

## South Atlantic Modern Language Association

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Source: *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Nov., 1992), pp. 21-38

Published by: South Atlantic Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3199835>

Accessed: 28-04-2020 16:39 UTC

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## *The Wheel of Fortune, the Wheel of State, and Moral Choice in Hamlet*

CATHERINE BROWN TKACZ

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**I**N SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*, not only the action of the play, but two fascinating wheel images turn on the point of the prayer scene, for the choices that Hamlet and Claudius make then subject the wheel of state (3.3.15-22) to the wheel of Fortune (2.2.464-68) and thus lead to the "boist'rous ruin" of the royal house of Denmark. Between the crowded and turbulent mousetrap scene and the verbally and physically violent closet scene—which, significantly, includes the play's first onstage death—is the deceptively quiet prayer scene. Not simply the calm before the storm, this is the calm that precipitates the tempest, that decisive moment which makes the rest of the play inevitable and its eight deaths unavoidable. For this play beautifully demonstrates Shakespeare's craft "as a Christian dramatist who wrote plays structured pyramidally in which the crucial ethical decisions occur in the climax" (Geckle 101).<sup>1</sup> In 3.3 the wrongly crowned Claudius and the should-have-been-crowned Hamlet speak in monologues: one kinsman confirms a vicious choice and the other, fatally, makes one. Each abuses his understanding: Claudius knows his sin yet does not repent, while Hamlet scorns the mere justice of a death for a death in a vicious desire to damn his uncle.

Shakespeare has prepared us for the intense and fatal ironies of the so-called prayer scene (in which no one prays) from the start of the play, through his exploration of kingship and duty. Richer preparation lies in dramatic and verbal parallels that could be effectively exploited in production through delivery and staging: the overlooked parallels between, and later echoes of, speeches on the wheel of Fortune and the wheel of state. Similarly, the Player's "passionate" speech, which Hamlet "chiefly loved," hideously adumbrates the Prince's role in the deaths of father, mother, daughter, son (cf. 2.2.427-29).<sup>2</sup> The

description of Pyrrhus in that speech unexpectedly prepares for the fatal “standing in pause” of both Hamlet and Claudius in the prayer scene and marks the hesitation of all three—Pyrrhus, Hamlet, and Claudius—as the prelude to slaughter. The first of the important wheel images, in the wheel of state speech, warns of the dire outcome of a “cess of majesty”; the last surviving members of Denmark’s royal house—Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude—variously exhibit such a “cess of majesty,” and this failure in the royal house allows all that is rotten in Denmark. Shakespeare’s emphasis is on the usurping and wronged kings, Claudius and Hamlet, and accordingly he makes the clearest evidence of their “cess of majesty,” the prayer scene, the moral center of the drama.

The decisive moment of the prayer scene follows extensive treatment of kingship and duty, beginning in act 1 and including Laertes’s advice to Ophelia. The play’s opening scene introduces a focus “on the throne, not on the kings as individuals,” as Nancy M. Lee-Riff has shown (103-04). Claudius is referred to as “the King” and “the Dane”; only once is the late king named, after five other references to him as king. Similarly, “young Hamlet” is named only at the scene’s close (1.1.170). Thus the notion of majesty is stressed. At the same time, the idea of duty is introduced. Clearly the guards and Horatio act from a sense of duty; the first scene concludes with Horatio explicitly saying that to inform Hamlet is proper, “fitting our duty” (1.1.173; see also 1.2.222). Six times in the following scene the term “duty” recurs, always in lines referring to a subject’s duty to his king or prince. In contrast, throughout the entire tragedy, no member of Denmark’s royal family ever speaks of his duty to the state. This omission is symptomatic of their abdication of that responsibility. Shakespeare leaves it to Polonius to link “majesty” and “duty,” and Laertes alone speaks clearly of that responsibility.

Polonius vividly alludes to “what majesty should be, what duty is” when he confers with Claudius and Gertrude about Hamlet’s “madness” (2.2.87). The counselor’s words are empty ornament, as far as their overt context is concerned. But Polonius functions in part as the unwitting fool of the play. Like all of Shakespeare’s fools, he speaks many lines that carry unsuspected meaning. (Unlike other, perceptive fools, Polonius does not recognize this meaning.) There is vivid irony in his mentioning the subject of majesty and duty to the incestuous royal couple and especially to the murderer-king Claudius. Moreover, the difference in predicates (“what majesty *should be*, what duty *is*”) points to the possibility that royal persons may fail to honor their obligations to the state.

And, indeed, what is rotten in Denmark is that those in the royal family, who ought to act according to both the ordinary duties of all Christians and also the duties specific to their majesty, do not. Claudius's betrayal of duty is deadly to those who do their duty to him: Laertes (1.2.53-54), Polonius (2.2.44), and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2.2.29, 3.2.322). Further, it is poignant and ironic that those subjects who do understand kingly duty—Laertes, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—die because their ruler fails them.

