, III, iv, 64-65; 96-99; 102.
32 Goddard, Meaning of Shakespeare, 348, 349.
At least, in these former cases, Hamlet is able to retain his ideal, admiring his father and despising his uncle. In the case of his mother, the idol topples into ruins at his feet.

Queen. Have you forgot me?

Hamlet. Ho, by the rood, not so;
You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife;
And—would it were not so!—you are my mother.33

Hamlet, as any young man, is confident of his mother's virtue; indeed, the very word with which the Ghost characterizes her echoes strongly in his ear: "my most seeming-virtuous queen." Her fall from grace disillusions him about all womankind: "Fraility, thy name is woman." As Granville-Barker puts it:

, , , with faith in his mother's virtue, his faith in all womanhood has vanished; his own sense of moral health, too, has vanished... That side of life has been poisoned for him... In the scene in his mother's closet (III, iv) he indulges an embittered idealist's lust to be avenged on the traitor to his ideal; and in the satiety will be the sense that he is ridding himself, too, of some of the poison.34

The emphasis which Hamlet puts on his mother's physical relationship with his uncle has led some critics of the Freudian school of psychology to label Hamlet's root difficulty an Oedipus complex. Hamlet, according to these critics, cannot act against his uncle for the simple reason that, in his unconscious mind, he

33 Hamlet, III, iv, 14-16.
34 Granville-Barker, Hamlet, 295.
has identified himself with his uncle. To put it bluntly, then, Hamlet wishes to take his uncle's place as his mother's husband. Therefore, he could not take action against the King without incurring a guilt-complex. Even if Freud's basic theories be acceptable to the critic, a solution based on these theories is scarcely acceptable because it is, dramatically speaking, no solution at all. The climax, to have any significance, must be a conscious decision of the main character, and the audience must understand it as such. Otherwise, the play concludes in a *deus-ex-machina* fashion. Dr. Jones' resolution reduces *Hamlet* to an unconscious struggle between two primordial images. The fate of the hero must lie within the ambit of his own will, and the audience must face his decision with him. The *Oedipus-complex* solution, then, places Hamlet out of reach for the ordinary individual, Dr. Jones to the contrary notwithstanding. It relies for its veracity entirely upon the supposition that Freud and/or his interpreters present a correct view of psychology. Chester-ten adds an interesting commentary on this approach: "the Freudian psychologist gives Hamlet a complex to avoid giving him a conscience."  

35 Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, New York, 1949,  
Hamlet's preoccupation with his mother's marriage, moreover, might be explained simply in another way. As Hamlet's idealism is typical of youth, so also is his attachment to his mother and his consciousness of the physical side of marriage. In Hamlet's eyes, his uncle is loathsome; therefore, his mother's love for him means unspeakable degradation for her. To add to his strong feelings on the matter, such a marriage, was, at that time, considered incestuous. Hamlet refers to it in such terms ("O wicked speed, to haste with such dexterity to incestuous sheets") as does the Ghost ("That incestuous, that adulterate beast Claudius "). Dover Wilson points out the value of such an observation: "This incest business is so important that it is scarcely possible to make too much of it."38 His mother's sin is triple: she has married her husband's brother with indecent haste, which bond is an incestuous one. Hamlet's soul "answers instantaneously when good and evil are presented to it, loving the one and hating the other."39 Thus, the "seeming-virtuous Queen" gives Hamlet moral, as well as emotional grounds for his disillusionment. He has not as yet the maturity to accept human nature for what it is, a nature subject to passion and the allurements of the flesh.

38 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 43.
39 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 112.
This disillusionment suffered at the fall of his mother extends even to his love for Ophelia. His mother, whose virtue he never before questioned, proved herself unfaithful; now, then, could he ever trust any woman? That is the question which preoccupies him when he confronts Ophelia in her closet, and the reason for the sigh so "piteous and profound" which shook him as he perused her face. And Ophelia herself completes his disillusionment by allowing the King and Polonius to use her as an unwitting shill to test the Prince. They decide to put the Lord Counselor's theory about Hamlet's distraction to the proof. Polonius is to "release his daughter to him" in the lobby and thus they will discover whether or not Hamlet's distraction is actually the "very ecstasy of love." Dover Wilson's conjecture is a sound one: Hamlet probably overheard what secret plans Polonius and the King had laid in this regard.

Ophelia meets the prince in the lobby. Hamlet, who has been "sent for," who meets her in the lobby "by accident," finds her prepared with a little speech ("I have remembrances of yours") and the gifts ready in her hand. Hamlet's suspicions have been well grounded; she, like his mother, is ready to betray him.

40 Hamlet, II, i, 77-100.
41 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 103-107.
This accounts for his fierce denunciations and cruel accusations; he treats her like the potential prostitute she, in his mind's eye, already is. His question "are you honest?" has a two-fold meaning: "are you dealing honestly with me?" (you are not!) and/or "are you not a whore?" (you are!). He continues this treatment in the "play-within-the-play" scene; "that's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs." He no longer respects his love because he no longer respects his mother; they have both betrayed his ideal of womanhood, and so have called the respectability of all human nature into question.

His regard for Horatio reveals this same strain of idealistic admiration which soured so tragically in the case of his mother and his sweetheart. He respects, in Horatio's character, that factor which he sees so desperately lacking in his own: emotional balance.

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.44

Hamlet comes to Horatio for counsel, advice, and, most of all, sympathy. In his admiration and respect for his friend, he shows

42 Hamlet, III, 1, 103.
43 Ibid., III, 11, 127.
flashes of the normal young man that was. With Horatio, he has no use for his "antic disposition"; the emotional war within suffers a short armistice. Had Horatio, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, gone over to the opposition or taken the "antic disposition" for real insanity, the final straw would have been laid on the Prince's back. In the character of his friend, Hamlet sees his own objective, a balanced and serene maturity. Here, at least, is the assurance that human nature has something to recommend it. Horatio provides tangible evidence that the struggle must be carried on to its conclusion.

Hamlet's problem, then, is finding the proper motivation for the acts which duty imposes on him.

...I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do it.45

Similarly, the critic's problem is Hamlet's hesitation. Why does he not act? The answer to this question seems to follow from the preceding study—at least, one-half of the answer; he cannot act because he is uncertain emotionally and, as shall be proved in the following chapter, intellectually, about the value of his own personal action. He is a youth suffering stress too great for his emotional powers and shock beyond his capacity for absorption. For him to act in such a condition would be to act on impulse,

45 Hamlet, IV iv, 43-46.
and this is just what he is trying to avoid. "Give me that man who is not passion's slave..." he is fighting for an equilibrium and control which will permit deliberate, rational action.

In the last act of the tragedy, Hamlet shows signs of attaining the emotional and intellectual balance necessary for deliberate action. "Hamlet returns from his voyage a changed man, with an air of self-possession greater than at any other time of the play..."46 In this section of the play, he is quieter, less swayed by passion; he repents of his outburst at Ophelia's grave:

But I am very sorry, good Horatio
That to Laertes I forgot myself... 

But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion...47

He has somehow conquered himself, and found a sort of balance; he tries to be "passion's slave" no longer. The apologies he makes to Laertes have a mature ring: "Give me your pardon, sir, I've done you wrong..."48 He is able to view the situation from some point of view other than his own when he says: "...by the image of my cause, I see the portraiture of his..."49 In

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46 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 267.
47 Hamlet, V, 11, 75-79.
48 Ibid., 216-233.
49 Ibid., 77-78.
his gibing with Osric, a quiet tone prevails; he laughs quietly to himself, as it were, with no great concern for the dramatic effect. The irony he employs here is in sharp contrast with his semi-hysterical treatment of Polonius. The change in Hamlet after his return from the sea-voyage is not great, but he has at least gained ground in one respect, in emotional maturity and balance.

This new-found or, better, regained maturity is incomplete in as much as Hamlet, reacting against his former vehemence, for a time lapses into an emotional indifference. His frayed nerves tremble on the verge of exhaustion so that he cannot evoke a justifiable and rational anger. That is the reason why he must wait even on the point of accomplishing his revenge. The balance must swing back to normal before normal action is possible. However, a matter of time, and not of resolution, stands between Hamlet and his revenge. The realization of his obligation has assumed a deeper and more lasting complexion; for "Hamlet never doubted that he was the legitimately appointed instrument of punishment." 

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon
He that hath killed my king and whor'd my mother
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes.

50 Compare Hamlet V, ii, 81 with II, ii, 172, iv, 1 and III, ii, 397.

51 Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus, 37.
is it not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and isn't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
Into further evil?52

The emotional lethargy in which he finds himself will pass away
as did the emotional turmoil, and action will result—if Pro-
vidence allows.

Just as disillusioned idealism was the root-cause of
Hamlet's emotional unbalance, so a "sense of providence" lies at
the root of Hamlet's regained maturity. At the conclusion of
the tragedy, then, Hamlet is on the verge of action. Emotionally
he is nigh-normal; intellectually (as will be shown) he has
found a basis for action. Hamlet again comes of age during the
tragedy this violent process of reaching maturity is the back-
ground against which his thought must be considered.

52 Hamlet, V, i, 66-69.
CHAPTER III

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HAMLET

The individual comes to every crisis of his life bringing with him the sum total of the habits and dispositions which compose his unique personality. He has come to be what he is slowly, through the impact of experience. The original deposit of intellectual ability and emotional bent is so modified and altered by experience that a pattern takes shape.

What we see, though in the very apprehension it becomes ours, is a cold abstract, a concept, and after the moment of knowledge it passes into the self to be lost there or caught again fitfully in memory or to remain half-asleep in our habits and dispositions. Nevertheless this permanence which it has in our habits is the important and significant fact to notice. For what has happened is that it has passed into our life, and by this means we struggle for our hoped-for apocalypse.

