

Denmark's Challenge and Hamlet's Task

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The end of Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, shows three foreigners speaking about the scene of "woe and wonder" (V.ii.402) upon which they look. An English ambassador, the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, and Hamlet's friend Horatio all marvel at the carnage before them—a dead prince, Hamlet; his dead rival, Laertes; a dead queen, Gertrude; and a dead king, Claudius. Together with the death of the king's counselor Polonius earlier in the play, Fortinbras appears to hold the political equivalent of a royal flush as he surveys the scene and immediately begins to give orders that will lead to his conquest of Denmark. Fortinbras's position is so strong that he doesn't even bother to hide that he has "some rights of memory in this kingdom/Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me" (V.ii.432-33).

What Fortinbras does not yet know is that Hamlet is responsible for all but one of the deaths that have emptied his nation of any pretenders to the throne, including himself, thus clearing the path for Fortinbras's conquest of Denmark. Moreover, Hamlet has bequeathed his "dying voice" (V.ii.393) to Fortinbras in support of his appropriation of the kingdom that Hamlet's father once ruled. Fortinbras owes much to Hamlet for his future dominion over the Danes.

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By the end of the play, Hamlet has also successfully fulfilled the command of his father's ghost to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.31) while also obeying the direction to "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven" (I.v.92-3). Claudius is dead by his own hand. Heaven has spared Hamlet from killing his mother by having Claudius do it. And Hamlet's mind remains guileless and untainted throughout his final interactions with the members of the Danish court in the last scene. Yet Hamlet has failed as prince of Denmark, for he has handed the kingdom off to a foreigner who probably has been angling to conquer Denmark since before the beginning of the play.

Shakespeare goes out of his way to draw the viewer's attention to the public aspect of Hamlet's tragedy, starting with the title of the play, which is named not only after a character but also after a public role. But what is that role? What is Hamlet's task as prince? And how well suited is he for the execution of it? This paper is an attempt to understand the public aspect of Shakespeare's play.

The prince's role is inextricably linked to the polity he is trying to rule. To understand his role, then, we need to understand the task of the prince *in Denmark*, and that requires understanding what is "rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.100), as the Danish sentry Marcellus puts it early in the play.

Part I: Denmark's Challenge and Hamlet's Task

Denmark is at a critical juncture at the beginning of the play. The nation is welcoming a new king—Claudius, the brother of the deceased king, Hamlet the Elder. Claudius is eager to demonstrate his legitimacy, and a large part of that demonstration involves linking his rule to that of his dead brother. In Claudius's first speech to the Danish court, several contradictions describe his and others' passions at seeing the ascent of a new king after the death of the beloved old king. He intends to reconcile the contradictions in his own person in order to unify Denmark.

. . . we with wisest sorrow think on him
 Together with remembrance of ourselves.
 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 a 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.)

The transition from one king to another requires juxtaposing the sadness at Hamlet the Elder's passing with the joy of having a new king on the throne of Denmark. Gertrude, Denmark's queen, provides the seam between the two kings and therefore binds the kingdom together by lending legitimacy to Claudius's claim on the kingdom. Establishing unity within Denmark and especially within the Danish royal court is the first challenge facing Claudius.

As Denmark endeavors to hold itself together during the transition, the enemies sitting on its borders smell an opportunity. Claudius immediately turns to this threat after addressing the emotional life of Denmark and the challenge of internal order:

Young Fortinbras,
 Holding a weak supposal of our worth
 Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
 Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,
 Colleguèd with this dream of his advantage,
 He hath not failed to pester us with message
 Importing the surrender of those lands
 Lost by his father, with all bonds of law,
 To our most valiant brother—so much for him.
 (I.ii.17-25.)

Claudius then dispatches two messengers, Cornelius and Voltemand, to Fortinbras's uncle, Old Norway, who holds some sway over his nephew but nevertheless is "impotent and bedrid" (I.ii.29) and ignorant of Fortinbras's intentions. That Claudius sends two messengers to a man he knows possesses no power, cannot rise from bed, and has trouble hearing in order to resolve the threat on the Danish border shows remarkable ineptitude. Claudius seems to be competent regarding internal matters of state but much less capable regarding foreign policy.