After the first scene's quiet stress on kingship, and the recurrence of "duty" in the second scene, the third scene brings a clear statement of a king's duty, in Laertes's advice to his sister concerning the prince:

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own,  
For he himself is subject to his birth.  
He may not, as unvalued persons do,  
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends  
The safety and health of this whole state,  
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed  
Unto the voice and yielding of that body  
Whereof he is the head. (1.3.17-24)

Here is a clear indication of "what majesty should be," directly linked to the prince's choosing to act to secure and maintain the welfare of Denmark (see also Lee-Riff 108). The themes of kingship and duty are continued throughout the play, with an additional statement of the importance of majesty delivered by Rosencrantz just before the prayer scene to ensure that the audience can have this firmly in mind during the crucial scene in the chapel. Rosencrantz's words present the image of the wheel of state, itself a detailed echo of the earlier image of the wheel of Fortune.

Shakespeare has carefully constructed the scenes in which the wheel images occur so that they are themselves richly parallel: in each, a speaker uses a wheel image when speaking to an audience composed of one of two royal Danes, each of whom is planning a stratagem to rid himself of the other and each of whom intends to use the current speaker in that stratagem. Significantly, both king and prince alike are violating the duties that belong to their majesty, and from this violation comes the identity of the wheel of state with the wheel of Fortune.

The first wheel image is in the Player's "passionate" speech, recited at Hamlet's request:

Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,  
 In general synod take away her power,  
 Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,  
 And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven  
 As low as to the fiends. (2.2.464-68)

Later, immediately before the prayer scene, Rosencrantz addresses Claudius and speaks of the wheel of state, unwittingly echoing the terms of the image of the wheel of Fortune.

The cess of majesty  
 Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw  
 What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel  
 Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,  
 To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things  
 Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls,  
 Each small annexment, petty consequence,  
 Attends the boist'rous ruin. (3.3.15-22)

Clearly the image is the same: a "wheel" on "the summit of the highest mount" in one case, on "the hill of heaven" in the other, from which the "spokes" are broken so that the "round nave" alone "falls" or is "bowl[ed] . . . down" to a "boist'rous ruin," or "as low as to the fiends."<sup>3</sup>

The direct referents of Rosencrantz's speech are clear: the audience knows that the murder of King Hamlet has rocked the still-uncertain security of Denmark; Claudius has taught Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to fear that the "mad" prince may kill the current king, himself (3.3.1-15). While "cess of majesty" can mean "death of a king," it can also refer to the end of behaving royally, the cessation of majesty in character in those of the royal house. And, indeed, Prince Hamlet is ceasing to act as he knows a man of bounty, honor, and dignity should (2.2.498-501), with the sad result that many "lesser things," including that "small annexment" Ophelia, are also soon to be destroyed. King Claudius, who was brother to a king, has declined from duty to murder and incest and will murder again. Gertrude is also "a criminal," for she "has committed incest" (Wilson 39; cf. Campbell 145-46). That is, two of the three surviving members of the royal house of Denmark have already experienced a "cess of majesty," and Hamlet, too, in the prayer scene, will cease to be majestic in character. Their dereliction results in the subjoining of the wheel of state to the wheel of Fortune. Ultimately this cess of majesty in character leads to cess of majesty through physical death, the sense Rosencrantz spoke of,

when the last members of the royal house of Denmark all die in the play's final scene.

While the falling wheel is the key image here, downward movement in general functions as a minor motif in the play. The first such movement is in Horatio's warning to Hamlet about the Ghost, lest it tempt the prince "to the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea" (1.4.70-71).<sup>4</sup> The wheel of Fortune bowling down to the fiends comes next, in 2.2, followed shortly by Ophelia's lament, "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! . . . quite, quite down!" (3.1.146, 150). The "boist'rous ruin" of the wheel of state is described in 3.3. Next, as will be shown, downward movement is emphasized in the crucial prayer scene. In the closet scene there are two more references to downward movement. The first recalls the wheel's descent, for Hamlet storms against his mother for descending from that "heaven-kissing hill," the "fair mountain" of his father, to the "moor" of Claudius (3.4.60, 3.4.67-68). (As the Ghost tells Hamlet, "O Hamlet, what a falling off was there, / From me . . . and to decline / Upon a wretch" [1.5.47-51]. This is precisely the Queen's descent, her personal "cess of majesty.") Again, even in Hamlet's inverted advice to his stunned mother at the end of the closet scene, he uses a story of "the famous ape" who leaps from a housetop "down" (3.4.197-200). After this series of fatal descents, the lines of the grief-distracted Ophelia resonate poignantly: "You must sing 'A-down, a-down, and you call him a-down-a.' O, how the wheel becomes it!" (4.5.168-69).<sup>5</sup>