This "pattern" which is the product of the interaction of thought,

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2 M.C. D'arcy, S.J., The Nature of Belief, New York, 1931, 286. The theory of belief here elaborated is largely a development of points taken from Fr. D'arcy.
will, and emotion is, in its totality, the personality of the individual. The beliefs which it encompasses, as consciously recognized by the individual, determine his goal in life and, therefore, the means which he must take to attain that goal. These beliefs, then, when formulated in generalities, embody the individual's philosophy of life.

The shaping of this "pattern" or philosophy, as is clear from the above, is not merely a rational process. Personal background, emotional prejudice, and the impact of experience modify the pattern so that the same idea or concept, presented to different personalities, may be assimilated in different ways. Identical experiences, too, will effect a different modification in the philosophies of different individuals. The basis, then, of a man's philosophy of life is not what he knows, but what he believes, that is, what he has accepted as real, whether he can support it with rational proofs or not.

Since man's nature and specific mark is to be rational, his beliefs should be based in reason and flow from it as from a source. However, this is not necessarily the case:

It is a common matter of experience that assents endure without the presence of the inferential acts upon which they were originally elicited. .. Again the assent may fail, though the reasons and the inferential acts which are the recognition of those reasons remain, and this happens not because we have come to doubt the reason but by an
unaccountable change of mind, which may possibly be due to moral causes...

Such a change of mind may be due to moral causes or emotional causes; this is certainly true, it is not due to any change in the intellectual order. If, then, man is a rational animal and his intellect is capable of recognizing truth and yet he falls into irrational beliefs, the source of such error must lie outside the realm of reason, or at least, not within the unhampered intellect.

There are various causes for the introduction of error into the individual's pattern or philosophy of life, but the source of all these errors is the individual's free will. Pascal explains it thus:

The will is one of the chief factors in belief, not that it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspect in which we look at them. The will which prefers one aspect to another, turns away the mind from considering the qualities of all that it does not like to see; and thus the mind, moving in accord with the will, stops to consider the aspect it likes, and so judges by what it sees.

It is likewise true, as Newman has pointed out, that the intellect treats of notions, abstractions from reality, which have not the

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color or impact of emotional experience. The mind may see that, for example, evil is a privation, but experience may so feel the brunt of it that, as in the case of William James, it assumes so positive an aspect that even God cannot cope with it. The intellect, then, gives a "notional" assent to a proposition while definite experience denies that such a truth touches reality.

The reason why assents vary in strength and in kind is that what is concrete exerts a force and makes an impression that nothing abstract can rival. . . It is not surprising, therefore, that real assents are stronger than notional. . .

So there is often a dichotomy between the conclusions which reason reaches in the logical order and those which the individual apprehends in reality. The results of experience color those ideas which are presented to the intellect, and the will, being free, directs the intellect to consider "those aspects which it likes" and to neglect those which it does not. And so it is that the God of William James is a poor finite being, bound by the Frankenstein monster of evil which He Himself created.6

Thus it is that, even when the individual considers the intellectual bases for belief, error can creep into the pattern.

To cite an example of this dichotomy particularly pertinent to the problem arising in Hamlet, a specific cause for

5 D'Arcy, Nature of Belief, 112.
failure to achieve a rational personal philosophy is profound emotional disturbance. D'arcoy explains this condition:

A cause for failure in reasoning is what has been called an anxiety-state. Those who suffer from this cannot make up their minds; they have had their balance upset by some shock to their old convictions and, as a traveller in a strange bed, they oscillate to and fro, they cannot make up their mind to rest in a fixed position.

It is easy to see how such a state could come about. Even in the case of a simple proposition as, for example, man is rational, where an analysis of the subject reveals the presence of the attribute predicated, an interval of time permits of the thinking of some example which goes against the evidence and so inhibits assent. The thinker cannot but acknowledge the logicality of the statement, but he can withhold assent to the proposition in the real order. A person, then, in an "anxiety-state" would, in his calmer moments, acknowledge the truth of the notion, but, with the recurrence of his concrete emotional state, would fail to see any truth in its application to reality. Therefore, the proposition would have no opportunity to fix itself into the pattern of beliefs which make up the individual's philosophy, and so he falls into error.

In the above case, the individual has considered the intellectual bases for his belief. Frequently enough he does not
even consider the rational grounds. He is content with the statement, "that is the way I feel about it," or "those are my sentiments." Often enough, he will quote Pascal in justification of such an attitude: "Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point." As T. S. Eliot has pointed out, "...this is by no means an exaltation of the 'heart' over the 'head,' a defense of unreason." Often enough, also, such a person arrives at the truth by interpretation of the accumulated facts, a kind of inductive process, which enables him to "intuit" the fact of the matter without any adversion to a logical process.

I do not believe that probabilities as such can ever be certitude, whereas there seems to be no doubt that evidence can so accumulate and cohere together as to reveal inevitably a certain pattern or meaning. At this point, then, the belief based on feeling can coincide with truth because it is based on the experience of reality, but the individual has no guarantee that he will not fall into an irrationality, especially since he does not look for any such guarantee.

Belief is, therefore, whatever a man has assented to as true in the real order, whether he can support it with rational proof or not, and it is largely the product of experience. Since,

8 T. S. Eliot, Essays Ancient and Modern, New York, 1932, 166.
9 D'Arcy, Nature of Belief, 201.
moreover, "belief is positive, an act of affirmation in which the soul expands," it provides a basis for determined action in a given situation.

The function of them all faiths and systems of philosophy is the third stage—the stage of action. . . For no one of them itself is final. They form but the middle segment of the mental curve, and not its termination. they can have but one essential function. . . --the function of defining the direction which our activity, immediate or remote, shall take.

To be a real motivation for action, it is clear that the assent to a truth must transcend the intellectual order; it must be, in the terminology of James, "alive" or, in that of Newman, "real."
The characteristic of the "dead hypothesis" which sets it off from the "live hypothesis" or that which sets off the "notional assent" from the "real assent" lies precisely here: the "dead hypothesis" and the "notional assent" are ineffective as motives for action. The "real assent," the "live hypothesis," on the other hand, affect the pattern; they establish belief in the real order, thereby making a truth practical and a standard of action. Such a belief would determine a set course of action in a given situation, and itself would be an incentive to perform such action.

10 D'arcy, Nature of Belief, 34.
11 James, Will to Believe, 123, 124.
It follows, then, that the man who confronts a variety of situations with consistent, determined action is the man who has achieved not merely a permanent pattern of belief, but also a pattern of permanent beliefs. A man might easily hold a general set of principles which are constantly modified and altered by new experiences; he maintains a permanent pattern, but, until he has fixed his beliefs in a definite state and order, he cannot be said to have formed a "philosophy of life." The permanence of a man's beliefs is the mark of maturity, it provides for that consistent, determined mode of action which identifies the mature man, and it has, therefore, been thoroughly tested in the crises of experience.

With this sketch of the nature of the individual's philosophy of life providing some criteria for analysis, Hamlet's philosophy will bear some study. Hamlet's basic pattern has been made out, by Mr. Prior and others, to be skeptical and stoical, at least during the major portion of the play. This skeptical pattern which the critics discover is not, however, fully rooted in the character of Hamlet from the outset of the play. It takes more definite shape as the play progresses. As a matter of fact,

Hamlet oscillates between two positions, or, at least, seems to so oscillate. This is indicative of a person in the anxiety-state; because of emotional shock he cannot find rest in one position. The analysis of Hamlet's emotional background has made it clear that such was his condition. As a result, to determine the nature of Hamlet's skepticism, it is necessary to investigate his original beliefs before they were affected by emotional shock. These original positions formed the "before-shock" pattern and constitute one extreme of the Prince's oscillation.

Hamlet's pattern or philosophy before the period of emotional unrest seems, in general, to have been based on the traditional beliefs of the scholastic philosophers. This is in keeping with the traditional pattern of the Elizabethan Englishman on whom Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature was based. The ideas of the humanists had not yet become so prevalent as to be second nature to the Englishman of the 16th century. Curry makes this observation:

Here was a vital body of doctrines and ideas scholastic philosophy skillfully built into a complex intellectual system. . . . It exerted such a unifying effect upon medieval life and activity that the attitudes which it created became, as it were, communal. . . . Learned men and the masses alike shared, according to capacity, in the common fund of knowledge, were actuated by the same mode of thought and came to assume the validity of the scholastic weltanschauung. . . . Thus cognition became so traditional that in a sense it may be said to have been congenital.14

Typical of the old philosophy were such doctrines as the rational nature of man, the ability of the intellect to discern truth, free-will, and the consequent value and dignity of human action. These positions represent Hamlet's pattern as untested by experience.

The question of Hamlet's belief in the rationality of man arises at intervals throughout the play, and is perhaps the most important philosophical problem involved because of its repercussions on the Prince's decisions. Originally Hamlet seems to have held the traditional position in orthodox form:

O God, a beast, that wants discourse of reasons, Would have mourned longer...

Hamlet here indicates, in the terminology of the old philosophy, the essential difference between man and brute. It is a point which later philosophers, for example, Montaigne, called into serious question or denied outright. It is likewise interesting to note that St. Thomas Aquinas, an undeniably scholastic author, uses the phrase "discourse of reason" when referring to the acts by which a man proceeds from premises to a conclusion. Beasts,

15 Hamlet, I, ii, 150-151.
16 Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, 38.
however, not having such a faculty, cannot so argue. Whether or not Hamlet was acquainted with the arguments supporting such a belief (as a university student it is very possible that he did), at least he had little doubt about the conclusion.

His beliefs about the nature of the intellect are revealed in his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two university men who would have appreciated his terminology: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty. . . In apprehension how like a god! The terms reason, faculty, and apprehension may be taken as synonyms if the intellect be taken as meaning both faculty and act. Reason is the intellectual faculty or power, while apprehension is the exercise of that power in actual cognition. In connection with the reasoning power, Hamlet emphasizes two points; first, its "infinite" character and, second, its "god-like" nature. The first predication recalls a position which Aquinas outlines: "The intellectual soul the rational faculty as comprehending universals, has a power extending to the infinite.".

