The Case of Hamlet’s Conscience

by Catherine Belsey

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action

(Hamlet, III, i, 83–81)

The variety of possible meanings of “conscience” in the Elizabethan period has enabled its occurrence in Hamlet’s most familiar soliloquy to be widely interpreted (or, as I hope to suggest, misinterpreted) to mean “conscience” (OED, I) rather than “knowledge of right and wrong” (OED, II). For instance, most of the readily available editions of Hamlet gloss “conscience” here as “consciousness,” “self-consciousness” or “reflection.” There appears to be nothing in the lines themselves, however, to suggest this reading of the word. The apparent meaning of the text is fairly straightforward: the moral sense inhibits action by generating fear (of the consequences). The word “conscience” occurs several times in the rest of the play where it seems to need no gloss, and it refers consistently to the faculty which distinguishes between good and evil. Six lines before the beginning of this soliloquy Claudius has given the

1 Shakespeare references are to the one-volume edition of Peter Alexander (London, 1951).
3 II, ii, 601; IV, v, 129; IV, vii, 1; V, ii, 58; V, ii, 67; V, ii, 288.
audience the first clear indication of his guilt when he says, "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" (III, i, 50). The word is common in the rest of Shakespeare, and it tends generally to be used in the sense familiar from much Renaissance and later moral writing to mean the element in man which is "appointed of God to declare and put in execution his just judgement against sinners," a moral arbiter whose function is "to judge of the goodnes or badnes of thinges or actions."

Nor does the immediate context require any other reading of "conscience" here. "To be or not to be" is perhaps the most disputed of Hamlet's soliloquies, but it seems to me that the simplest interpretation offers the best starting-point, at least, for analysis, unless there is good reason to reject the obvious. Clearly Hamlet is posing a problem. It is characteristic of the play that the soliloquy is interrupted before he reaches a solution ("soft you now . . . ," 1. 88), but the question itself has been clearly stated: it is whether it is "nobler" to suffer or to take arms, to be passive or to act against the "sea of troubles" in which Hamlet finds himself. The hopelessness of taking arms against the sea perhaps suggests something of the nature of Hamlet's predicament. Opposition to Claudius is treason (III, iii, 1–23; V, ii, 315), and in plotting against him Hamlet risks his own death, as the rest of the play makes clear. To kill the king may put an end to his troubles in every sense: "And by opposing end them? To die. . . ." And if death were no more than sleep, he continues, very reasonably (and it is the most ordered and rational, the least hysterical of the soliloquies), it would surely be welcome, but men choose to go on living, however wretchedly, because of the fear of something after death, the unknown which includes (we may construe) the possibility of eternal punishment, damnation. "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . . ," conscience which forbids suicide to wretches, however intolerable their lives, and which also forbids a murder which is simultaneously regicide.

The widespread reading of "conscience" as "consciousness" must, then, reflect an understanding of Hamlet's meaning which is determined by a different interpretation of Hamlet's problem. It is, I think,
a vestige of the Romantic view of the play, which locates the central problem not in Hamlet's situation but in his character: the tender, delicate, sensitive prince, unequal to the sacred duty of revenge, endlessly inventing excuses to escape from the harsh reality of action. This Hamlet toys in his melancholy with the notion of suicide, but he is incapable even of that, and the "conscience" said to make a coward of him is the speculative tendency which continually supplies him with pretexts for inaction. But we can no longer accept that revenge is a sacred duty,7 and in rejecting this we must also reject the escapist Hamlet inhibited by a Romantic "consciousness." Once we do so, as Eleanor Prosser argues, "the final lines of the soliloquy can mean only one thing: that the inner voice of judgement, by warning us that a proposed action is damnable, prevents us from undertaking great enterprises and thus makes us cowards."8 We are then confronted by an altogether more vigorous Hamlet, struggling to determine the "nobler" course, but caught up in the moral ambiguity that what seems a great enterprise is forbidden by conscience.

Hamlet and Revenge is a most valuable and stimulating book, but in making its case against the sacred duty theory it seems to me to obscure some of the complexity of Hamlet's predicament. On the one hand, revenge is damnable; but, on the other, something is rotten in the state of Denmark. By Act III it is clear to the audience at least that Claudius is a villain; by Act IV Claudius is plotting to murder Hamlet; most of the court is spying on most of the rest of the court. The question of a recourse to law does not arise:9 the king is the source of law, and significantly Claudius twice insists that he will not bring Hamlet to "a public count" for the murder of Polonius (IV, iii, 3–4; IV, vii, 16 ff.). There is an irony available to the audience in his explanation: Hamlet's popularity would ensure that the king's arrows "Would have reverted to my bow again,/ But not where I have aimed them" (IV, vii, 23–4). The fountainhead of justice is poisoned. The time is out of joint; and Hamlet believes, as might any Renaissance prince, that he has a duty to set it right. It is difficult to imagine that an audience, however attentive to contemporary moralists, could admire a Hamlet who simply washed his hands of the whole matter. On the

7 The case seems to me to have been demolished conclusively by Eleanor Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge (Stanford, California, 1967). See also Nigel Alexander, Poison, Play and Duel: A Study in Hamlet (London, 1971).
contrary, he has two possible courses, both wrong—or perhaps both right. The question which confronts the audience as well as the prince is which is "nobler."