Having seen Shakespeare's elaboration of the wheel imagery, let us return to the passage in which he introduces it, the Player's speech. For, in addition to the powerful image of the wheel of Fortune, that passage contains the evocative description of Pyrrhus, and it too is relevant to the prayer scene. The Player's speech has been much discussed by scholars, including Arthur Johnston, Harry Levin, and Joseph Westlund; Eric Rasmussen has recently treated the parallels between Hamlet and Pyrrhus. In ways that have not been discussed before, the circumstances and actions of Pyrrhus foreshadow the behavior of *both* Hamlet and Claudius in the prayer scene. Furthermore, Pyrrhus's actions forecast Hamlet's actions in two additional ways: in detail they forecast the rest of act 3, and, broadly, the rest of the play.

As scholars have noted, Hamlet and Pyrrhus both appear black and are bent on avenging the deaths of their fathers. Presumably Hamlet, who speaks of Pyrrhus, whose "sable arms" "did the night resemble" (2.2.423-24), is in his habitual "nighted color" (1.2.68), one

of his "customary suits of solemn black" (1.2.78; cf. 3.2.117-18), so that the audience quite literally *sees* the first parallel between the two. Hamlet strengthens the association of himself with Pyrrhus by movingly reciting the appalling description of "hellish Pyrrhus" (2.2.423-35).

The account of Pyrrhus begins with a recollection of his concealment in the Trojan horse (2.2.423-25). Seeking the king he desires to kill for vengeance, he slaughters "fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" along the way (2.2.429) so that he is "o'ersizéd with coagulate gore" (2.2.433). At last he finds his desired victim, the father of the killer of his father: too passionate, Pyrrhus "in rage strikes wide" and misses the old man, but the wind of his sword knocks the king down (2.2.442-45). Pyrrhus's sword then "seemed i' th' air to stick" (2.2.450) and the avenger "stood / And like a neutral to his will and matter, / Did nothing" (2.2.451-53; the last is a truncated line). A five-line image of a gathering storm follows, building tension for what ensues: Pyrrhus's frenzied hacking of Priam. The five-line reference to Fortune's wheel concludes this section of the speech.

An overlooked similarity between Pyrrhus and Hamlet involves action just before the prayer scene. The two characters are alike in that each uses a deceptive, disarming strategy to bring him toward revenge of a father's murder, a murder associated with a lust that devastates a nation. Specifically, the mousetrap is a stratagem like the Trojan horse: it allows the avenger to get inside his opponent's guard. For Pyrrhus, this is true literally, for in "th' ominous horse" (2.2.425) he passes the walls of Troy unharmed. For Hamlet, it is true psychologically, for the "Mouse-trap" (3.2.220) lets the prince observe Claudius when his guard is down and his appalled response to seeing his own crime enacted before him convinces Hamlet and Horatio of the king's guilt.

The striking parallels between Pyrrhus and both Hamlet and Claudius begin in the prayer scene itself. Just as Pyrrhus stands, sword drawn, over the king associated with his father's murder, so too Hamlet stands over the kneeling Claudius. Both avengers hesitate; the emphasis on Pyrrhus's hesitation and the butchery that follows is mirrored in the focus on Hamlet's hesitation in the prayer scene, which allows all the deaths that ensue. Taken differently, the Player's speech also adumbrates the events of acts 3 and 4 as a whole. Only after Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius do the deaths of the prince's *mother*, the *father* of Ophelia and Laertes, and the *daughter* and *son* of Polonius—as well as those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—follow. When at last Hamlet does kill Claudius, the prince's

vengeance is thus retained with superfluous death. This double adumbration of action points to the importance of Hamlet's hesitation in the prayer scene.

But Hamlet is not the only one who hesitates in the prayer scene: Claudius delays repentance, in terms strikingly reminiscent of the hesitation of Pyrrhus. The false king painfully realizes:

My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,  
And like a man to double business bound,  
I *stand in pause* where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect. (3.3.40-43; italics mine)

Here we see an unexpected parallel to Pyrrhus, who also "stood" in "pause" (2.2.451, 458). In addition, the truncated line from the Player's speech, "Did nothing," is here matched by the short "And both neglect." The short line stresses both Claudius's hesitation and also the seriousness of this neglect. Another vivid parallel follows. Pyrrhus was "o'ersized" with the blood of victims identified by their family relationships; Claudius asks himself, "What if this curséd hand / Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?" (3.3.43-44). Shakespeare sets up Pyrrhus as a foil to both Hamlet and Claudius, and, in order to heighten the irony of the prayer scene and to demonstrate the failings of both characters, echoes the imagery of the Player's speech in Claudius's fruitless meditation.