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18 Aquinas, S.T., I, IIae, 93,5, ad 2, Summa, I, 1006.
20 Aquinas, S.T., I, 79, 8c Summa, I, 403, 404.
21 Ibid., I, 76, 5, ad 4, 32, 379.
The reach, then, of the rational power extends through all created things to the summit, the Infinite itself. The second predication has to do with the "god-like" nature. The scholastic position, as stated by Aquinas, supports this:

...the soul of man is, in a way, all things by sense and intellect; and thereby those things that have knowledge, in a way, approach to a likeness of God, in Whom all things preëxist...22

Hamlet's original belief supposes the intellect to be a spiritual faculty with the ability to know highest Being.

There is little question in Hamlet's mind, moreover, of the intellect's revealing truth in these matters. He recounts the argument:

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused.23

The reasoning here follows the scholastic pattern arguing from the principle of sufficient reason. Aquinas puts it technically:

truth is known by the intellect in view of the fact that the intellect knows the proportion of the act to the thing. Now this proportion cannot be known without knowing the nature of the active principle, that is, the intellect itself, to whose nature it belongs to be conformed to things.24

22 Aquinas, S.T., I, 80, 2c, Summa, I, 409.
23 Hamlet, IV, iv, 36-39.
If, in other words, the intellect were not conscious that it was attaining truth, then it would have no sufficient reason for existence and, therefore, God would be guilty of a contradiction in creating a nature tending toward truth, yet unable to attain it. This is what Hamlet has observed above. If man could not attain truth through his intellect, certainly this faculty would "fust in us unused."

Such beliefs, even were they not supported by conscious arguments, would imply a belief in the immortality of the soul, whose chief faculty is the intellect. Hamlet states his belief clearly:

I do not set my life at a pin's fee;
And as for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing as immortal as itself the Ghost?25

The "infinite" and "god-like" nature of the soul provide adequate philosophical grounds for such a belief, without considering the theological basis which Hamlet undoubtedly considered.

All these noble characteristics which Hamlet's soul and powers reveal to him would be for nothing if his will be shackled to a deterministic belief. Hamlet is again explicit on this point; he knows his will is free to determine its own course.

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election

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Hath seal'd thee for herself... 26

And again:

I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do it.27

The position of the medieval philosopher is equally clear on this score; Aquinas makes as direct a statement of it as can be found in the Summa: "Man has free will."28 Under the stress of emotional shock Hamlet questions whether or not the intellect is able to point out a choice worth the making, but he never calls into doubt his ability to choose for himself.

Other scholastic theses, which are manifest in the play and incidental to the main problems, but strengthen the impression which the Prince makes as a pupil of the schoolmen.

Hamlet's 'table of my memory' upon which are written 'all forms, all pressures past that youth and observation copied there' reproduces the tabula rasa of Aristotle and the formae and species impressae of the schoolmen; his 'quiddities' in the sense of realities, his 'god-like reason' which differentiates man from the beasts, his 'sense you have, else could you not have motion' recalling the doctrine that movement presupposed sense-perception—all indicate dependence on scholastic principles... 29

26 Hamlet, III, ii, 68-70.
27 Ibid., IV, iv, 43-46, Italics not in original.
28 Aquinas, S.T., I, 83, 1 c Summa, I, 418.
29 Curry, Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, 23.
The "natural philosophy" or cosmology of the play, the psychology and the scholastic terminology embodied, for example, in the gravedigger sequence, all indicate a predilection in the Prince for the learning of the old philosophy.

In summary, then, Hamlet's original beliefs follow the traditional pattern established by the schoolmen and typified by such philosophers as Aquinas. The picture of man which Hamlet had accepted previous to the action of the play is, in the terms of Spencer, "bright, orderly, optimistic." In this picture man is the essential link between the physical and spiritual worlds, the nexus between the brute and the angel. The Prince's unquestioned acceptance of such a position lays the ground-work for the action of the drama proper. The anxiety-state of shock to which his experiences subject him causes the wavering attitude characteristic of his meditating mind.

Just as the wave of Hamlet's mental oscillation has as one extreme of its amplitude the optimistic picture, so at the other is darkness and chaos. His questing mind considers the beliefs which make up the original pattern, and immediate experience calls them into serious question. Thus appears the dichotomy between what the Prince has held as logically true and

30 Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, 94.
and what he now experiences as true in the real order. Since, as has been shown, the concrete experience carries more impact than the colorless findings of the abstract, Hamlet's beliefs concerning the rationality of man fall back into the class of "dead hypotheses," and so the bright pattern changes to a skeptic hue.

The experiences which altered the pattern have been outlined in the preceding chapter. The death of his father, his mother's second marriage, and his uncle's perfidy provided the shock; his high idealism increased their disruptive impact. The result of these experiences Hamlet outlines in his first soliloquy: "...the world 'tis an unweeded garden That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely." The world, made for the service of man, has lost its usefulness; man, the gardener, has let it run to seed. Thus is the order of the cosmos violated.

Indeed it goes heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air... this brave o'er-hanging firmament... appears to me no other thing than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. 32

31 Hamlet, I, ii, 135-137.
32 Ibid., II, i, 316-321.
Hamlet's oscillation of mind is obvious here: the earth, which he believed a "goodly frame," now appears, in his experience, as a "sterile promontory"; the air, a "most excellent canopu," seems a "pestilent congregation of vapours." Hamlet has come face to face with a contradiction: his original belief is belied by his latter experience. His belief in the essential order of the universe, which "every thoughtful Elizabethan took for granted," depended on man's position as the link between the physical and the spiritual and the sufficient reason, then, for the rest of creation. Take man from his place in the chain and the whole order falls.

How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and 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. . . .

Hamlet's experiences revealed reason for doubting man's sovereign dignity.

The shock which effectively altered his belief-pattern on the point of man's dignity was his mother's marriage to the uncle he despised.

A little month; or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body

33 Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, 5.
34 Hamlet, II, 11, 323-329.
Like Niobe, all tears; why she, even she,—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourned longer,—married with mine uncle.35

Man's equation with the brute looms large in Hamlet's consciousness; he cannot see how rational and conscientious mankind could perform the deeds of which his mother and his uncle, that "incestuous, that adulterate beast," are guilty. It is surprising how frequently this notion of man as a beast, once a part of the varying pattern, creeps into Hamlet's metaphor. He is "an ass," "of the chameleon's dish," his uncle "the adulterate beast," the "galled jade," Polonius "a rat!" and his school-fellows "adders fanged." He describes himself in these terms to Ophelia: "What should fellows such as I do, crawling between heaven and earth? We are errant knives all; believe none of us."36 This is not the "paragon of animals" that Hamlet thus sets crawling, but some insect whose world is "bounded in a nutshell." His disillusionment with his mother does not merely color the pattern of his philosophy, but positively alters it.

Some critics have asked why Shakespeare did not clarify Hamlet's attitudes by having Horatio comment on them as, for example, Cassius clarifies those of Brutus in Julius Caesar. The fact of the matter is that Shakespeare probably would have thought

35 Hamlet, I, ii, 147-151.
36 Ibid., III, 1, 133-134.
this unnecessary since he has Hamlet comment on them himself. Hamlet is conscious of his problem in the second soliloquy "0 what a rogue and peasant knave am I:" he finds himself suddenly a "John-a-Dreams," a "dull and muddy-mettled fellow" unable to act, and he does not understand the reason. The conclusion at which he arrives is the product of his overwrought emotions;

it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal.37

He sees soon enough that this is not the reason for his hesitation; perhaps the "brute complex" (note the metaphors employed above) unconsciously affects his thinking here. He soon puts such a consideration out of his mind: he sees he is whipping himself to no avail.

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab...38

. . . About, my brain...38

The whole tone of this soliloquy is frantic, self-depreciating. "Man delights not me" has extended even past the barrier of self-esteem. He beats "brother ass" to no avail and ultimately to his own further bewilderment. The anxiety-state has bereft him

37 Hamlet, II, 11, 612-615.
38 Ibid., 619-625.
of any real trust in his own faculties. He himself points out the fact more clearly than any commentary could.

The much-disputed meditation at the opening of the third act, "To be or not to be," does more than show the color of the Prince's thoughts or present a line of action; it also (and this factor has not been sufficiently noted) presents his own analysis of his difficulty as he sees it. Knight has noted this factor without being able to put his finger on the viewpoint which Hamlet adopts:

Commentators differ as to whether Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' refers to the proposed killing of Claudius or to the killing of himself. Hitherto I have supported the latter reading, but I now think both are somehow included, or rather surveyed from a vantage not easy to define.39

The opening phrase, "the question," may be interpreted as being a practical one, in which case it would mean either "to act (and so kill the King) or not to act," or "to continue existing or not to continue (and so kill himself)." On the other hand, since it is speculative in tone, it may be purely theoretical and so would be paraphrased, "To every man is open the choice of living or seeking death: which would be better?" In any case, the Prince comes to no practical conclusion, and so the question of its precise interpretation is of less importance than the viewpoint from which it is considered.

39 Knight, Wheel of Fire, 304.
The "vantage" from which the problem is surveyed gives Hamlet, in part, a solution to his own hesitations. Whether he recognizes it as such is another question, but the observer should see its applicability.

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 loose the name of action. 40

Here, then, the Prince gives his own interpretation of his trouble; it is very near the anxiety-state which D'arcy describes. The cast which clouds the mind is the cast of experience which intervenes between the premises and the logical conclusion. The soliloquy treated as a meditation exemplifies the intervention of experience. Man's soul is immortal—if he pick the way of self-destruction, he goes to some other life; the nature of that life is "undiscovered" and not a matter of personal experience. Man, therefore, hesitates to take the step across its border. Hamlet is outlining his own psychological state, a state of anxiety which cannot fix itself firmly on a denial of the old belief or an acceptance of the new.