Eleanor Prosser and Fredson Bowers have both paid scholarly attention to the attitudes to revenge which prevailed both on and off the Elizabethan stage.¹⁰ My hypothesis is that we can gain further insight into the expectations and assumptions of Elizabethan audiences by examining their dramatic heritage of the analysis of inner conflict in the morality plays, and in particular the recurrent opposition in the allegorical drama between Conscience and Wrath. Hamlet has to make a moral choice, and in this he is the heir of Mankind and Everyman, the heroes of the morality tradition, which dominated the popular stage in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and which consistently analyzed, with varying degrees of subtlety, the processes of ethical conflict. It is no longer necessary, I think, to make out a case for the familiarity of Shakespeare and his contemporaries with this tradition. Scholarship now recognizes that elements of the morality pattern were successively transformed by Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson.¹¹

Clearly, the conflicts dramatized in the moralities were not confined to the stage. These plays have their roots in sermons, and the sermons in turn reflect the prevailing concerns of the Christian tradition. But while in one sense it is a mistake to isolate drama, in another sense there is a special relationship between plays and other plays. The prevalence of particular theatrical conventions in given periods implies that the previous experience of the audience in the theater itself has an influence on their expectations, their beliefs about what is plausible, and their willingness to accept certain relationships and connections without detailed exposition by the dramatist each time they recur.¹² Parallels between Hamlet's ethical doubts and the moral uncertainties of his allegorical predecessors make available to an...
Elizabethan audience certain conceptual patterns which are not so readily apparent in the twentieth century. Hamlet's "conscience" might well evoke a personified abstraction with a long history on the stage: if so, the role of Conscience in the morality tradition would have become part of the connotative meaning of the word in a play about moral doubt. Parallels with Wrath, familiar not only as a sin condemned by the preachers but also as a strikingly vigorous dramatic character, would influence the audience's response to Hamlet's vengeful soliloquies. In addition, however, the doubts and perplexities of Hamlet's conscience might evoke the non-dramatic and altogether newer interest in the Protestant science of casuistry. William Perkins's widely influential works were the first in what was to become a central field of interest for seventeenth-century divines. A Case of Conscience was first published in 1592 and A Discourse of Conscience in 1596. The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience was published posthumously in 1606. Casuistry was concerned with offering the faithful a way of resolving doubts about moral action, particularly in cases of conflicting moral claims, by appealing to higher general principles. Perkins, of course, did not invent it. Casuistry had its roots in medieval Catholicism and was to become the special province of the Jesuits. Immediately after the Reformation there was a reaction against a practice so closely associated with the confessional and with the moral authority of the pope, but it rapidly became clear that the doctrine of sola fide only intensified the need for clear moral principles and ways of resolving practical ethical problems. The writings of Perkins were the first examples of Protestant casuistry to be available in print, and both A Case and A Discourse might have been familiar to the first audiences of Hamlet.

I propose, therefore, to discuss the treatment of revenge in Hamlet in the light of these two traditions, in order to extend the context for our understanding of the full complexity of the play. I shall first

13 For non-dramatic treatments of Wrath which bear some resemblance to the stage figure, see Spenser's Furov and Occasion (The Faerie Queene, II, iv, 3–15) and George Wither "Of Choller" (1613), Juvenilia, 1622, pp. 69–75. See also Samuel C. Chew, The Pilgrimage of Life (New Haven and London, 1962), pp. 79–115, esp. pp. 111–13.


suggest that there are parallels between the casuistry of Perkins and
the morality tradition as popular treatments of cases of conscience,
and then go on to consider the analysis in the moralities of the role of
Conscience in discouraging mindless "resolution" or Wrath. I shall
then turn specifically to the problem of revenge in order to suggest
that while a linguistic analysis of Hamlet supports Eleanor Prosser's
contention that private revenge is regarded as a sin, there remains the
public problem of Claudius's crimes, and here conscience confronts a
new and more complex difficulty. Here, too, both the morality tradi-
tion and Perkins seem to me to provide a context for Hamlet, but a
context which points to a reading of the play as ultimately am-
biguous, proposing not an unequivocal moral statement but a case of
conscience for the consideration of the audience.

I

For Perkins (as indeed for Aquinas) conscience is aligned with the
understanding as opposed to the will. The understanding rules the
whole man, and controls the will, which is associated with the pas-
sions, "as ioy, sorrow, loue, hatred &c." Corrupt passions blind the
moral judgment, and one major impediment to a good conscience
is "vnstaied and vnmortified affections, which if they have their
swinge, as wild horses ouerturne the chariot with men and all,
so they ouerturne & ouer carrie the judgement & conscience of
man." Unimpeded, the conscience arrives at a judgment "by a kind
of reasoning or disputing, called a practicall syllogisme." Perkins
demonstrates the method by applying it to a number of cases, pro-
ceeding by means of a series of arguments, followed by answers or
objections to them, to establish the truth. His discussion of revenge
(see below, p 000) was not published until 1606; so there are no
grounds for supposing that it had any influence on Hamlet; but the
work of Perkins is evidence of a contemporary interest in cases of
conscience.