Unexpectedly, and most ironically, these two kinsmen who will at last kill each other are here fatally alike. Both neglect duty and the possibility of prayer for a vicious hope. Claudius fails to pray and repent because he wrongly loves power and his incestuous union with Gertrude; Hamlet fails to be satisfied by justice because he wrongly hopes to insure his uncle's damnation. The similarities between the two are pointed up by the verbal and descriptive parallels linking each of the two royal characters with Pyrrhus as described in the Player's speech.

Significantly, although Hamlet considers only two possible courses of action in this scene, he is not limited to them. He considers killing the king at once, apparently without warning, or else killing him when he is engaged in a sinful act or asleep so that he might be damned (cf. Phillips, who believes Hamlet sees and takes a different, "subtle" revenge). Waldock considers the first "a repulsive chance [for revenge]. . . . We shrink from his accepting it. We could not help thinking less of him if he did accept it" (42). Hamlet, however, could make different use of his present chance: for instance, he could call



Claudius from the chapel, declare why he is going to slay him, and then kill him face to face—no sneaking up behind a praying man, no stabbing in the back.<sup>6</sup> This article cannot explore all of Hamlet's possible courses of action, but it is clear that Hamlet's speech presents a false dichotomy.

Hamlet's decision in this key scene to seek the king's damnation repels many scholars, and scholarship has been divided on whether to accept or rationalize it. Waldock examines the speech thoroughly and convincingly, concluding that Hamlet means simply what he says, horrible as it is (37-49). Other critics find it repugnant to take literally the prince's decision to kill Claudius

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At game a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't—  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damned and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. (3.3.89-95)

Peter Alexander manages to praise Hamlet for refraining "from stabbing a villain in the back," but only by ignoring all that Hamlet says (144-45). Wilson is among those scholars who decide that Hamlet is unconsciously cloaking his natural mercy in hideous terms (244). As Bernice W. Kliman has shown, Sir Laurence Olivier, in his famous film of the play, prominently displays an image of Christ in the chapel to associate Hamlet's refraining with God's will (159-64). In contrast, Geoffrey Hughes, analyzing the play as "The Tragedy of a Revenger's Loss of Conscience," rightly construes Hamlet's words in the prayer scene as showing "blasphemous arrogance" as he takes God's role as avenger (400). This is not passive inaction, but a vicious decision to try to damn Claudius (see also Calderwood 88-90).<sup>7</sup>

It is primarily the new viciousness of Hamlet here that makes this scene the moral center of the play. Hitherto he has shown himself passionate, but still concerned with bounty. Now he chooses vice: as Campbell has asserted, "More than all others did the passion of revenge lead to tragedy" (24; see also 144-45). In act 1, Hamlet knows merely that something is rotten in Denmark; in that act's concluding scene and all of act 2, he is largely convinced of Claudius's guilt while Claudius suspects that Hamlet is dangerous; but by the end of 3.2, Hamlet knows his uncle is guilty and Claudius knows his nephew has discovered the crime. Now both the actions and inward re-

sponses of Claudius and Hamlet to this knowledge are crucial to the fate of Denmark.

Accordingly Shakespeare shows us both the chosen courses of action and the thoughts of each man. In the case of Claudius, only the prayer scene provides a full and developed exposition of his inward state, as the fratricide-king considers in agony the possibility of repentance but does not repent (3.3.36-72). In short, Claudius does not change: guilty of serious sin from before the start of the play, he now neglects to repent and continues to suffer the guilt of his murder while yet clinging to "my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (3.3.55; see also Ashley 86-87). The mousetrap has shaken him deeply, but he derives no good from the experience and refuses to amend. We have not expected Claudius to repent, and when he leaves the chapel, we know he will not. The cess of majesty is now complete in him, and also completely demonstrated.

Hamlet, however, changes: even as Claudius, kneeling, speaks of prayer's ability to forestall us before we sin, Hamlet falls into serious sin. Immediately following Claudius's failure to pray and to repent, Shakespeare shows us Hamlet's failure to pray and to behave as a king should, in accordance with his own bounty. This scene, carefully prepared for, stirs many chords: as both men "stand in pause," we know the aftermath will be dire. Aptly, the imagery of descent recurs in Claudius's lines: "And what's in prayer but this twofold force, / To be forestalléd ere we come to fall, / Or pardoned being down?" (3.3.48-50). Ironically, he points to the two uses of prayer that prince and king should then be using, for Hamlet should avoid falling and Claudius is already down. One is to become, the other is, the killer of a kinsman and a king. Yet neither character repents, seeks or shows mercy, or even honestly prays. The one who is already fallen remains down, and now the other, his descent not forestalled by prayer, falls. There is a "cess of majesty" in both men, a dereliction of "what majesty should be." Because of their political responsibilities, the king and the prince, by their falling, inevitably subject the wheel of state to the wheel of Fortune, so that Denmark will fall with them.