An example of this condition in action takes place in the King's closet. 41 Hamlet's introspections have led him

40 Hamlet, III, 1, 84-88.
41 Ibid., III, iii.
into a habit of questioning, a seeking for the assurance of experience. Newman makes this observation:

Introspection of our intellectual operations is not the best means for preserving us from intellectual hesitation. . . Questioning, when encouraged on any subject matter, readily becomes a habit...reasons for assenting suggest reasons for not assenting and what were real become little more than notion.42

The immediate problem before the Prince’s consciousness is the willing of the King. There is no reason why he should not be convinced of the King’s guilt, yet his initial statement does not mirror this conviction. “Now I might do it pat, now he is praying...”43 The might indicates more than the presence of opportunity; it also indicates the vacillating character of his resolutions and his fear of acting on impulse. The motive for the act depends on the reality of his intellectual processes, in which he has no real belief. However, he makes his decision: “And now I’ll do it...”44 Before the breath of the phrase has cooled, so has his determination. He begins to question his decision. Reason for reason, he balances the action against the determination, and so looses both. “Reasons for assenting suggest reasons for not assenting:"

43 Hamlet, III, iv, 73.
44 Ibid., 74.
... and so he goes to heaven
And so am I revenged. That should be scanned:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge. 45

he has not any real basis for action; his emotional unbalance
which leads him to fear his impulses throws him back on the conclusions of his intellect, whose power to discern the truth of
the matter is in serious question. The pattern of his beliefs,
then, have excluded any factor which would provide him with a
real and infallible incentive to decisive action.

The original pattern, then, has been altered so that
now Hamlet seriously questions the ability of the unaided intel- 
et to attain reality and, therefore, the worth of its con- 
clusions as motives for action. Skepticism, as a philosophical
pattern, has a negative factor in as much as it denies the in-
tellect its function as truth-finder. As Knight points out:
"the quality of Hamlet's melancholy is fixed in something nega-
tive yet powerful." 46 The aspect of skepticism which involves
"powerful" elements is positive; a state of doubt is a psycho-
logical reality. Critics have suggested that Hamlet's skepticism
was born of the philosophy of Montaigne and show parallels which

45 Hamlet, III, iv, 74-79.
46 Knight, Wheel of Fire, 269.
justify that position as possible. This is not to say that Shakespeare set out to illustrate or defend any philosophy in the play; T.S. Eliot is probably correct when he says: "I can see no reason for believing that Shakespeare did any thinking on his own." Nevertheless, there is some trace of Montaigne in Hamlet. It has been pointed out by Robertson that Shakespeare's works show no skeptical influence before Hamlet; and, on the other hand, that influence to some extent continues beyond that play. This statement is probably true, but to imply therefore that Shakespeare borrowed ideas directly from the philosopher is to stretch the facts out of all proportion. If the supposition about direct borrowing were true, it would be possible to interpret the play in the light of Montaigne's writings. However, an investigation shows that this hypothesis is barely probable.

The English translation of Montaigne's Essays, a work by John Florio, was licensed in 1601, but withheld from publication till 1603. This same year is given on the title page of the First Quarto edition of Hamlet. The simultaneous publication of the two works would preclude any possibility of the inspiration

49 Robertson, Montaigne and Shakespeare, 39.
or influence of one on the other. Robertson suggests two possible resolutions which would eliminate the difficulty. The first supposes that the First Quarto represents an early draft of the play and that the second edition is a revised and supplemented text. Most modern critics deny the supposition.

The theory most commonly accepted is . . . that Quarto sic does not represent an earlier version by Shakespeare nor even an earlier alien play partly amended by him; but that it is a 'surreptitious and assembled' text. . .

The second argument states that Shakespeare helped Florio read the proof of his edition. This rather overreaches the evidence. Although Shakespeare was a member of Jonson's circle, as was Florio, he was classed by his contemporaries as a "popular" playwright rather than a scholar of Jonson's type. This supposition would require more substantial proof than its supporters have found for it. Therefore, that Shakespeare was acquainted with the translation prior to publication or that he read the French text must remain a gratuitous assumption.

The parallel passages in the two authors are also unconvincing. Of the fifteen sections from the play which Robertson refers to the Essayes, twelve express mutually proverbial views in broad outline while three have one word in common.

50 Robertson, Montaigne and Shakespeare, 39, 40.
51 Granville-Barker, Hamlet, 190.
52 Robertson, Montaigne and Shakespeare, 47-61.
An example of the proverbial type might be noted: "There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Hamlet); "every man is either well or ill according as he finds himself" (Montaigne). The references to identical words are no more convincing; for example, "'tis death a consummation devoutly to be wished" (Hamlet); if it death be a consummation of one's being..." Therefore, a critic would be treading on thin ice who would attempt to interpret the play entirely on the assumption that Shakespeare borrowed directly from the philosophy of Montaigne.

There does seem to be, however, evidences of an indirect influence. Montaigne was a pioneer of the new philosophy; his ideas were matter for discussion on both sides of the Channel. Scholasticism, as a system of philosophy, was moribund at this time; as a way of life, too, it was definitely on the decline. The ideas of the new philosophy were under discussion in the Universities and in intellectual circles. It is not improbable, then, that Shakespeare should have heard them discussed in the coffee shops and taverns which were the meeting-places of the day. Marchette Chute makes this observation:

Hamlet was born, in part, of the young men who had been glooming about the Universities and Inns and Courts in the fin de siècle atmosphere of the late '90's passing remarks of the hollowness of life, the futility of heroic

53 Curry, Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, 12.
action, and the degrading nature of sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{54} These notions received a forceful impetus from the works of Montaigne and his English imitators. The influence of Montaigne's skepticism on Shakespeare, then, is probably that influence as mirrored by the thought of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The tone and color of Montaigne's thought is, by and large, different from that found in Hamlet. An interpretation of the play which would make this skeptical pattern the theme of Hamlet would take a questionable and narrow view of the whole drama.

Thus far, this study has been an amplification and a development, with different emphasis, of Prior's short essay on the thought of Hamlet. If, as may be the case, this emphasis has resulted in considerable divergence from the lines which Prior took, at least there have been no open contradictions. Mr. Prior, as has been said, has made Hamlet out a skeptic and a stoic. That the former belief was part of the pattern of the Prince's philosophy has been reasonably established; the latter part still stands in question. It seems, as will be shown, that, although Hamlet was at a skeptic cast, the stoicism which might have followed as a sort of antidote was prevented from becoming a permanent part of the pattern by the intervention of another factor.

\textsuperscript{54} Chute, \textit{Shakespeare of London}, 228.
Philosophical skepticism, if carried to its ultimate conclusions, reduces man to a passive state of mind, strips him of his dignity, and so renders life a purposeless meandering. It is necessary, then, for man to salvage something from the wreckage, and that stoicism may do for him. The stoical pattern is a state of mind which accepts as inevitable the stroke of "fortune" and so attempts to achieve a "rational" indifference to all external and internal circumstances, favorable and unfavorable. Lacking certitude on fundamental questions, the stoic summons up a belief in the dignity of man based on his capacity for endurance. It is, as is evident, a pattern which leads to studied passivity and has as its sole virtue the ability "to make a mouth at the invisible event." To say that Hamlet's resolution to his problem was based in stoicism is the same as admitting that, practically, Hamlet found no solution in the real order.

Stoicism, then, is proposed as a solution to Hamlet's hesitation. There is no evidence for it in the early sections of the play. It appears, if at all, in the final two acts; to be specific, from Act IV, scene iv to the end. As the Prince is leaving Denmark for England in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his meeting with Fortinbras provides him with another opportunity for introspection. In the soliloquy "How all occasions do inform against me" he reviews his case and attempts
a new solution. First, he sums up his difficulties:

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To rust in us unused. 55

This is his original position; he is still oscillating between
the logical and real orders. The section quoted above has logic
to recommend it, but that is insufficient to carry any weight
with Hamlet. He disputes further:

Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event
I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do it. 56

This is the Prince's answer to logic; perhaps his hesitation is
caused by the fact that man actually is no better than the beast
or perhaps it is his own thought that is "one part wisdom and
three parts coward." In either case, the fault is imputed to the
rational faculty, to "consciousness." For Hamlet, the real order
allows no commerce with logic. So he turns to the present ex-
perience in the shape of Fortinbras to find motivation.

56 Ibid., 39-46.
It is perhaps hard to discern any stoical elements here. Eliot clarifies the picture by commenting on the essence of stoicism:

Stoicism is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him; it is the permanent substratum of a number of versions of cheering oneself up... The stoical attitude is the reverse of Christian humility.57

Hamlet, in turning to experience for assurance, finds the "delicate" prince, young Fortinbras, as a spur to his wavering ambition. He tries to cheer himself up and drive himself onward with a consideration of the young general exposing "what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death, and danger dare." He has as much cause for his action as Fortinbras for his, and so should dare the consequence. Hamlet is whistling in the graveyard, cheering himself on with rhetoric, but without the essential conviction that it will all be worth-while. The last comment of his soliloquy is worth noting: "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"58 His thoughts may indeed by bloody as a running wound; without conviction they cannot be translated into action. The stoic is essentially passive; he thinks, but "fortune" takes care of the event. This is what Hamlet has been trying to avoid.

57 T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, 112.
58 Hamlet, IV, iv, 67.
Hamlet, on his return from the sea-voyage, is a subtly changed man. In spite of the protestations of some of the critics, for example, Schücking, he does not reveal the two essential notes of stoicism, passivity and a lack of humility. Knight, in remarking on the change in Hamlet, alleges that it has its font in a new-found humility. "He has attained humility before society... a love which is humility before not God's ideal for the race but God's human race as it is, in one's own time and place"... 59 Be it noted that Eliot pointed out that stoicism, as a philosophy, is the opposite of real humility. The passivity of the stoic is also lacking:

Hamlet. Is it not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

Horatio. It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.

Hamlet. It will be short; the interim is mine
And man's life no more than to say one. 60

These lines betray neither a passivity nor a whistling-in-the-dark attitude. They reveal a Hamlet on the verge of determined action, a Hamlet who has somehow achieved a new conviction whose motivation will insure the fulfillment of his mission. Stoicism cannot account for it.