Indeed, the threat on Denmark's border has been lowering since the opening of the play. We first hear about Fortinbras and the Norwegian menace in the darkness on the frontier from two Danish sentries, Marcellus and Barnardo, and Hamlet's friend Horatio. The whispers about Fortinbras's presence are exceedingly ominous in the first scene of the play, as the threat of his invasion is linked to the appearance of another thing that unexpectedly shows up on Denmark's border—the Ghost of King Hamlet.

The Ghost appears at first in silence. It does not speak to Marcellus and Barnardo, nor does it speak to Horatio, although (or perhaps because?) he is a “scholar” (I.i.49). It approaches with “martial stalk” (I.i.77) and dons the “very armor he had on/When he the ambitious Norway combated” (I.i.71-2). This was no ordinary battle—King Hamlet fought Fortinbras the Elder in single combat, killed him, and gained a substantial part of old Fortinbras's lands. Moreover, Hamlet and Fortinbras agreed that whoever won the lands would pass them on to their descendants. One effect of this is to solidify Denmark's power; another is to put young Hamlet and young Fortinbras in direct competition.

This situation had remained for at least a generation, as we later learn (V.i.146-53), signifying that Norway had been deterred from striking back for a long time. Perhaps it was the case that because old Fortinbras's losses were “Well ratified by law and heraldry” (I.i.99), the situation had stayed the same. But it's more likely that the Norwegians were deterred by the Ghost's “martial stalk,” which King Hamlet once displayed in the flesh. Claudius, lacking such a swagger, appears not to deter a man half his age from intruding at Denmark's time of weakness.

Whatever the reason, Fortinbras is on the march, and Denmark is readying for war. Claudius described Fortinbras merely as “young,” but Fortinbras has in fact spurred the Danes to prepare for war. He has

Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute
 For food and diet to some enterprise
 That hath a stomach in 't; which is no other
 (As it doth well appear unto our state)
 But to recover of us, by strong hand

And terms compulsory, those foresaid lands
 So by his father lost. (I.i.110-116)

The Ghost's appearance is linked to this movement on Denmark's frontiers by the way he walks and by the armor he wears. It's as if the Ghost is trying to tell the sentries that war really is approaching and that sending diplomats to treat with Fortinbras's bedridden uncle will achieve nothing.

But even though the Ghost effectively communicates the need for martial prowess to the sentries and Horatio, he nevertheless waits to deliver the real news until he meets young Hamlet. We will see what that news is and discover the public task that it gives Hamlet in a moment. But first, I want to reflect on why Hamlet is the only person to whom the Ghost speaks. Two considerations show that this question is worth taking seriously. First, the Ghost does not warn the Danish sentries about any threats, even though they are in public roles that could help them raise the alarm. And second, Horatio expresses confidence at the end of the first scene that "This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to [Hamlet]" (I.i.186).

Part II: Hamlet's Reception of the Ghost's Message

In a world defined by martial assertion, young Hamlet stands out for his ability to listen well. He possesses a desire to hear and a willingness to believe stories he is told. Whereas his friend Horatio would not believe Marcellus and Barnardo's account of having seen the Ghost until he had the "sensible and true avouch/Of [his] own eyes" (I.i.67-8), Hamlet, upon hearing that Horatio has seen the former king, can't help blurting out: "For God's love, let me hear!" (I.ii.205.) His questions to Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo about their interactions with the Ghost are three: Where was he? What did he say? What did he look like? None of these questions demonstrate any sort of skepticism about the fact of the encounter.

Moreover, his desire to speak to the Ghost is evident from the first time its presence is mentioned to him. Hamlet sees communication with the Ghost as a heroic task. He says, "If it assume my noble father's person/I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape/And bid me hold my peace" (I.ii.265-7). The sentries and

Horatio had been struck with “fear and wonder” at the sight of the Ghost, and did not know what to make of it. Hamlet, only hearing about the thing, begins to suspect there has been some “foul play” and that “all is not well” (I.ii.277-8) in the kingdom. In Hamlet’s eyes, the Ghost is an omen to be trusted.