Perkins writes clearly and simply and his works are addressed to
the laity. Protestant casuistry was designed to be popular and prac-
tical, to provide a methodology of holiness which would equip all
men to solve individual moral problems in all spheres of life, eco-

17 Ibid., p. 86.
18 Ibid., p. 168.
19 Ibid., p. 83.
nomic and political as well as theological. In this it has much in common with the morality plays, traditionally concerned with moral problems, presenting in dialogue between vices and virtues, or more often between vices and the central figure, a series of arguments and objections which lead the audience to the moral truth. The doubts and perplexities of mankind are the central theme of the moralities: the vices consistently put forward false but plausible arguments which alert the audience to the kinds of sophistries employed by the devil. In Wager’s *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (c. 1559–70), for example, Covetous and his vice-lieutenants persuade Worldly Man to make money in order to be charitable.20 Worldly Man succumbs to this argument and in his avarice at once forgets his motive. Here a case of conscience has been dramatized. Perkins deals with the same problem in *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*. Discussing how far a man may with a good conscience seek wealth, he concludes that he is entitled to make sure that he has enough for his needs. He then lists the objections to this position which might be adduced by a covetous man, including the obligation to “doe good to the poore, to the Church, to the common wealth.” To this Perkins in his own voice answers firmly, “We may not doe euill that good may come therof.”21

Perkins leaves his readers in no doubt about the proper solutions to his cases of conscience. The morality dramatists, too, label their vice-figures clearly so that the audience is aware of the ironies of the hero’s fall. Irony alone, however, leaves open the possibility of misinterpretation, and usually the spokesmen of virtue make the moral position clear beyond all possibility of confusion. Among these spokesmen, Conscience personified has a recurrent and fairly specific role in the moralities, which illuminates, I believe, the case of conscience confronting Hamlet.

II

In *The Castle of Perseverance*, the first complete extant morality play, conscience is not separately personified. Instead, man’s virtuous impulses are represented by the Good Angel in alliance with the seven Virtues, who argue strenuously against the Seven Deadly Sins, and tell Mankind how to behave. The Good Angel’s single recurrent con-
cern is the fate of Mankind’s soul after death. He warns the hero that this life is a brief interlude in which he will determine his eternal future. To deter him from sin he urges, “Man, ðynke on ðyn endinge day/ Whanne ðou schalt be closyd vndyr clay” (ll. 407–8), and this insistence on the remembrance of death and the possibility of damnation is the culminating moral message of the play as a whole:

To saue ȝou from synnyng
Evyr at þe begynnynge
Thynke on ȝoure last endynge!
(ll. 3646–8)

The World and the Child (soon after 1500) closely resembles The Castle of Perseverance in terms of plot and structure, but the cast is reduced to four speaking parts. The hero describes how the World has introduced him to the seven kings, who represent the seven deadly sins, and Conscience then appears on the stage to persuade him, for the sake of his salvation, to reject the seven kings. Conscience here combines the functions of the Good Angel and the seven Virtues in The Castle of Perseverance. Having restored the hero to virtue, Conscience leaves him with the advice, “In what occupation that ever ye be,/ Always, or ye begin to think on the ending” (ll. 482–3). The imperative, here as in Perseverance, is “think. . . .” Hamlet is deterred from action by “thinking too precisely on the event” (IV, iv, 41). If “event” here means “outcome” (OED, 3) or “ending,” Hamlet is following the advice of the morality Conscience. Thought, particularly the thought of death and what follows it, inhibits resolution.

A play which is much closer to Shakespeare’s own period, but which is very clearly in the morality tradition, offers a further parallel. In Nathaniel Woodes’s The Conflict of Conscience, printed in 1581, Philologus is persuaded by the vices to abandon his Protestant convictions and become a Catholic. As he is on the point of abjuring his faith, Spirit urges him not to betray his conscience (ll. 1462 and 1484). Philologus acknowledges that his conscience pricks him (l. 1488) and at once Conscience himself appears, saying “Alas, alas thou woefull wight, what fury doth thee move/ So willingly to cast thyself into consuming fire?” (ll. 1502–3). He goes on to describe the

24 Ibid.
pains of hell. Here too Conscience is urging the hero to think of the effect his action will have on the fate of his soul after death.

*Apius and Virginia*, printed in 1575, provides a more specific parallel with *Hamlet*, introducing an association between conscience and "cowardice," the Vice's name for the fear of damnation. Encouraged by the Vice, Haphazard, who personifies a spirit of recklessness, or ignoring the consequences of action, Apius gives way to lust for Virginia. Before he plunges into sin, however, Conscience and Justice "come out of him" (l. 500 S.D.)\(^\text{25}\) bearing a lamp and a sword. Apius hesitates:

> But out I am wounded, how am I deuided?  
> Two states of my life, from me are now glided,  
> For Consience he pricketh me contempned,  
> And Justice saith, Judgement wold haue me condemned:  
> Consience saith crueltye sure will detest me:  
> And Justice saith, death in thende will molest me,  
> And both in one sodden me thinkes they do crie,  
> That fier etemall, my soule shall destroy.

Haphazard is contemptuous: "Why these are but thoughts man? why fie for shame fie" (l. 510). Like Hamlet, he scorns the pale cast of thought and urges, "Then care not for consience, the worth of a pin" (l. 516). Apius accepts his advice, asserting that he is no coward: "Let Consience grope, and judgement craue, I will not shrink one whit" (l. 524).