59 Knight, Wheel of Fire, 322.

60 Hamlet, V, ii, 67-74.
An hypothesis similar to the theory about Montaigne's influence has been suggested with regard to Hamlet's stoicism. Here the influence attributed to Seneca. As was true of the Montaignian theory, if Shakespeare did borrow from the Roman philosopher-playwright, then the play must square with the ideas of that philosopher. Some authors, principally Cunliffe and Engel have tried to show that Shakespeare borrowed passages almost word for word from the tragedies. This hypothesis has been rejected by most modern critics. Lucas makes this criticism:

But it must be said once for all about the bulk of Shakespeare's supposed borrowings from Seneca that one grows more and more skeptical. ...most of the passages quoted by Cunliffe and Engel seems sic to me the merest coincidences.

Eliot concurs with the above stating in more general terms:

I propose a Shakespeare under the influence of Seneca. But I do not believe that Shakespeare was under the influence of Seneca. ... I wish merely to disinfect the Senecan Shakespeare before he appears. My ambitions would be realized if I could prevent him, in so doing, from appearing at all.

Shakespeare, as a student of drama, probably went through the Senecan tragedies as a matter of course, but that he elected to set forth their implicit philosophy seems to be out of the question.


There is, however, a certain parallelism between the influence of Seneca and that of Montaigne. Schücking's statement about Stoic influence probably contains some truth:

He Shakespeare was certainly not uninfluenced by the general tendencies of the day, which, in late Elizabethan times, in England and in cultured circles in Europe, made stoic philosophy the basis of their outlook on life.64

Shakespeare was in contact with the minds of his times; he is probably reflecting, in some of his terminology ("passion's slave"), the Renaissance-induced attitudes of the contemporary intellectual. But because the contemporary Englishman was not of the same background as the antique Roman, this stoicism does not have a genuine Roman ring. Perhaps Horatio, more Roman than Dane, is a character drawn from the picture of the Renaissance intellectual; Hamlet is not completely true to this type. There is too much positive Christianity in Hamlet's pattern—his "stoicism" is a compound of Christian trust in providence and emotional lethargy. Wenly makes a point, perhaps too strongly put, when he remarks: "the stoic made philosophy moral. . . and at the same time linked it to speculative problems. . . no limit can be set to its leaven within the undivided Church."65 It is the Christian theological element in his pattern which provides the key to Hamlet's solution, and not the stoic factor, which was confined to one feeble attempt before the sea-voyage.

64 Schücking, _Meaning of Hamlet_, 17.
65 R.M. Wenly, _Stoicism and Its Influence_, Boston, 1924.
Hamlet's pattern, then, has been altered, at the end of the third act, by a positive skepticism which is the result of experience, the shocks to his emotional nature and the disillusionment of his ideas. At this point he is still faced with the most pressing problem of the play: where can he find a firm basis for determined action? Mr. Prior states that "his Hamlet's is not a religious resolution." If this be true, then there is no resolution and the fourth and fifth Acts are reduced to anti-climax. Hamlet does find a solution, a belief rooted in experience and providing motivation for action; and that belief has definite religious implications.
CHAPTER IV

THE THEOLOGY OF HAMLET

The mystery at the heart of Hamlet is centered in the last two acts. Hamlet accosts his mother in her chamber, and, with the admonition of the Ghost, achieves a sort of understanding with her. Then, quite suddenly, he departs from the scene, leaving Claudius in command and the critic with a feeling of anticlimax. "Hamlet sails for England and with his departure the play seems to break up."¹ This break-up in the action throws the last two Acts of the play (Granville-Barker's third "movement") into a kind of critical shadow; the author seems to fail his material at this point. As a result, not enough attention has been paid to the sea-voyage and its effect on the Prince. The brief interval in which he does not appear serves an important dramatic purpose.

Hamlet returns from his sea-voyage a changed man. This change, though subtle, is easily perceived. The critics take note of it:

"Hamlet's sea-adventures... may be allowed... to serve a vague symbolic purpose: Certainly he comes back a subtly changed man... he shows a new repose...".2 This "new repose" may be laid at the door of a return of Hamlet's emotional balance. In his dealings with Horatio, Osric, and especially Laertes, he manifests a maturity and control lacking in earlier scenes. For instance, after his outburst at Ophelia's grave, he apologizes to Horatio: "But I am very sorry, good Horatio, That to Laertes I forgot myself...".3 He has resolved to be passion's slave no longer; because his former violence was followed by an inevitable state of lethargy ("How all occasions do inform against me"), the balance has moved back to normal, and he is able to adhere to his resolution. His apology to Laertes has a mature ring to it: "Give me your pardon, sir; I've done you wrong; But pardon it, as you are a gentleman."4 The interval at sea, with its preoccupations, has allowed the Prince an opportunity to recover his emotional equilibrium. This partially accounts for the subtle change noted in him. Hamlet "is himself... or almost himself."5

2 Knight, Wheel of Fire, 320.
3 Hamlet, V, 11, 75-76.
4 Ibid., 249-241.
5 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 267.
This new-found, or better, recovered emotional balance accounts in part for the change in the Prince. There is another factor, deeper and more important, to be reckoned with. Hamlet shows a conviction concerning his mission which he did not reveal previously. His hesitation is no longer perpetuated by the skeptic cast of his mind. Bradley puts his finger on this new factor in Hamlet's thinking:

In what spirit does he return? Unquestionably, I think, we can observe a certain change, though it is not great. . . . there is a trait about which doubt is impossible, a sense that he is in the hands of providence.5

Hamlet's thinking on the event has taken a new turn, and is colored by a "sense of providence." This religious element is uppermost in the Prince's own mind.

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my King and whored my mother
Popped in between the election and my hopes;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such censure—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and is it not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?7

"Perfect conscience" is his concern and his motivation; "to be damned" his punishment for neglecting this duty. He is no longer thinking "bloody thoughts" or interlarding his resolutions with subjunctives ("Now might I do it"); his present conviction, based

6 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 148.
7 Hamlet, V, ii, 63-70.
on some religious motivation, reflects a quiet fierce determination. He has somehow acquired a sense of providence. If this attitude is not a \textit{deus-ex-machina}, then there is an adequate solution to the mystery of Hamlet.

"Inject religion," says Ivor Brown, "and you add venom to a debate."\(^8\) However true this statement may be, it seems necessary at this point to inject some religion, at least to the extent of investigating the religious beliefs in Hamlet's pattern. Mr. Prior, as noted before, states that Hamlet's solution is not a religious resolution to the problem; the answer he finds denies the will the ability to shape events and deprives of significance man's gift of looking before and after.\(^9\) This is just the point in question; precisely what religious factor, if any, is at work in Hamlet's consciousness?

Since religion, taken objectively, regards man's relation to a Supreme Being and the duties arising from such a relation, if Hamlet acknowledge such duties, he must therefore acknowledge their object. Most critics do not question Hamlet's belief in God. Tillyard expresses the common opinion when he says:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(8\) Ivor Brown, \textit{Shakespeare}, Garden City, N.Y., 1949, 43.
  \item \(9\) Prior, "\textit{Hamlet and the Modern Temper}," ELH, XV, 274.
\end{itemize}
"He Hamlet has been from the first remote from the natural unregenerate man. He is deeply religious. ..."10 Hamlet's skepticism is by no means universal; he doubts about the rationality and dignity of man because of his experiences to the contrary, but there is no indication that these doubts undermined his belief in God.

The scenes in which Hamlet encounters his Father's spirit present the religious beliefs in Hamlet's pattern in a clearer focus. In the scene on the battlements, Hamlet greets his father's spirit with a prayer: "Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!"11 After this invocation which has neither a studied air nor the crassness of an oath about it, Hamlet questions whether or not the Ghost is an "honest" one:

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. ..."12

The first question, then, occurring to the Prince is a theological one; is the Ghost angel, devil, spirit? Aquinas throws some light on Hamlet's hesitation:

10 Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, 16.
11 Hamlet, I, iv, 39.
12 Ibid., I, iv, 40-44.
That the dead appear to the living in any way whatever is either by the special dispensation of God; in order that the souls of the dead may interfere in the affairs of the living;--and this is to be accounted miraculous. Or else such apparitions occur through the instrumentality of bad or good angels, with the knowledge of the departed...

Hamlet's problem, then, revolves about the type of supernatural creature revealing itself to him, not whether such a creature exists. The Ghost itself makes a very definite statement on its own origin:

I am thy father's spirit;  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.

The Ghost, by its own word, comes from the purging fires of purgatory to spur Hamlet to revenge and so see justice done. Hamlet accepts the Ghost as a reality, a fact, not a fiction; he accepts the supernatural and the preternatural as a part of the universal order.

Hamlet's reactions in the scene following his conversation with the Ghost, while interlarded with displays of the

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14 *Hamlet*, I, v, 9-12.
15 Dover Wilson's interpretation of the battlement scene advances the opinion that Shakespeare was recreating a theological controversy on the nature of ghosts. Hamlet, he maintains, represented the Protestant point of view since he considers the Ghost as coming from heaven or hell. Semper upholds a Catholic Ghost. Cf. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 70, 71 and Semper, *Hamlet Without Tears*, 32.
antic disposition," show intent seriousness about the Ghost's appearance. He calls on the patron saint of purgatory, St. Patrick, to attest the honesty of the Ghost.16

Yes, by St. Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much offence, too. Touching this vision here
It is an honest ghost...17

He adjures his companions to swear by his sword; the significance here is again religious, since the hilt of the sword forms a cross. Hamlet binds Horatio and Marcellus by the strongest tie he knows; they must swear a religious oath. The conclusion of the scene emphasizes the spiritual undertone:

And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friendship to you,
God willing, shall not lack...18

The entire section underlines Tillyard's remark; "Hamlet is deeply religious."