Put another way, the prayer scene is that fatal, stressed hesitation which precedes all the violent deaths of the play. We expect action after the mousetrap, but the play is like Pyrrhus's first swing of the sword at Priam: without touching the king, its wind knocks him down. So, too, Claudius is knocked to his knees in the chapel by his turbulent feelings in response to Hamlet's masterstroke, the mousetrap. Shakespeare focuses here on the two surviving men of the royal house, juxtaposing them in self-revealing soliloquy. Because of the

choice each makes at this crucial point, seven unnecessary deaths will follow. And this tragedy's many deaths are indeed important. Fascination with Hamlet's psychological state has sometimes obscured the significance of the deaths in the play, but dramatically they loom large. Their importance to the popular audience is shown in, for instance, the play's most terse and light-hearted synopsis, blithely sung in the MGM musical *The Bandwagon* when Fred Astaire and company cite, as an example of entertainment, the play in which "the Ghost and the Prince meet, / and everyone ends up mincemeat." Characters do not start dying in 2.1, though, right after the Ghost and Hamlet first meet. Rather, the deaths begin in the last scene of act 3, immediately after the play's central ironic moment, the prayer scene.

The first human "lesser thing" to be destroyed as the wheel of state falls is Polonius. Gertrude calls his killing "a rash and bloody deed" (3.4.28). Some would excuse the killing, as Coleridge does: "Polonius's volunteer intrusion of himself into this business, while it is appropriate to his character, still leaching after former importance, removes all likelihood that Hamlet should suspect his presence, and prevents us from making his death injure Hamlet in our opinion" (161). Nonetheless, though Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet weeps over Polonius's death (4.1.27), the prince shows scant remorse and roundly insults his corpse, calling it "the guts" (4.1.216) and referring to it as safely "stowed" (4.2.1). As Hamlet delivers these insults to his mother and when he is alone, they cannot be part of his assumed antic disposition. This is Hamlet speaking as Hamlet, and he is callous. Although Hamlet says to his mother, "For this same lord / I do repent" (3.4.176-77), he rushes on into rationalization, the import of which is to deny his responsibility in the killing of an innocent man. For Polonius is innocent: his spying on the prince is officious, yes, and shows fatuous self-importance, but is after all undertaken for the security of the realm.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are next, although the audience learns only later of Hamlet's conniving at their deaths (5.2.31-56). What excuse can Hamlet have for condemning his "excellent good friends" (2.2.220) to death, with no opportunity for confession first? They have been "brought up with him" (2.2.11) and remain friends, as Gertrude verifies (2.2.19-21) and as Hamlet himself indicates (2.2.274-76). Shakespeare never shows them as other than concerned for the health of their apparently mad friend and prince, Hamlet, and justly obedient to the king, Claudius (cf. Sahel 104). Though Hamlet believes they are in league with his traitorous uncle, he is tragically and culpably mistaken. He tests the Ghost's testimony by the mouse-trap but never doubts his own hasty condemnation of his longtime

friends. Further, the prince's request that the two be slain without a chance to make their peace with God is "horrible! most horrible!" (cf. 1.5.76-80). Far from repenting of his rash and cruel sentencing of them and the vicious manner in which he ordered it to be carried out, he declares to the amazed Horatio, "They are not near my conscience" (5.2.58) and delights in what Hughes properly deems their "gratuitous murder" (402).

So, too, his reaction to Ophelia's death shows him wanting. Never in the play has he shown sympathy for the woman he claims to love. Moreover, when Hamlet discovers that she is dead, he offends and attacks her mourning brother, who has returned to Denmark to bury his father, dead at Hamlet's hands. The prince's puerile excuse for fighting Laertes is that "the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow'ring passion" (5.2.79-80). In this same conversation Hamlet shocks his friend by bragging of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. So far, Hamlet is responsible for four deaths. He strikes the blow that kills Polonius, he orders the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his cruelty to Ophelia, orphaned at his hands, leads at least indirectly to her drowning (see also Belsey 148).

More deaths, of course, close the play. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, Hamlet—all die. The royal house of Denmark and the entire family of Polonius are obliterated. Had Claudius been imprisoned after the mousetrap scene, slain in the prayer scene, or in some other way apprehended, every tragic event that occurs during the course of the play would have been avoided: with Claudius imprisoned or dead, Gertrude would have learned forcefully how wrong her remarriage had been and could have been pricked and stung into repentance; Hamlet could not have mistaken Polonius for his uncle, so the old counselor would not have been killed; the occasion for rewriting the dispatch to order the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would not have occurred because Claudius would have written no dispatch; Ophelia would have kept her father, her senses, her life, and quite probably her beloved Hamlet; Laertes would have had no murdered father and no drowned sister to avenge and thus could not have died in seeking vengeance; no chalice would have been poisoned, so the queen would not have died; and, as no foil would have been envenomed, the prince would still live. Seven lives would have continued and Denmark would have once again enjoyed the rule of a King Hamlet.