Conscience, thought, and cowardice are here aligned exactly as they are in Hamlet's speech. The argument of the Vice that obedience to conscience is cowardice is traditional. The Vice of Wapull's *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, printed in 1576, is called Courage. One of his victims, a landlord called Greediness, is reproached by his conscience as a result of a sermon he has heard (l. 326).\(^\text{26}\) Courage mocks his cowardice: "Why, doltish patch, art thou so unwise/ To quail for the saying of such a knave?" (ll. 330–1). In the same way the murderers hired to kill Clarence in Shakespeare's *Richard III* are momentarily impeded by conscience.\(^\text{27}\) The Second Murderer says that Clarence will sleep until the Last Judgment, and then suddenly hesitates:

\(^{26}\) Schell and Schuchter, *op. cit*.
\(^{27}\) The parallel with *Hamlet* is noted by Prosser, p. 170.
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2 Murd. The urging of that word judgement hath bred a kind of remorse in me.
1 Murd. What, art thou afraid?
2 Murd. Not to kill him, having a warrant; but to be damn’d for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.
1 Murd. I thought thou hadst been resolute.

(I, iv, 107–13)

The fear of damnation inhibits resolution. The second Murderer recovers gradually. The last dregs of conscience are dispelled by the thought of the reward. He is resolute again and conscience is finally dismissed: “I’ll not meddle with it—it makes a man a coward” (I, iv, 133–4). The episode is a caricature (in advance) of Richard’s own terrors on the eve of Bosworth—“O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” (V, iii, 179). When Hamlet says, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,” he is evoking a tradition in which Mankind, who represents “us all,” fears to commit a sin because he thinks of the eternal consequences. Hamlet’s conscience causes him to hesitate before carrying out the Ghost’s ethically over-simplified command.

The play’s other revengers, of course, are more resolute. Pyrrhus, avenging his father’s death by killing King Priam, hesitates apparently only to rouse new vengeance (II, ii, 470–82). At the beginning of

28 “Resolution” is not necessarily heroic in Shakespeare. The word often seems to convey the desperate courage of a criminal rather than the determination of a hero: see I Henry IV, I, ii, 31 and 58; King John, IV, i, 35; Macbeth, IV, i, 79; Measure for Measure, II, i, 12; Othello, V, i, 5. There may be an ironic parallel between Hamlet’s resolution which calls for an enterprise of great pitch and moment and Fortinbras’s “lawless resolutes” who are “shark’d up” for “some enterprise! That hath a stomach in’t” (I, i, 98–100). The language here (“shark’d up,” “lawless”) does not invite unqualified admiration for Fortinbras, the man of action.


30 This, the traditional role of conscience, is not, of course, confined to the stage, though it is very recurrent there, perhaps because the suspense created when Conscience interrupts the hero as he is on the verge of action is particularly powerful as drama.
the play Fortinbras is advancing on Denmark to avenge his father with a band of "lawless resolutes" (I, i, 98), and later, having been deflected from this course, he finds a new outlet for his martial energies in endangering the lives of twenty thousand men "for an eggshell," "a fantasy and trick of fame" (IV, iv, 54, 61). Laertes, believing that Claudius has killed his father, unhesitatingly rouses the rabble and bursts into the palace. He is undeterred by thoughts of treason, conscience, damnation:

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be reveng'd
Most throughly for my father.

It is because Hamlet's ethics are more subtle, because he sees the ambiguity of his position and is anxious to know which course is "nobler" that he is the hero of the play.

III

The recurrent morality figure of Wrath is also, I suggest, relevant to the audience's response to Hamlet. Wrath is a vice-figure who consistently urges his victims to mindless and unhesitating belligerence. In The Castle of Perseverance he instructs Mankind, "Be also wroth as thou were wode" (as if you were mad, l. 1088); "Be redy to spylle mans blod" (l. 1092). He insists that Mankind should react at once to an injury: "Whoso þe wrethe, be fen or flode,/ Loke þou be avengyd 3erne" (at once, ll. 1090–1); "Anon take venjaunce, man, I rede" (l. 1097). Claudius gives Laertes the same advice: "What we would do,/ We should do when we would" (IV, vii, 118–19). Hamlet's delay is to his credit.

In The World and the Child, when Conscience tries to persuade him to forsake the seven kings, the hero is particularly reluctant to abandon Wrath, "For he is in every deed doughty,/ For him dare no man rout" (ll. 393–4). He believes that Wrath is synonymous with courage, and that any other mode of behavior is cowardice.31 Conscience

31 Cf. Lady Macbeth, n. 29 above. See also Joseph Hall, who calls duelling a "conceit of false fortitude" (Epistles, vol. II, 1608), in Works, ed. Peter Hall (London, 1837), VI, 210; Wither, "Of Choller": "there may be many doe suppose,/ It is a signe of courage" (p. 73); and Wither, "Of Man": revenge is "That cruell Ruffian, that in vaine doth strie,/ His Off-spring from true Valour to deriue" (ibid., p. 27).
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prevails, however, but when he leaves the stage, Folly appears in order to tempt the hero back to sin. His first action is to challenge him to a fight (II. 538 ff.). Manhood resists because Conscience forbids fighting; Folly accuses him of cowardice; Manhood becomes very angry and fights to prove that he is not afraid; and thereafter he submits to Folly who leads him to other forms of sin. Fighting is associated with Folly, irrationality: Conscience prescribes patience, but patience is associated by the Vice with cowardice. Hamlet, like Manhood, is the victim of antithetical impulses. Driven to rage by excitements of his reason and his blood, he is ready to call his hesitation cowardice, a "craven scruple" (IV, iv, 40). The moralities would suggest that the noun "scruple" is at least as telling as the adjective.32