When the Ghost appears, Hamlet unquestioningly, even devotedly, follows it. Despite his comrades’ attempts to hold him back, Hamlet insists on going away with the Ghost for a private conversation. He says it is a matter of his “fate,” which “cries out.” It’s not every man who has a fate, of course, and Hamlet is not humble about comparisons: his fate, he says, “makes each petty arture in this body/As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve./Still am I called” (I.iv.91-93). Hamlet sees himself as Hercules being summoned to his first labor.

Hamlet is open to words and stories. He trusts words more than the three men with whom he encounters the Ghost, and his sense of listening is heightened—the task of listening is heightened—as he goes to listen to a Ghost, a thing that comes from beyond the grave, from beyond the human horizon. When the Ghost directs Hamlet to “mark” him, Hamlet confidently answers: “I will” (I.v.3-4). Listening and the quality of being beyond the human horizon are gathered into Hamlet’s fate: reception of the word delivered from beyond the grave is what he is meant for.

It is important that Hamlet is the only person in Denmark capable of taking seriously the Ghost’s message. By way of contrast, let’s consider two other examples, both of whom are more skeptical than Hamlet about what they hear: Laertes and Polonius, son and father. Laertes is Hamlet’s contemporary and sometime rival, especially in fencing, a sport in which he is reputed to be the top athlete, due partly to his training in Paris. Polonius, Laertes’s father, is the king’s chief counselor and a man who would talk the ears off a fish if the fish couldn’t get out of its tank.

Both father and son offer advice to Ophelia, Laertes’s sister and Polonius’s daughter, about her liaison with young Hamlet. They emphasize that Hamlet’s vows and promises are meaningless. Laertes warns Ophelia that Hamlet’s love is subject to his duty, and therefore his private voice will give way to his public

role, which will not allow him to control his choice of spouse. When the time comes, he will have to revise the parameters of his promise; he will have to break his vows to Ophelia. Polonius, on the other hand, warns Ophelia that Hamlet is in fact a liar, not because his love is subject to duty but because he is a passionate young lover putting on a show of pious vows in order to seduce Ophelia. So both father and son claim that Hamlet's vows cannot be trusted. One thinks they are subject to duty; the other thinks they are subject to passion.

Laertes or Polonius might be right about Hamlet's vows. Hamlet surely goes back on them later in the play, when he denies that he ever promised Ophelia his love. But what is important here is that both Laertes and Polonius demonstrate a skepticism of vows that Hamlet does not share. For Hamlet, speaking itself is an action, a thing that has solidity and integrity. He is enamored with words and the hearing of them.

I will return to this theme of Hamlet's relationship to words. But first, I want to examine the Ghost's message to young Hamlet, because it is important for rounding out an understanding of his public task and for comprehending the rot that characterizes Denmark at the beginning of the play.

Part III: The Ghost's Message

The Ghost reveals to Hamlet that his father was murdered by Claudius and that Claudius seduced Gertrude. That is difficult enough for young Hamlet to hear. But the Ghost seems concerned with something else, and if we listen closely, as Hamlet does, we can see that he brings young Hamlet a warning that the young prince alone is now able to pass on to Denmark. The Ghost's message is about public life in Denmark—and about the present threat to that public life.

In addition to revealing the reality of the murder and Gertrude's hasty re-marriage to Claudius, the Ghost addresses the disparity between the events themselves and the story being told in Denmark. "'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,/A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark/Is by a forgèd process of my death/Rankly abused" (I.v.42-45). The Ghost continues, revealing the identity of the murderer: "The serpent that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown" (I.v.46-7). The

Ghost's main concern is the betrayal of Denmark through deceptive story-telling and the presence of an illegitimate king hiding in plain sight. Similarly, in the Ghost's description of the seduction of Gertrude, it rails in the first place against Claudius's "traitorous gifts," which it decries in the second place because they "have the power" to "seduce" (I.v.50-52). And in describing Claudius's victory, the Ghost laments the loss of his "seeming-virtuous queen" (I.v.53). It warns Hamlet primarily about treason and then about the appearance of virtue in the royal court where there is actually corruption.

The Ghost is concerned about the decay of Denmark, going on to implore young Hamlet, "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damnèd incest" (I.v.89-90). Young Hamlet is given the task of restoring the royal bed of Denmark by extirpating its corruption.