It is possible, however, to consider the Ghost as a dramatic device after the fashion of its Senecan prototype. Certainly such an apparition does provide an air of awesome mystery dear to the Elizabethan audience and an opportunity to impress the viewer with the magnitude of a crime which draws the suffering soul from its confines. Dover Wilson comments on the

16 Semper, Hamlet Without Tears, 14, 15.
17 Hamlet, I, v, 135.
18 Ibid., I, v, 184-185.
"revenge-Ghost" theory:

Shakespeare's Ghost is both a revenge-Ghost and a prologue Ghost; from the technical point of view it corresponds with its Senecan prototype. But there the likeness ends; for it is one of Shakespeare's glories that he took the conventional puppet, humanized it, christianized it and made it a figure that his spectators would recognize as real. In making horror more awesome, by giving it a contemporary spiritual background, Shakespeare managed at the same time to lift the whole ghost-business to a higher level to transform a ranting, roistering abstraction into a thing at once tender and majestic.  

The nub of the matter lies precisely here: to Hamlet, as to the Elizabethan audience, the Ghost is real. Hamlet does not disregard either its existence or its message.

Another more modern attempt to explain away the Ghost makes an equation between the spirit and Hamlet's unconscious mind. Goddard advances this theory: "If a 'belief in ghosts' sounds too old-fashioned or superstitious, call it, more pedantically, a belief in the autonomous character of the unconscious." In terms of modern psychology, the Ghost then becomes a Freudian figure, released from the depths of Hamlet's unconscious. This approach relegates Hamlet to the abnormal class; it eliminates the objective reality of the Ghost. Hamlet's "unconscious" cannot play such a role without distorting the

the whole meaning of the Ghost as intended by the author. If
the Ghost represents a figure of Hamlet's imagining, then the
whole spiritual order which it represents also belongs to the
realm of fiction. In this event, then, Hamlet would be deluded
about duty and justice and revenge. In effect, the whole moral
structure on which the drama is built would crumble. If a critic
wishes to extract the core of meaning from a play, he must accept
the beliefs of the characters at face-value, or at least admit
that he is creating a new "psychological drama" over the ruins
of the original.

If, then, it is true that Hamlet accepted the Ghost as
a reality, why does its injunction fade so quickly from Hamlet's
consciousness? This difficulty has lead Middleton Murry to de-
clare: "The Ghost belong to an order of existences and his in-
junction to an order of morality which has been left behind in
the slow advance of humanity. . ."21 This explanation does not
square with the facts. After Hamlet has asserted that the Ghost
is an honest one, he cannot rest there; but not because the
Ghost is morally or existentially passe, but because his anxiety-
state will not allow him peace.

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power

To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits
Abuses me to damn me.22

Even though the information conveyed by the spirit coincided with
Hamlet's suspicions, the Prince cannot accept the Ghost's plea
for vengeful action without putting it to the test himself. He
is ever distrustful of his own judgment; he is conscious of his
lack of equilibrium (his "weakness"), therefore his assurance
vanishes with the vanishing Ghost. He determines to put the case
to the only test he has come to respect, the test of experience.

...I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.23

It would seem that, after the testing, the Ghost's command would
have returned to the forefront of Hamlet's consciousness. Why,
for instance, does he not reassert his vow of vengeance on the
success of the "mousetrap?" Dover Wilson answers this question
particularly well: "Hamlet's first thoughts are of his amazing
dramatic success, exceeding his wildest dreams."24 Hamlet's pre-
occupations are with himself and exclude all other considerations.
His own mental states and emotional responses occupy the fore-
ground of his mind; the Ghost and his admonitions necessarily fall

22 *Hamlet*, II, 11, 635-640.
into the background. There is little doubt that the play-within-the-play is more than a detective's device to trap the King in crime; it seems also that "Hamlet desires... to put him Claudius on the rack and watch him writhing."\(^{25}\) Hamlet's belief in the Ghost, then, does not falter, but the questions which arise from the apparation's appearance confound one in Hamlet's anxiety-state. The phantom's reality was no pressing problem as were the questions it raised, therefore, whereas the Ghost dropped from the foreground of consciousness, its problems remained acutely present.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that Hamlet forgot the Ghost completely. His reaction to the second appearance of his father's spirit shows him respectful and obedient.

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by.
The important acting of your dread command?\(^ {26} \)

These are not the words of one unconscious of his duty; they reflect Hamlet's own consciousness of his neglect. As for his respect, he takes his father's admonition about gentle treatment of his mother very much to heart: "How is it with you, lady?"\(^ {27} \) Never, then, was Hamlet in doubt about the nature of the Ghost;

\(^{25}\) Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 177.

\(^{26}\) *Hamlet*, III, iv, 106-108.

\(^{27}\) *Ibid.*, 114.
first of all, it really existed, secondly, it was his father's spirit out of purgatory. Hamlet, therefore, may be said to have believed the suppositions on which the appearance of such a spirit rests, the existence of the metaphysical and moral order of which it is a part, since his experience did not teach him otherwise explicitly.

Critics like Murry, then, who state out of hand that Hamlet could not believe in the Ghost do not seem to be basing their argument on the text.

To me, the unmistakable import of the play, as refashioned and transmuted by Shakespeare, is that Hamlet could not 'believe' in the Ghost in the true and effective sense of the word believe, any more than Horatio could... Hamlet and Horatio were tainted with what Mr. Chesterton would call the modern prejudice against the supernatural.28

What Murry says of Horatio, who is "more the antique Roman than a Dane," may well be so; he holds the Ghost a sight "most wondrous strange."

Horatio. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange! Hamlet. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.29

If the emphasis in this latter line fall upon your, Hamlet may well be drawing a contrast between Horatio's Renaissance stoicism

28 Murry, Shakespeare, 266.
29 Hamlet, II, 1, 164-167.
and his own beliefs. He implies that the Ghost is nothing so strange for him. Hamlet has no "prejudice" against the supernatural; he accepts it as a part of the universal order.

Another problem which arises in relation to the Ghost poses the question of Hamlet's revenge. If the Ghost be assumed "honest," how is it that he demands of Hamlet what appears on the surface to be a criminal act, the murder of Claudius? Goddard assumes that such a request must proceed from the devil: "But who then did kill the King if not Hamlet? Why, his rashness, his indiscretion, the divinity of hell... the Devil."30 The murder of the King being an evil, the Ghost cannot be other than from the devil. Hamlet does not assume so. As Jones points out, "Hamlet never doubted that he was the legitimately appointed instrument of punishment..."31 Aquinas points out where Hamlet's justification lies:

Vengeance consists in the inflection of a penal evil on one who has sinned. If... the avenger's intention be directed chiefly to some good, to be obtained by means of the punishment of the person who has sinned (for instance, that the sinner may amend, that justice may be upheld, and God honored), then vengeance may be lawful, provided other due circumstances be observed.32

30 Goddard, Meaning of Shakespeare, 379.
31 Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus, 37.
32 Aquinas, Summa, II, 1656.
There can be no question, then, of the traditional point of view; vengeance is lawful for the reestablishment of justice, provided due proportion is observed between the crime and the punishment. So Aquinas states further that vengeance is lawful in so far as it prevents evil. Hamlet gives that precise reason as one of his motives for killing the King: "...and is it not to be damned to let this canker of our nature come in further evil?" With the King holding the supreme power in the land, the only effective way of preventing this further evil is, in Hamlet's mind, depriving him of life. Therefore, that evil be prevented and justice be served, it is entirely in accordance with traditional law that Hamlet seek his revenge.

This attitude might be questioned on the grounds that Hamlet could have found some other means of preventing the King. There is another aspect of the case worth considering in this regard. In speaking of killing a private sinner, Aquinas lays down the following norms:

...it is lawful to kill an evildoer in so far as it is directed to the welfare of the whole community, so that it belongs to him as one who has the charge of the community's welfare.34

33 Hamlet, V, I, 68-70.
34 Aquinas, Summa, II, 1467.
In other words, the punishment of a murderer cannot be left in the hands of the citizenry, but comes immediately under the civil power. However, in the case of Claudius, he is the civil power and, therefore, Hamlet has no court of appeal. Moreover, as Dover Wilson has pointed out, Claudius is not the legitimate ruler of Denmark. He is, in point of law, plainly a usurper—Hamlet describes him in that terminology:

A cut-purse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket. . .

He that hath killed my King and whored my mother
Popped in between the election and my hopes. . . 35

This "election" of which Hamlet speaks is the official pronouncement of the privy council; Claudius stepped in and secured his ascendency in defiance of law and custom.

Before Hamlet, . . . was able to claim them his rights, the murderer had 'popped in' and, by marrying the Queen and squaring Polonius and the council, secured the election. 36

Since brothers do not succeed brothers unless there is a failure in the direct line of succession, Claudius is usurper and Hamlet the rightful monarch. If justice, therefore, is to be done in this case, Hamlet, the rightful civil authority, was the logical, indeed, the only person with an iron-bound right to accomplish it.

35 Hamlet, III, iv, 99-101; V, ii, 63-64.
36 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 38.
Moreover, he felt it a duty ("is it not to be damned") since he was very conscious of Claudius' usurpation. According to the traditional view, then, Hamlet was perfectly justified in accepting the revelation of the Ghost as a commission from Divine authority.

It seems clear that Hamlet did accept the existential and moral order of which the Ghost was a part, at least implicitly. If further proof be needed of Hamlet's religious belief, his attitude concerning his mother's marriage substantiates the case. His mother violated the ideal which Hamlet created for her in a twofold manner. First, she showed herself subject to base passion ("go not to mine uncle's bed"), and secondly, she incurred an ecclesiastical charge of incest. Dover Wilson indicates the emphasis which should be put on this "incest business:" "His mother has committed incest. . . .Shakespeare wished to make full dramatic capital out of Gertrude's infringement of ecclesiastical law. . . ."37 Here is an instance of Hamlet's accepting not merely the supernatural law, but even canonical code in making his judgment. This, in itself, proves little as such a belief was traditional; but it does show Hamlet anything but an enfant terrible in his religious beliefs. Hamlet's personal creed was involved with traditional theology.