The same sort of network of associations occurs in Wager’s The Longer Thou Livest, The More Fool Thou Art, a morality of the 1560's. The hero, Moros (fool), is associated from his childhood with Wrath who, conventionally enough, calls himself “Manhood” to delude the protagonist into associating him with tough, manly courage.33 Wrath

32 A later analogue for Hamlet appears in George Wither’s satire, “Of Revenge” (1613, op. cit., pp. 56–68). The poem is influenced by the stage tradition, as the opening makes clear: “Roome for Reuenge: hee’s no Comedian / That acts for pleasure; but a grim Tragedian” (p. 56). Wither warns the revenger of the pangs of conscience he will suffer:

For say thou scape the rigour of the Law,
Thy wounded conscience will have many a law,
Fear's thou shalt passe by day, and then at night
Dreams all of terour thy scar'd soul affright.... (p. 57)

If these lines offer something of a parallel to the “To be or not to be” speech, some lines later there is a passage even more reminiscent of Hamlet:

But now (me thinks) I heare our Hacksters tell me,
With thundering words, as if their breath would fell me,
I am a Coward, if I will not fight.
True, Caualleros, you haue spoken right:
And, if upon good earmes you urge me to it,
I haue both strength and heart enough to do it. . . . (p. 58)

Cf. Hamlet II, ii, 565–9; IV, iv, 39–46. Of course, some men think “bloody actions” honorable (p. 58), but in truth revenge is “Brutish” (p. 61), ranting (p. 67), the fruit of uncontrolled passion (p. 62). Only patient endurance of injury permits the conscience to rest in safety (pp. 64–5). In the following poem ("Of Choller") it is made clear that revenge proceeds from unbridled wrath (p. 69). The parallels with Hamlet may be purely coincidental: if so, they provide further evidence of a conjunction of ideas common in the period. If, on the other hand, they spring from a half-remembered performance of the play, they show how Wither at least interpreted the relationship between wrath and conscience in Hamlet.

33 For other instances of Wrath disguised as Manhood, see Spivack, op. cit., pp. 155–60.
blusters and rants, and teaches Moros to do the same. He does not pause to discuss the issue: "I am Wrath, soon kindled and set on fire./ Speak one word and I will break thy bones" (ll. 1234–5). Moros has great difficulty with the books of his virtuous counsellors, but he learns readily from Wrath:

**Wrath.** Like a man ever face out the matter, Stick not blood, heart, and wounds to swear; But suffer no man with thee to clatter, Anon let him have a blow on the ear. Behold, here I give thee a good sword And a dagger thyself to defend; Draw thy dagger at every word, And say that thy blood thou wilt spend.

**Moros.** Bold, quoth he! I pray you keep my book, These weapons have set me on a fire. *Flourish with your sword.*

How say you? like a man do I not look? To be fighting now is all my desire. . . .

(ll. 826–37)

In old age Moros becomes rich and exploits his tenants. One of these, a pathetic figure called People, ventures to complain. As he goes out, Moros enters, showing how well he still retains Wrath's lesson:

**Enter furiously with a grey beard.**

Where is he? Blood, sides, heart and wounds! A man I am now, every inch of me. I shall teach the knave to keep his bounds . . .

*Fight alone.* (ll. 1743–52)

He is still ranting and brandishing his sword when God's Judgment comes on to put an end to his career. Moros, the recurrent figure of Wrath, as well as Sturdiness in *The Trial of Treasure* (1567) all represent the bombast and violence of the passionate, unthinking impulse to avenge a wrong.

The opposition between Wrath and Conscience is parallel to the opposition which is reflected in Hamlet's soliloquies. One part of his nature is committed, because he loved his father and because he is outraged by his mother's incest and his uncle's villainy, to passionate,

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34 R. Mark Benbow, ed., *op. cit.*

35 Sturdiness is a companion of Lust, the reprobate protagonist. Sturdiness can neither read nor write but he excels at swearing and fighting (Robert Dodsley, *Old Plays*, ed. W. C. Hazlitt [London, 1874], III, 270).
mindless vengeance. That is the Hamlet who would outrant the Player, "Make mad the guilty and appal the free" (II, ii, 557); who castigates himself with his own inaction and calls it unmanly cowardice (II, ii, 565–83); who falls a-cursing like Moros, "Bloody, bawdy villain . . . ." (II, ii, 575); and who asserts, like Wrath, that "rightly to be great/ Is . . . greatly to find quarrel in a straw" (IV, iv, 53–5). The language of these passionate, self-castigating soliloquies is often crude and blustering, and the values they express fall little short of those of Pyrrhus, drenched with blood, "roasted in wrath and fire" (II, ii, 455), appalling Hecuba (and the audience) with his violence. The imagery of vengeance is gross: "Now could I drink hot blood" (III, ii, 380); "I should have fatted all the region kites/ With this slave's offal" (II, ii, 574–5). Revenge belongs to

the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world.