And yet, despite the prince's tragic failing, Horatio bids him adieu nobly, and this ideal man also exonerates Hamlet of much of the guilt for his rash deeds by calling them "accidental judgments, casual slaughters . . . and forced cause" (5.2.367-68). In part, this is Horatio's

using his dead friend and prince according to Horatio's own bounty. And we welcome this, for the poignancy of Hamlet's own death by treachery rouses our sympathy.<sup>8</sup> Horatio's tribute is also, however, the playwright's reminder of how good Hamlet could have been and of the prince's partial return to majestic character in act 5, for in the final act we hear Hamlet frankly express to Horatio sorrow "that to Laertes I forgot myself" (5.2.75-76), and the prince graciously addresses Laertes before their fencing match, "Give me your pardon, sir, I have done you wrong" (5.2.205). Moreover, when dying, Hamlet and Laertes forgive each other, and the prince prays, "Heaven make thee free of [my death]" (5.2.314-17).<sup>9</sup> Also in act 5, Hamlet acknowledges (albeit with imperfect understanding) "a divinity that shapes our ends"<sup>10</sup> and with dignity he reminds Horatio, "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.199-200). From these words and from his dying actions—executing Claudius, preventing Horatio's suicide, and giving his "dying voice" to Fortinbras, thus acting in accord with his duty to restore stability to Denmark—we see that Hamlet's cess of majesty has partly abated, and that, "had he been put on," he might indeed have proved most royal (5.2.383-84).

The relationship between the prince's cruel deeds, which are the passionate sequel to the wicked choice made in the chapel, and his otherwise noble nature is provided by Hamlet's own, well-known words to Horatio in act 1 while they await the coming of the Ghost. Extrapolating from the damage done to Denmark's reputation by the gun and drum salute to the king's drinking, Hamlet continues:

So oft it chances in particular men,  
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,  
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty  
(Since nature cannot choose his origin),  
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens  
The form of plausible manners—that these men,  
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,  
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,  
As infinite as man may undergo,  
Shall in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault. The dram of evil  
Doth all the noble substance often doubt  
To his own scandal. (1.4.23-38)

This passage, of course, is often cited in discussions of Hamlet's fault. Campbell argues convincingly that, in it, Hamlet "moralize[s] the reputation which his countrymen have for being drunkards into the statement of the theory [of venial and mortal sin] that is, I believe, at the basis of Shakespearean tragedy" (120). Similarly, Wilson asserts that this speech comes as close as possible to "Shakespeare's own judgment upon Hamlet" (207). Sir Laurence Olivier, drawing upon Wilson, used the speech in its proper place and also as the play's prologue (Kliman 161). On the other hand, Andrews, following Alexander, holds that Hamlet's sole intention in this speech is to express concern with reputation and that therefore deriving any more general or serious meaning from the passage is inappropriate ("Stamp" 217). Yet this view neglects the need to distinguish between the character and the playwright, who is certainly free to let his characters speak lines that have a broader meaning than the character can apprehend.

The details and structure of the "defect" speech cue the audience to its aptness for Hamlet, and the content of the speech is distinctly moral. Wilson shows that "noble substance" is a reference to gold (208; cf. Grubb 188-203), clearly a princely substance. When Gertrude later likens Hamlet's madness to a pure mineral (4.1.24-27), Shakespeare lightly recapitulates the association of Hamlet with "noble substances." In the shift from the plural (1.4.23-30) to singular (1.4.31-38), Wilson continues, we see that "Hamlet is thinking of himself, or rather Shakespeare is asking us to think of him; and though at this stage of the play we do not see the point, the magician is plying us with suggestion" (207). Further, the magician shortly afterwards deftly recalls that suggestion in the rhetorical meanderings of Polonius about the cause of the "effect defective" in Hamlet's behavior (2.2.100-03).

One modern critical tendency is to deem a character's flaws justified if they are understandable. Such is evident in, for instance, Arthur Kirsch's defense of Hamlet on modern psychological grounds. Similarly, Andrews seems to move from the observation that the play's climax is dramatically satisfying to the notion that the audience must therefore approve of Hamlet's conduct ("Satisfactions"). Walley has shown, however, that "both Elizabethan tragedy and tragical theory are essentially moral" (797), and certainly it would be patronizing to think that the Elizabethan audience, because it had been stirred to sympathize with the dying prince, could neither then nor later assess his failings as well (see also Prosser 35).

The very structure of the "stamp of one defect" speech argues for the importance to the play of its general meaning, regardless of whether Hamlet is aware of that meaning (although I think he is).