37 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 39.
Hamlet's pattern, then, includes religious beliefs as a part of its internal structure. He accepts the Ghost as a reality, and therefore accepts concomitant beliefs such as the immortality of the soul, heaven, hell, purgatory, and duty imposed by a Supreme Being. It may be assumed that Hamlet acknowledged a Supreme Being, with that type of belief which the theologians describe as "faith;"

Faith is 'the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not.' Faith does not convince the mind or satisfy it so as to assent because of the evidence of the thing, but because of the influence of the will. . . . The essential object of faith is first truth. . . . Hence faith, which through assent unites man to divine knowledge, has God as its principal object, and anything else as a consequent addition.\(^{38}\)

Since, as is clear from the quotation, "faith" is a matter of assent, that assent may be "real" or "notional." It may require, as does any assent, the corroborations of experience to move it from the notional stage to the real order. The appearance of the Ghost involved such an experience, but at this point Hamlet was emotionally upset, and more inclined to concentrate on the information which the Ghost revealed than on the providential implications of its appearance. The Hamlet of the first three Acts needed another such experience to move his faith in God and all consequent beliefs from the category of notional assents to the real order, the order of motivation.

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\(^{38}\) Aquinas, *Truth*, II, 213, 221, 244, 245.
If the critic fail to make a distinction between a positive lack of faith and faith as a notional assent, he might easily fall into the error of extending Hamlet's skepticism to the entire universal order and so preclude any solution to the problem. Faith, as Aquinas says, is a matter of the will; in spite of intellectual difficulties, the will can cling to its beliefs. Murry does not consider this factor:

Hamlet's universe has been emptied of God...it serves to remind us what God is or was. He is Universal Order—not any order, Universal Order which satisfies the soul of man exposed to the worst life can bring...the shattering of his faith in life. Hamlet's innocence—that which we have so long as we believe in somebody as good and just and permanent—is shattered. Of the two who seemed good and just, his Father, who was good and just, is dead and his Mother, who lives, is neither...39

Mr. Murry has fallen into a fundamental misconception. He assumes what has not been proved and bases his argument on that assumption. "God," he says, "is Universal Order." This is not the traditional view; at most, it is a misconception of the traditional view. God most certainly is responsible for the order of the universe, but he is not identified with that order.

...all things that exist are seen to be ordered to each other since some serve others. But things that are diverse do not harmonize in the same order, unless they are ordered thereto by one. For many are reduced into one order by one...and this one is God.40

Mr. Murry has imposed a prejudgment on Hamlet; he has assumed

39 Murry, Shakespeare, 269.
40 Aquinas, Summa, I, 47, 48.
That his ideal of God was also Hamlet's. Eliot has pointed out this tendency in Murry:

It seems to me that one of the chief reasons for questioning Mr. Strachey's Shakespeare and Mr. Murry's...is the remarkable resemblance which they bear to Mr. Strachey and Mr. Murry respectively. ...41

The germ of truth contained in Murry's quotation reveals why Hamlet's faith did not come to the forefront of his consciousness sooner; he lost his sense of order in the universe and, struggling with his skepticism, could not turn to the author of this order. Man must be placed in the traditional cosmic setting between the beasts and the angels before the universal order can be fully recognized by the intellect. Logically, then, Hamlet's universe could have been emptied of God had he carried his denial of man's rationality to its logical conclusions. But because faith is a matter of the will and experience taught him otherwise, Hamlet never considered abandoning his traditional beliefs in God and the spiritual world around him.

It is to be noted that Mr. Murry equates Shakespeare's beliefs with Hamlet's when he talks of religion. This is not an uncommon approach to the problem of faith as it appears in the play. Bradley makes the following statement:

He Shakespeare looked at the "secular" world most intently and seriously and he painted it...with entire fidelity, without the wish to enforce an opinion of his own, and, in

essentials, without regard to anyone's hopes, fears, or beliefs. His greatness is largely due to this fidelity. ... and if, as a private person, he had a religious faith, his tragic view can hardly have been in contradiction with this faith, but must have been included in it and supplemented, not abolished, by additional ideals.42

Exactly what this faith of Shakespeare's was is still a matter of debate. His father may have been Roman Catholic or Anglo- catholic or Puritan; certain mysterious lapses in his political career can be accounted for by religious dissention of any of the above types.43 His mother, Mary Arden, came from a family of Roman Catholic nobility. One of young Will's masters at the Stratford Grammar School, Simon Hunt, left his post to join the undeniably Roman Catholic Society of Jesus.44 Any of these factors in Shakespeare's education would be enough to account for the inclination he displays in Hamlet towards the conservative outlook in religion and philosophy. The state religion upheld a creed broadly Catholic in root and essentially traditional. There is no evidence that Shakespeare had any reason to make a radical change in his basic religious tenets. Ivor Brown, a wholly impartial judge in this matter, states:

42 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 25.


While unlikely to stand at either religious pole, he was kinder to friars than to parsons and, like all playhouse men, hated the fanatical Puritans who so fanatically hated the theatre and would have ruined its servants. His humanity, his compassion, and his intense belief, expressed most strongly in his latest plays, that penitence merits mercy and that right reason takes part against the fury of revenge, all suggest a generous but undogmatic faith.45

The point of the matter, then, is this: Shakespeare, whatever his formal religion, held to the traditional outlook on man's relation to God and included in his picture of man the entire scope of that relationship. No positive proof, therefore, has been pointed out which supports the theory of an irreligious Shakespeare; indeed, evidence to the contrary is abundant. No critic, without more "relative grounds" than have been uncovered, should present an irreligious Hamlet on the strength of an irreligious Shakespeare.

The pattern of Hamlet's philosophy of life contains religious elements; a belief in God, in heaven, hell, the immortality of the soul, and in duty imposed by conscience and the Creator. These beliefs need only to be vivified to become sources of real motivation for the Prince, need only to make the transit from the order of notions to the real order. If they can be shown to have made such a transit through the medium of experience, then Hamlet may make an end of hesitating and for religious reasons. Hamlet's

45 Brown, Shakespeare, 286.
solution to his problem, in that event, would be specifically religious.

The change in Hamlet occurs after his sea-voyage. The experiences of the voyage must contain the key to this new Hamlet. The interval serves, first of all, as an interval of change during which he regains his emotional balance. He returns a quieter, more emotionally mature man. It also serves a much more significant purpose than that. It gives Hamlet experience of the hand of Providence in his affairs, an experiential proof that God is watching over him. This new "feeling that he is in the hands of providence" accounts for the change in his attitude toward his mission.

The occurrences of the sea-adventure are related by Hamlet in his letter to Horatio:

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. . .46

On the purest chance, as it appeared, the pirate-ship attacked the one on which Hamlet and his companions were sailing. This "accident" provided Hamlet with an opportunity, perhaps his only

46 Hamlet, IV, iv, 15-21.
opportunity of completely eluding the death-trap which Claudius set for him. Previous to the battle with the pirates, Hamlet, because of a providential uneasiness, had pilfered the King's commission and discovered the plot against his life. He tells Horatio of the manner in which he came to this knowledge:

Rashly--
And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
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. 47

Here the "divinity" has served him well; neither did it fail in subsequent occurences. Hamlet, on the inspiration of the moment, revised his step-father's injunctions, exchanging his name for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Again, heaven stood by to aid him.

Horatio. ... How as it sealed?
Hamlet. Why, even in that was heaven ordinant,
I had my father's signet in my purse... 48

The Why even of this last speech indicates how thoroughly, in his opinion, heaven was attendant on him; the whole affair seemed to him managed from on high. When the pirate-corsair appeared to take him completely out of his enemies' hands ("like thieves angels of mercy"), his belief in a personal providence was completely activated.

47 Hamlet, V, ii, 6-11.
48 Ibid., 47-49.
His own experiences on the sea-voyage removed his belief in a providential God from the notional order and projected it into the order of realities. As Moulton observes:

These moral accidents are sudden openings into the unknown giving us scattered intimations of a supreme Power behind the visible course of things overruling all. ('There's a divinity that shapes our ends. . .').

This is equivalently what D'Arcy means when he talks of "evidence...so accumulating and cohering together as to reveal inevitably a certain pattern or meaning." Hamlet feels that these "accidents" could not have been mere accidents, that they were part of a plan to stir his dull purpose. This belief in providence and in the duty which providence has laid on his shoulders inspires Hamlet to a direct resolution:

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon--
He that hath killed my king and whored my mother
Popped in between the election and my hopes
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such comenage--is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is it not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

This resolution stands him now upon; no "bloody thoughts" alone are involved, but a marshaling of motives and the underlying motive most prominent, duty imposed by conscience and a providential God.

50 D'Arcy, Nature of Belief, 201.
51 Hamlet, V, 11, 63-70.
This interpretation of the sea-voyage and its subsequent happenings also explains Hamlet's attitude in regard to the duel with Laertes. That, too, he feels, will be taken care of by providence. Hamlet, in effect, dares the King to do his worst; he himself will act in due time.

Horatio. If your mind dislike anything, obey it;
I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

Hamlet. Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it will 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...52

The Gospel proverb of the sparrow lends color to the whole passage. The context here is pertinent:

But I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will show you whom you shall be afraid of: be afraid to him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell... Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God... Therefore do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.53

Hamlet has no fear of the event, but his fearlessness stems neither from a languid disinterest nor from a swaggering stoicism; he is sure of his ground. Mr. Murry touches the quick of the solution without accepting the motivation.

It is in his conquering his fear of the unknown futurity that Hamlet's victory lies. That is the central line of progress and growth. He has to teach himself, as it were

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52 Hamlet, V, 11, 229-236.

53 Luke, c. 12, vv. 6, 7.
all over again, to make a mouth at the invisible event. The critic who appeals to a "fatalistic" Hamlet has no reasonable explanation of this ability of the Prince to make a mouth at the invisible event. The Elizabethan audience would have snapped up the scriptural illusion and found in it an explanation of Hamlet's victory. Without this factor, Hamlet's mystery remains a mystery.