(III, ii, 378–80)

Revenge entails the "lawless resolutes" of Fortinbras, the poisoned sword of Laertes, and above all Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius while he is praying because this would be "hire and salary, not revenge" (III, iii, 79). It is crude, extravagant, and wildly in excess of justice.

Wrath always exceeds justice: that is its nature in the morality plays and, of course, in the Christian tradition which is their motive force. In The Longer Thou Livest it is clear that People does not deserve Moros's threats. But Claudius presents a more complex problem. If revenge is evil, so are Claudius's crimes; and analysis of the play makes it hard to believe that the audience, however influenced by the morality tradition, or by non-dramatic moral and political pleas for patience or for civil order, would endorse the action of a hero who put the episode of the Ghost behind him and returned to Wittenberg.36 Hamlet is the victim not simply of temptation to evil but of a moral dilemma, and this is central to our understanding of the play as a whole.

IV

It is this ambiguity above all which has given rise to so much of the critical disagreement about Hamlet's moral obligations, the meaning

of the "To be or not to be" speech, and the significance of "con-
science." If we examine the linguistic collocations of revenge and its
cognate forms (including vengeance) in the play, it becomes clear that
there is no need to go outside the text itself for evidence of this
ambiguity: Hamlet is prompted to his revenge by heaven and hell (II,
ii, 580).

Hell, sin, and darkness seem the dominant collocations of revenge
(III, i, 122; III, ii, 248; IV, v, 128–33); but Hamlet believes himself to be
prompted by heaven too. One possible source of this conviction is the
association of revenge with honor, and this connection is made in the
text. The sight of Fortinbras's army seems designed to spur his dull
revenge (IV, iv, 33), to incite him to emulate the honorable behavior
of this "delicate and tender prince" (l. 48). And yet the reasoning of
this speech, as is widely recognized, seems curiously self-consuming:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,
When honour's at the stake. (ll. 53–6)

The missing negative of line 54 should give us pause: the line as it
stands receives a good deal of support from the rest of the speech
even though it runs counter to the ostensible pattern of reasoning.
Fortinbras's behavior is as absurd as it is heroic and the language fails
to persuade us that the "eggshell" (l. 53), the "fantasy and trick of
fame" (l. 61) can justify "the imminent death of twenty thousand
men" (l. 60). Nor, I think, is this response entirely anachronistic.
Within the previous four or five years Elizabethan audiences had
watched the comedy of Hotspur uncontrollably talking too much,
largely about honor and revenge (1 Henry IV, I, iii, 130–258), and had
heard Falstaff more pithily put the opposite case at the other end of
the same play (V, i, 126–40). Hotspur here appears heroic but ridicu-
lous, Falstaff a coward with common sense. Honor is as morally
ambiguous as revenge itself: it certainly has little to do with heaven.

The real source of Hamlet's conviction of heaven's interest in re-
venge is filial love, endorsed by nature and by the commandments.
This is the basis of the Ghost's appeal:

_Ghost._ If thou didst ever dear father love—
_Ham._ O God!
_Ghost._ Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

(I, v, 23–5)
The sequence *dear father love—God—revenge* reflects this trio of ideas. The commonest of the collocations with *revenge* and its cognate forms is *father*, which occurs with nine of the sixteen instances of *revenge*. In three of the nine cases *father* is qualified by *dear* and in two cases *revenge* is linked with *love*. Revenge thus appears as a manifestation of filial piety, not as a duty but as an act of love, and the contradiction between this and the hellish nature of the deed of revenge is the origin of Hamlet's dilemma:

I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell. . . .  

(II, ii, 579–80)

His reaction to the Ghost, it is commonly noted, is immediate, intuitive, and passionate:

that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge. (I, v, 29–31)

"Meditation" is an unexpected word here. If it simply means "thought" (*OED* 1, b), it reinforces the breathless speed of the image ("wings," "swift," "sweep"). If, on the other hand, it evokes a religious experience (*OED*, 2), it conveys a visionary intensity in Hamlet's response. Perhaps both meanings are present. In either case, this parallel of the revenger with a lover suggests heroic passion.

But passion, as Perkins says, may blind moral judgment, and the play's counter-images of the passionate revenger confirm the revulsion engendered by the language of Hamlet's vengeful speeches. The "hellish" Pyrrhus seeking the king who murdered his father leads the audience to feel relief that for Hamlet the native and bloody hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. However "native" (natural) the impulse, the deeds of the revenger repel us with their violence and lack of restraint. The exchanges between Laertes and Claudius in Act IV show clearly and in sequence a process which in Hamlet is complex and interrupted by events, doubts, plans, and finally conscience. The italics are mine:

*King.*  
Laertes, was your father dear to you?  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart?  
*Laer.*  
Why ask you this?  
*King.*  
Not that I think you did not love your father. . . .  