Andrews would limit the meaning of the speech to a concern about the judgment, often ill-founded, that others make of us. Shakespeare's trio of examples here, however, progress from the morally neutral to the clearly wrong. First, men may be flawed by an aspect of "nature," such as "their birth, wherein they are not *guilty*" (italics mine); next Hamlet mentions the "o'ergrowth of some complexion," a condition produced by the interaction of nature and behavior; he concludes with "some habit," that is a pattern of behavior for which one is morally responsible. By noting that one is *not* guilty in one's birth, Shakespeare subtly reminds us that one *is* culpable for bad habits, because they are subject to the will. He has Hamlet return to this topic in the closet scene. The prince urges his mother, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not" (3.4.164). He then describes the psychology of developing a habit: the new choice, once made, lends "a kind of easiness" to repeating it the first time (3.4.170) and makes "the next more easy; / For use can almost change the stamp of nature" (3.4.171-72). Hamlet's understanding here is entirely consonant with his "stamp of one defect" speech and shows patently that he takes these ideas seriously.

Whether we assume that the complexion of melancholy occasioned by Hamlet's mourning breaks "down the pales and forts of [his] reason" and causes him to become too passionate and therefore subject to Fortune, as for instance Campbell argues (109-14), or, with Walley (797), view the prince's melancholy as itself an excess of passion caused by "some habit" of indulging his emotions too freely (which seems indicated by the nature of the speech he "chiefly love[s]" and has memorized), we are guided by Shakespeare in this passage to attribute Hamlet's vicious choice in the chapel and his wrongdoings to "the stamp of one defect." We are free, therefore, to condemn those actions of Hamlet that put him in apposition to "the hellish Pyrrhus," and also to view the prince's decline as a tragic lesson that even "nature's livery or fortune's star" may be undone by subjection to Fortune, when the wheel turns (see also Feibleman 150). What we are not free to do is to overlook the strength of the concluding image in this speech and thus deny that Hamlet has imbibed, to his own scandal, a tainting "dram" (cf. Wilson 224).

For the focus of the play is of course on the tragic prince. Claudius's role is, as this study has indicated, more important than is often recognized, and the juxtaposition of the two kinsmen in the quiet chapel reveals Claudius's wrongs most fully and shows Hamlet's as they become full blown. Here each of the two kinsmen unwittingly mimics Pyrrhus's fateful pause, for Claudius "stand[s] in pause" and fails to pray, and Hamlet stays his blow, deciding to seek his uncle's damnation.

Here, at the center of the play, Hamlet's subjection to Fortune shows itself most crucially; by being passion's slave, he subjects the wheel of state to the wheel of Fortune. How ironic that the sight of a kneeling man, apparently at prayer and repenting, does not rouse Hamlet's noble heart to use the traitor after Hamlet's own worth; after all, "The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (2.2.500-01). Instead, passionately cruel now, the prince determines to damn his uncle if he can, and from that "specific dereliction of duty" (Stoll 22), that one vicious choice, come all the tragic deaths of the play. On that decision, that focal point of moral choice, the broken wheel of state turns irrevocably from its mount and falls down and down until all the royal house of Denmark die.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Different scenes in act 3 of *Hamlet* have been interpreted as the crux of the play. Some critics see the decisive dramatic moment as the instant when the prince achieves necessary knowledge about his father's murder; J. Dover Wilson has argued that the mousetrap scene in 3.2 has proven to Hamlet that his uncle is guilty and revealed to Claudius that Hamlet suspects him. Now Hamlet "must act, or Claudius will act first" (201). Focusing again on knowledge, Pearl Hogrefe argues that the closet scene of 3.4 convinces Hamlet of his mother's innocence in his father's murder and thus frees him to concentrate on revenge against Claudius (192; cf. Walley 797). More important to the subsequent action of the play than the gaining of knowledge, however, are the moral choices made on the basis of that knowledge. (All quotations from the play in this article are from the Norton critical edition of *Hamlet* edited by Cyrus Hoy.)

<sup>2</sup>Vocal delivery and staging could readily serve to link, tonally and visually, speeches Shakespeare composed with parallels. For instance, descending pitch and similarities in the speaker's stance and gesture and in his staged relationship to the other actor in the scene could subtly reinforce similarities among speeches using the imagery of descent. Thus the Player might dramatically sweep his arm and voice downward while calling for the destruction of Fortune's wheel, and later Rosencrantz might woodenly sketch the same gesture; Ophelia's "quite, quite down" might descend in thirds, and so on, the actors thus appropriately dramatizing Shakespeare's verbal parallels by tone and gesture. Similarly, the Player's speech describing rugged Pyrrhus and Fortune's wheel (2.2.423-68) might be amply echoed in the prayer scene: for example, a splay-fingered gesture indicating Pyrrhus's being "o'ersized with coagulate gore" (2.2.433) might be recalled by Claudius when he contemplates his hand as if it were "thicker than itself with brother's blood" (3.3.44); the Player might mimic the freezing of Pyrrhus's sword, which "seemed i' th' air to stick" (2.2.450), and later Hamlet might use the same gesture when he moves to strike Claudius, but stops (3.3.74).