The Ghost's revelations show that Denmark's public life has no substantial footing. The most essential institutions—marriage and the kingship—are diseased. What is worse, the Danes don't know it, and as a consequence Claudius could solidify his rule quickly and effectively. The more entrenched Claudius's rule becomes, the worse disease and the more vulnerable Denmark will be to being taken over. The problem with corrupt institutions is not an abstract one—the Ghost says that Claudius's natural gifts are poor compared to those of his brother, and we know that King Hamlet used those gifts skillfully to stave off the Norwegian threat for a generation. Claudius will not have the same success. And the more internal political success he has, the more he will be allowed to govern Danish customs and institutions, and the weaker Denmark will be.

The Ghost's warning about the internal corruption of the Danish kingdom means that the health of the internal order and institutions of Denmark are closely linked to its health and powers facing outward—primarily toward Norway. Indeed, a polity's internal organization governs its ability to act outwardly, just as the health and order of the body allows it to act energetically toward objects outside of it. It is fitting that the two corrupt institutions identified are marriage and the crown, for both have to do with foundational loyalties and devotions. Marriage ennobles

and governs private love by elevating it into a public union. The kingship embodies the country, to which the Danes devote their public love or devotion. When the private man who fills the public role is corrupt, the public aspect, which binds people together, is not an adequate representation of the private aspect. To put the issue another way, both marriage and the kingship concern where the heart is properly placed. The Ghost reveals that Danes are delivering their hearts to corruption. To paraphrase Hamlet, such a situation cannot and will not come to good.

Hamlet's public task is therefore composed of two major parts: protect Denmark from the Norwegian threat, and rid Denmark of the corruption that currently governs it. Once he has spoken with the Ghost Hamlet confirms what we already suspected and what Fortinbras is exploiting to Denmark's detriment: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.210-1.)

Part IV: Hamlet, The Flesh, and Denmark

Hamlet appears particularly well-suited for his public task for two reasons. First, he distinguishes sharply between nature and custom, often seeing more clearly than others what has merit by nature, although he also mocks the hollow and empty customs of the Danish court. Second, he cares for words and vows, as we have seen, deeply, which means that he cares deeply about honesty, abiding by one's word—indeed, being ruled by one's word. Having as the head of one's polity someone who can recognize natural merit and insists on his people being ruled by their word seems ideal.

But although one of Hamlet's strengths is critiquing customs and institutions, his critical faculties seem less than admirable when we consider his unmeasured animosity toward the body. His hatred of the flesh, or what he describes to Ophelia as man's "old stock," makes him believe that human beings—and thus their customs, institutions, and public life—are irredeemably evil. For much of the play, he does not use his powers of discrimination to recognize natural deficiencies and then set about improving them using the power and might of the word, as we might have hoped. Instead, he despairs of amending human wickedness. All human structures are incorrigible.

From the first, Hamlet's critiques are not confined to Denmark but rather go right to the root of being human. For example, the only new setback he seems to receive in Act I after conversing with Gertrude and Claudius is that he cannot, like his rival Laertes, depart Denmark to go back to school. Yet he exclaims,

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
 Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
 Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
 How weary, stale, and unprofitable
 Seem to me all the uses of this world!
 Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
 That grows to seed. (I.ii.129-36.)

Such despair in the face of his father's death is understandable, if extreme. But it demonstrates a desire to escape even his own existence. In this first speech, Hamlet already wishes to melt and dissolve into dew rather than maintain the tautness of the flesh. He wishes that the life-giving tension inherent in the flesh would dissipate and vanish. And when he reflects on the corruption of the world—the “unweeded garden”—it never dawns on him that the world could be possessed by something other than what is “rank and gross in nature” (I.ii.136). Only those who are inferior by nature are at home in the world.

Just as Hamlet dismisses the flesh and the world, so he dismisses marriage entirely because of the corruption of human beings and their sinfulness. In a cruel moment later in the play, when Hamlet revokes the promises he made to Ophelia, he issues the notorious command, “Get thee to a nunnery” (III.i.121). There is, Hamlet tells her, no reason for further generation of the human species, no reason for he or any other “such fellows” to be “crawling between heaven and earth.” While Hamlet is “indifferent honest,” it would have been better had his mother not given birth to him. It doesn't matter who it is—there is no redemption for any human being, and “virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it” (III.1.117-29). Human beings are irredeemable. There should be no more marriages, no more breeding.