(IV, vii, 106–10)
There is no need to challenge Laertes in this way. Here and in their earlier conversation he has shown himself apt enough for revenge. But the response to this stimulus is violent in excess of his previous feelings:

`King. what would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son?
Laer. To cut his throat i' th' church.`

(IV, vii, 124–6)

Claudius’s reply points to one of the most important features of revenge as it is presented in *Hamlet*:

`No place indeed should murder sanctuarize;
Revenge should have no bounds. (IV, vii, 127–8)`

Nor is this merely the view of the corrupt king. The prayer scene, understood literally and not as a rationalization of Hamlet’s inaction, provides a direct parallel. Claudius, if not in the church, is at prayer, and Hamlet rejects the opportunity to cut his throat, not out of respect for the situation but because revenge demands a deed of greater horror.

Hamlet himself does not at any point explicitly analyze his inner conflict in terms of its ethical ambiguity, and John Lawlor, who recognizes that “we see and reject the whole scale of values which bloody resolution entails,” suggests accordingly that the source of Hamlet’s tragedy is his failure to recognize his own aversion to revenge.37 But Lawlor argues that “the centre of interest in Shakespeare’s play is not in the ethic of revenge, but in the over-burdened human agent.”38 This judgment seems to me to propose a false distinction: our interest in the problems of Hamlet cannot be separated from our interest in the ethics of *Hamlet*. Elizabethan audiences, accustomed to a drama which was thoroughly and overtly ethical, would not necessarily need a more explicit statement from Hamlet himself when the imagery and action of the play as a whole so emphasize the horror of revenge.

But if the play finally rejects the ethic of private revenge, there remains the public and political problem of Claudius, whose crimes

38 Ibid., p. 71.
increase while Hamlet wrestles with his conscience. By Act V, with more evidence of Claudius's guilt before him, Hamlet is able to formulate the question differently:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother;
Popped in between the election and my hopes;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (V, ii, 63–70)

It is still a question of conscience but the terms are reversed. Revenge is not mentioned: the problem is to prevent further villainy, and in this context conscience seems to demand action, an enterprise of great pitch and moment, while it is passivity which seems damnable. The speech is prompted by Horatio's outraged reaction to Hamlet's account of Claudius's plot: "Why, what a king is this!" Horatio's response is also, I think, the audience's: Claudius is not a fit ruler.39

A similarly complex problem, unusual in the early drama, confronts the hero of Pickering's Horestes (1567), the first English revenge play.40 The play's central concern is the question whether it is right for Horestes (Orestes) to avenge his father by killing his mother. At his first appearance Horestes reveals his uncertainty about his moral duty (ll. 200–16).41 Pity for his mother contends with piety towards his father, and he concludes with an appeal to the gods to resolve the problem:

shall I reuenged be
Of good Kynge Agememnones death, ye godes declare to me
Or shall I let the, adulitres dame, styll wallow in her sin?
(ll. 214–16)

The question is whether to endure Clytemnestra's villainy or to take arms against it. The Vice, Revenge, appears at once, calling himself

39 Claudius's murder of Old Hamlet, his attempted murder of the hero, and his vice-like corruption of Laertes can hardly fail to prompt a response of this kind from the audience. The play is here consistent with the orthodox Elizabethan political theory that the king is bound by the law (see C. H. and K. George, The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation [Princeton, 1961], pp. 221 ff.).

40 Eleanor Prosser discusses Horestes (pp. 41–4), but I think she underestimates its ambiguity, believing that revenge is presented unequivocally as "a shocking crime" (p. 42).

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Courage, and claiming to be a messenger of the gods. Horestes is quick to respond to his persuasions: “My thinkes I fele corrage prouokes, my wil for ward againe” (I. 249). He resists Dame Nature who pleads against matricide (II. 487–536), and executes Clytemnestra. So far the moral position seems clear—and conventional: Horestes is deluded by the Vice into believing that vengeance is synonymous with courage. But the ethical debate is not confined to the mind of Horestes. When the hero consults Idumeus (Idomeneus) about his plans, the king summons Counsel, a figure of some gravity, who urges that murderers should not escape punishment lest others should be encouraged to imitate them (II. 311–14). Later, he repeats this argument for revenge as a deterrent, adding that it is right for Horestes to execute his mother, since a corrupt ruler sets a bad example to the people and should be removed (II. 617–38). After the event, however, Fame compares the cruel Horestes to Nero (II. 1072–6), and Menelaus condemns his ruthlessness (II. 1134–51). Nestor, on the other hand, maintains that his action was just, and in accordance with the will of the gods (II. 1172–86). Menelaus concludes that he too would have been avenged, but he would have spared his mother (II. 1188–91), a comment which seems to summarize the ambivalence of the whole play. It is then decided that Horestes shall marry the daughter of Menelaus, and the new King reappears, accompanied by his Nobles, Commons, Truth, and Duty, clearly a just and worthy ruler. Revenge is driven out, as the Vice always is when good triumphs, but here there is a feeling that it is because he has accomplished his mission. It is by no means clear whether Horestes is prompted to his revenge by the gods or by the Vice.