<sup>3</sup>An additional nuance to the parallelism of these wheel images lies in the source for the first one. The distinctive vocabulary of the image in the Player's speech is drawn, A. B. Taylor argues, from Arthur Golding's translation of *Metamorphoses* (1567).



The pertinent passage in Ovid's work describes Phaeton's fall in his father's chariot. Hamlet, in taking upon himself the divine prerogative of vengeance, is like Phaeton in presuming to drive the god Apollo's car; the prince, by his actions, subjects the wheel of state to the wheel of Fortune, and, in the resulting ruin, he, like Phaeton, is also destroyed.

<sup>4</sup>Prosser (esp. part 2) and Russell (66-73) have independently adduced credible evidence for interpreting the Ghost as demonic; they argue that the "Ghost" uses the truth of Claudius's guilt to deceive the prince into accepting the demon as his father's spirit and therefore obeying it; Ashley (88), however, differs from Prosser and Russell in ascribing to Shakespeare a pessimistic world view (91). If the Ghost is a demon, then Shakespeare has most fittingly introduced the imagery of descent in Horatio's warning, for the Ghost will tempt Hamlet to a fatal fall—not the merely physical one his friend fears, but a moral one.

<sup>5</sup>Andrews ("Shakespeare's *Hamlet*") finds Ophelia's words here "wonderfully apposite" in their blending of references to love and death. Through Shakespeare's punning use of "wheel" and "down" to continue the theme of the descent of the wheel of Fortune/state, he makes them startlingly apposite to the larger action of the play as well.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to recognizing that Hamlet could take such direct action during the prayer scene itself, we may also ask why the prince does not use more effectively the loyalty of the guards Marcellus and Bernardo, of Horatio, and of the "multitude" who love him so much that Claudius will fear to "put the strong law on [Hamlet]" even after the prince slays Polonius (4.3.3-4). Why does Hamlet not have some of these loyal men at or near the mousetrap so that he might regally and openly accuse Claudius of his guilt when Claudius is "marvellous disterpered" (3.2.279) and might speak unguardedly, demonstrating his guilt to others?

<sup>7</sup>A recent analysis praising Hamlet in the prayer scene requires a separate response because it seems to follow a new approach. Actually, like Alexander's treatment of the scene, it requires the writer to ignore Hamlet's own words. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., compares Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius in the prayer scene to the biblical David's decision not to kill the sleeping Saul. Veith asserts that each young man rightly abstains from killing "the Lord's anointed," preferring to leave just retribution to God. Certainly this is true of the biblical figure, but Hamlet is quite a different case. First, the play offers no evidence that the Danish prince ever considers his uncle "the Lord's anointed"; quite the contrary, he calls him "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" (2.2.546-47), and in the prayer scene itself, he flatly terms him "villain" (76). More important, Hamlet does not decide *not* to kill the king; he explicitly decides to kill him *when he can be sure of damning him*. This is no scruple against king-killing, but a vicious desire to go beyond human justice and to seek eternal as well as temporal punishment. In short, Hughes is precisely correct. Pursuing Veith's comparison, one should note that in the biblical account, when later a servant reports having killed Saul, David has the king-killer executed (2 Sam. 1:1-16). In contrast, Hamlet himself does kill Claudius, exclaiming, "Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane" (5.2.310). Completely opposite to Veith's thesis is that of Ashley, who holds that Hamlet becomes "devilish" (88) in the prayer scene.

<sup>8</sup>Some also see his end as a death in return for deaths. Bowers, for instance, finds the prince to be like Samson, "never wholly cast off for his tragic fault and in the end . . . honored by fulfilling divine plan in expiatory death" (749).

<sup>9</sup>Note, though, that Laertes, not Hamlet, initiated this exchange of forgiveness; indeed, Calderwood views the dying prince more severely than I and credits him with making only a "gesture of apology to Laertes" (43). Even taken as a true apology, however, this dying generosity is followed by a reminder, via the words of an ambassador

from England, that Hamlet has arranged the deaths of his school fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio at once clears Claudius of their deaths, and the audience is thus reminded that Hamlet condemned the two.

<sup>10</sup>Because Hamlet, who arrogantly presumes to damn his uncle in 3.3, acknowledges "a divinity that shapes our ends" in 5.2.10, many scholars, including Bowers and Calderwood (90), see him as significantly restored in character. Yet the prince's view of divinity is skewed and self-serving: though he justly ascribes to providence his discovery of the mandate ordering his death (5.2.13-24), he also declares "heaven ordinant" in his substituting a mandate ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (5.2.29-55), a substitution that appalls Horatio. And when Hamlet asks his friend to approve his actions, past and intended, note well that Horatio instead changes the subject (5.2.63-72).

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