Hamlet goes into the duel convinced that "the readiness is all." With his apology to Laertes he squares all the accounts:

Give me your pardon, sir; I've done you wrong
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman. . .
Was it Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet:
Who does it then? His madness. . .
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother. 55

Those critics who count this speech insincere or shallow do Hamlet an injustice. It has a genuine ring, especially the last protestation. Laertes is his brother—in the Christian sense of the term. With justice on his side, Hamlet takes up his sword.

The critics who ignore or refuse the religious connotations of most of the above passages must necessarily leave the Prince mired in a fatalistic stoicism. Dover Wilson notes the change in the Prince and comments: "we are not told why." Goddard

54 Murry, Shakespeare, 248.
55 Hamlet, V. 11, 240-258.
places the emphasis on Hamlet's apostrophe to rashness instead of his references to providence.

It would be interesting to know how many times that last line-and-a-half There's a divinity. . . has been quoted as Shakespeare's own religious wisdom by persons who never read or never noticed the apostrophe to rashness and indiscretion that precedes it or the account of the callous and superfluous murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of which it is made the justification, that follows it. . . How unobtrusively the Fortune whose instrument he once abhorred the very thought of becoming has been translated into the Divinity he is only too willing to have shape his ends!56

Hamlet's "apostrophe to rashness" is only a preface—that rashness "sometimes serves us well"—to the consideration of the workings of providence. Hamlet does not praise his indiscretion, but rather the omniscient providence that can bring salvation from it. Goddard, who accuses others of failing to read the context, seems to fail at that very point himself. As for the callous murder of his companions, Hamlet has reason:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell-incensed points
Of mighty opposites.57

These two knaves worked their own destruction; they were accomplices to Hamlet's near-destruction so that the sword of justice rightly fell on them. They only inherited Hamlet's fate.

56 Goddard, Meaning of Shakespeare, 376, 377.
57 Hamlet, V, i, 57-62.
Fortune, on the other hand, has abdicated in favor of providence in the manner described above. No translation, as Goddard would wish, is effected between the two—the one dropped from Hamlet's consciousness when the other became rooted there. Tillyard hits on the truth when he says: "He falls into a kind of fatalism. I think Bradley is right." Tillyard, however, is very wrong in defining the kind of fatalism into which Hamlet falls. Christian resignation is a variety of fatalism—at least the surface appearance of the two might well be identical. The underlying motive, however, is quite different. Dover Wilson maintains that Shakespeare has not told the reason for Hamlet's change. Then again, perhaps the critics have overlooked it.

Hamlet's death, too, seems a stumbling-block to some of the critics. Eliot, for instance, attempts to foist his "cheer-up" theory on the dying Prince:

But even Hamlet, who has made a pretty considerable mess of things and occasioned the death of at least three innocent people and two more insignificant ones, dies fairly well pleased with himself:

'report me and my cause aright':

It would be interesting if Eliot were to identify the "three innocent people" involved. Certainly Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude,
Polonius and the students could not unconditionally be called innocent, and Ophelia's death was hardly Hamlet's responsibility alone. Hamlet may be said to be pleased with himself only to this extent—he dies leaving his destiny in the hands of God. On all other counts he is disturbed. He dies a young man on the verge of a fuller life; he carried out his mission on impulse, not deliberately as he would have liked. His concern about his good name is understandable; the populace is in ignorance about the whole seamy tale. No religious sentiments are forthcoming in his dying moments, his forgiveness of Laertes excepted. Hamlet said his most efficacious prayer when he breathed "the readiness is all." Horatio, as chorus to the tragedy, says the final prayer for his soul: "...Good night, sweet prince, And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." 60

Tragedy is only tragedy because it terminates in the natural order. In Hamlet's final lines Shakespeare accentuates the tragic motif and subdues the counterpoint of triumph. Hamlet dies with his youthful potential for greatness unachieved, and on the point of a fuller maturity. Death viewed from this standpoint carries a scythe:

60 *Hamlet*, V, ii, 373, 374.
These grimmer aspects are, for the most part, aspects of death seen under special circumstances... the ravisher of youth, strength and beauty who mockingly... dominates not only kings and princes but even life itself... 61

Certainly this aspect underlying Hamlet's view of death dominates his lines in the final scene. Passing from the picture before his time and regretting it, Hamlet leaves the restoration of the note of religious triumph to Horatio who threads the counterpoint through the dominantly tragic theme.

Shakespeare's Hamlet represents a faithful picture of the problems and doubts which the Reformation inspired, the Renaissance nourished, and which subsequent developments rendered, for the majority, insoluble. Shakespeare took the problem of skepticism which was rising in his day, and examined it in his own way. He did not treat it abstractly as a problem, but concretely in an individual. His solution, eminently a religious one, is not clear-cut or apodictic. It stems from the belief-pattern of the hero's mind. Perhaps, as Myrick says, it was clear enough for the Elizabethan audience.

Those who speak of the absence of religion in Shakespeare have neglected the instinctive faith of his audience and certain aspects of his art. The poet... does not set out to expound religious doctrine. But his pictures of life may include religious values of which his characters are aware and to which they turn in moments of tragic stress.

Shakespeare's audience found these values in... Hamlet. Hamlet is undeniably skeptical in his views on the rationality of man, and the value and worth of man's action as related by the intellect. His religious beliefs, on the other hand, rendered real by experience provide him the motivation which he requires to accomplish his mission and so fulfill his destiny. Hamlet is no failure; he succeeds in as much as it is given to man to do so. He puts trust in providence and does what he can; no man can do more.

CHAPTER V

HAMLET AND THE MODERN TEMPER

In fine, we were never intended to reach the heart of the
mystery. That it has a heart is an illusion; the mystery
itself is an illusion; Hamlet is an illusion. . .1

Hamlet, as the most human of Shakespeare's creations, will al-
ways remain something of a mystery. His very humanness, perhaps,
is the reason why critics continue to probe the various aspects
of his character. It is true that Hamlet is a fiction, a crea-
ture of the mind, yet he is also a mirror of complex human nature.
The critic who claims to have plucked the heart from the charac-
ter and, by dissection, to have laid all its separate parts on
the table of analysis most probably has failed to understand how
various and divergent the facets of the play really are. There
are no mathematical formulae which may be marshaled to a con-
clusion; an interpretation of the play is largely a matter of
delicate emphasis. If the critic demand certitude of a mathemat-
ical kind, Hamlet becomes will-o'-the-wisp, a lantern which flick-
ers and is gone. Then is Hamlet an illusion and his mystery
insoluble.

1 Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet, 229.
The assumption that the problem cannot be fully explained, then, may be a point of departure for the critic. Then may he take the play at face-value and attempt an analysis which considers as many facets as possible in an interpretation of the whole. If his explanation is not self-contradictory nor at loggerheads with given lines or sections in the play itself, then it should illumine, in its own fashion, the mystery of the play. To create such an effect, the critic has to assume that the dramatist constructed a fundamentally intelligible plot and work on from that point. The interpretation contained in this thesis is based on the above assumptions; it is an attempt to illumine, not to define. Since literary criticism largely depends on emphasis, it is an attempt to set the balance gingerly so that the balance tells true. This type of criticism produces no illusion; it sketches an outline of reality which may be filled with flesh and bone as the character grows.

"now the theme of Hamlet is death. . ."2 This is Knight's interpretation of Hamlet. Such a reduction seems to neglect the whole scope of the play; rather, it would be better to say "the theme of Hamlet is life. . ." The story of Hamlet does not reveal the full maturity of man, but rather the maturing of a man.

2 Knight, Wheel of Fire, 31.
Hamlet comes of age again during the course of the play; he passes through the severest trials to a fuller maturity. This is the mystery of life at its fullest; it is the mystery of growth. The emotional nature, the belief-pattern of the Prince are formed under the eye of the critic—Hamlet not only is during the course of the play, but, much more significant, he becomes during its progress. Hamlet does not represent a glorified Spanish Tragedy, rolling in gore and croaking for revenge; it is the picture of a young man coming to a new life and being cut off in the flower. This, therefore, is the theme and the tragedy of Hamlet, a bloody, fierce birth of a constant soul.

Mr. Prior's article, "Hamlet and the Modern Temper," set out to prove that the play was the first work of the post-medieval world which displayed symptoms of thought now termed the modern temper. Eliot points out this same attitude in Hamlet when he speaks of a "new self-consciousness and self-dramatization of the Shakespearean hero." Hamlet bears a strong resemblance to the modern man and to his temper. The problems of the contemporary thinker are very much Hamlet's problems—the emotional unrest, the search for certitude in rational matters, the adherence to creed. The tragedy of the modern mind, as Merton points out, lies in the fact that man, having entangled himself in his own consciousness, can do nothing whatsoever to extricate
himself. Reason has abdicated in favor of feeling; faith in favor of a fashionable skepticism. On such bases man can build no permanent city since he has no solid foundation of any kind. If a man cannot see God, he certainly will not be able to see the hand of God. And so the man of modern temper fails to find any answer to the "whys" of existence.

Hamlet's philosophy of life may not be wholly true; certainly his belief-pattern with regard to intellectual aptitude for truth is open to debate. But, at least, he has found an empirical solution to his problem which solution is firmly based in faith and experience. The Prince returns to faith and draws his motivation there. Modern man is finding that, in his own present condition, faith is the only answer. Hamlet is the first literary expression in the English tongue of the modern tendency to the untrammeled thought which was the baneful flower of the Reformation and the Renaissance. He is first to show its fundamental weakness and inadequacy as a solution for the enigmas of existence. Shakespeare's questioning and meditating mind expressed the modern problems vividly; his faith supplied the solution.
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The thesis submitted by Thomas E. Porter, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 11, 1954
John B. Conrath, S.J.
Date
Signature of Adviser