Perkins would certainly have viewed the problems of both Horestes and Hamlet as cases of conscience. As far as revenge itself is concerned, the moral position is perfectly clear: violence for immediate self-defense in the absence of the magistrate is permissible; but deliberate and delayed revenge arising from “prepensed malice” is sinful in all circumstances, whatever disgrace patience may incur in

42 Counsel’s advice seems to be in accord with orthodox Elizabethan theory: a rightful ruler must not be resisted, but a usurper ought to be removed from office by the true heir, especially if he has attained his power through murder. See W. A. Armstrong, “The Elizabethan Conception of the Tyrant,” RES, XXII (1946), 161–81. In the case of Hamlet it is not entirely clear, of course, whether Claudius is a usurper. Denmark’s elective monarchy intensifies the ambiguities of Hamlet’s position. See E. A. J. Honigmann, “The Politics in Hamlet and ‘The World of the Play,’” Hamlet, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 5 (London, 1963), 129–47.
the eyes of the world. There is one exception, however. When Moses slew the Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-12), he "took upon him publike ruuenge in this action, as a Magistrate, and not priuate, as a priuate man. . . . Beeing then a publicke person, his example can prooue nothing" concerning private revenge. If by Act V to kill Claudius has become "perfect conscience," this may be because it is now clear that Claudius has wronged not only Hamlet but also the state. But Perkins gives no further guidance on the distinction between public and private revenge. He does add, however, that wrath may be righteous anger when the offense is an injury to God as well as to an individual. And elsewhere Perkins makes a comment which reveals that he would have recognized the full ambiguity of Hamlet's position. He is discussing the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," and after explaining that this is to be interpreted widely, he adds, "Againe, this law is as well transgressed by not killing, when the law chargeth to kill, and by pardoning the punishment due unto murther, as by killing when we should not." To uphold the law Hamlet has to break it, and Perkins offers no opinion which would further help to resolve his problem.

Like most people (and certainly like the morality dramatists), Hamlet characteristically thinks in antitheses, organizing his world in terms of good and evil, right and wrong: "Hyperion to a satyr" (I, ii, 140); "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,/ And batten on this moor?" (II, iv, 66–7); "To be or not to be. . . ." His address to the Ghost reflects this mode of thinking:

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. . . .

(I, iv, 40–2)

The Ghost must be either an honest ghost, or the devil, abusing him to damn him. Claudius represents the blurring of these antitheses. His first speech shows how he obliterates them:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as ’twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

(I, ii, 8–14)

44 Ibid., p. 504.
He is evidence "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I, v, 108). He addresses Hamlet as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (I, ii, 64), blurring the sharp distinction between the two relationships. Hamlet immediately—and sharply—disentangles them again: "A little more than kin, and less than kind." What is intolerable in Hamlet's situation is that it cannot be reduced to the familiar antitheses of right and wrong: conscience both demands and opposes action.

It is generally agreed that Hamlet behaves differently in Act V after the voyage to England. He knows now that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (V, ii, 10), and that "there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V, ii, 212–13). If to kill Claudius is "perfect conscience," then heaven will be ordinant: "the readiness is all" (V, ii, 215–16). When the moment comes, Claudius has given adequate evidence of "further evil": he is to blame for the deaths of Gertrude and Laertes, as well as Hamlet himself. Hamlet acts without hesitation, and without the blustering wrath of the earlier soliloquies: "The point envenom'd too! Then, venom, to thy work" (V, ii, 313–14). We can assume that he is not a coward since the play accords him a soldier's funeral; and that his conscience was right in the end we may suppose from Horatio's elegy: "Good night, sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (V, ii, 351–2). The pattern evokes the medieval moralities where Mankind struggles with his conscience and is finally (in most cases) saved. At the end of The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind's soul is conducted to the throne of God in full view of the audience; at the end of Everyman, Knowledge, who has functioned very like conscience, stands on the brink of the hero's grave and hears the angels sing as Everyman's soul is received into heaven.

It would be reassuring to think that this apparently straightforward conclusion resolved the ambiguities of Hamlet. On the contrary, however, I believe that we remain ambivalent to the end. The Ghost's instructions cannot be obeyed. On the one hand, he commands Hamlet to punish the villain and purge the court:

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
(I, v, 25);

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
(I, v, 82–3)

But on the other hand he urges, "howsomever thou pursuest this act,/ Taint not thy mind" (I, v, 84–5). The play as a whole suggests that Hamlet’s mind is tainted—not in the sense that he is mad, but that he is inevitably corrupted by his mission. Hamlet is as ethically scrupulous as it is possible to be, but symbolically he finally kills Claudius with the poisoned rapier and the poisoned wine.\(^47\) The king’s to blame in both cases; but Hamlet uses Claudius’s own weapons, the characteristic weapons of the revenger. In the same way, Hamlet is in no sense responsible for the situation in which he finds himself, but he becomes tainted by it, killing Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, indirectly, Ophelia. We can see why: as pawns of Claudius, they represent the enemy. But their deaths are evidence that Hamlet has lost his innocence. It appears that to act morally he must act violently, and yet he cannot act violently and retain his integrity.

If Hamlet were a morality play, it would present a simple antithesis between conscience and wrath, or between mindless revenge and thought. In Horestes Pickering confronted the moral and political ambiguities of revenge but was unable to weld them into a coherent whole. The evidence suggests that if Perkins had confronted Hamlet’s problem, he would have recognized the full extent of its complexity. The world of Hamlet "reverberates with questions,"\(^48\) and appropriately it leaves its audience with a question—or perhaps with two: what ought Hamlet to have done? what else could he have done?

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