Hamlet's abhorrence goes along with his antipathy to beauty, which corrupts honesty. Honesty is simple and direct while beauty, especially feminine beauty, is two-faced and deceitful, "for the power of beauty will sooner/transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the/force of honesty can translate beauty into his/likeness" (I.ii.111-14). Hamlet accuses Ophelia, and women in general, of deception: "God/hath given you one face, and you make yourselves/another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures." Hamlet seems beyond being softened by jokes, or dancing, or nicknames. He now regards these as fit only for fools who cannot see through the pleasing deception to the pessimistic truth. If Ophelia must marry, Hamlet advises, she should marry only such a fool—like her father Polonius, who should be shut up in his own home so that he can ply his foolishness only there. Hamlet has no time for jokes or jesters. They have made him mad.

Hamlet is angry at customs, jokes, dancing, marriage, and nicknames, which belie man's incorrigibility. All attempts to cover over or transfigure the irredeemable imperfection and sinfulness of human nature seem like outright lies to Hamlet. Communal and political life is therefore also a lie—it seems like merely another way of refusing to recognize the consitutional irredeemable quality of man. If man cannot be redeemed, neither can politics, customs, marriages, names, or jokes—which are merely opportunities for rubbing salt in the wound. We might go further: For Hamlet, even salt is bad since it spices food, which is nothing more than carrion. Hamlet's view of man as irredeemable renders him infinitely critical, and creates in him an infinite regress of despair.

Hamlet's extreme critique of man, politics, and customs causes him to see Denmark as full of weeds that must be extirpated and he doesn't mind extirpating them. But at the same time it causes him to see the whole world as an unweeded garden, impossible to reduce to order, and so he can have no plan for eventually providing internal order in Denmark. If the public task of the prince is twofold—to excise, ruthlessly if necessary, corrupt parts of the polity and then to provide a healthy order—then the ruthless excising must be undertaken with an eye to the eventual internal ordering of the polity. But any such ordering depends on believing

that the polity is redeemable, that is, capable of being ordered and ruled. If, as is the case for Hamlet, the whole world is corrupt and irredeemable, then there is nothing governing his actions, because there is no vision of any eventual order for the state.

Part V: Hamlet's Turn

Hamlet's disdain for human things together with the despair that underlies it remains characteristic of him until he is sent to England by Claudius. When he leaves Denmark, Hamlet undergoes a change in disposition that moves him closer to fitness for his public task. This change in disposition has to do with seeing that the human flesh and blood can indeed be directed toward a worthy goal. By seeing an example of an active and determined prince—namely, his foreign rival Fortinbras—Hamlet learns that the appropriation of a quality is more important than its internal meaning, and thus that honor is more important than “thinking too precisely” on it (IV.4.43).

What Hamlet learns from observing Fortinbras's invasion of a small, nearly worthless, patch of Polish ground appears in his interaction with another rival once he returns to Denmark. Observing from a hidden place the “maiméd rites” (V.1.226) of Ophelia's funeral, Hamlet sees Laertes's grief at Ophelia's death. He becomes incensed. He lashes out, issuing a challenge to Laertes and entering into direct competition with him before the Danish court, the King, and the Queen.

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane. (V.1.266-271)

Hamlet's challenge to Laertes is significant: it is the first time that Hamlet offers himself for public competition with another member of the Danish court, and he does so by affirming his Danish lineage. Hamlet will later repudiate his actions by calling them “madness” (V.ii.232), and he asks for Laertes's forgiveness and pardon, but the episode nevertheless demonstrates an increasing willingness by Hamlet to place himself into public competition. Honor, which Hamlet had previously mocked, becomes

meaningful to him after observing Fortinbras's daring intrusion into Denmark on his way to a conquest in Poland—and he shows his newfound appreciation in his public challenge to Laertes.

Before returning to Denmark and challenging Laertes, however, Hamlet had escaped death in a way that indicates a change of disposition in the second half of the play. Recounting the episode to his friend Horatio, Hamlet describes finding a note sent from Claudius to the English king by way of the envoys Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The note contains a command that Hamlet's "head should be struck off" (V.2.28). Understanding now the depth of the treachery around him, Hamlet replaces the note with a new one instructing the English king to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of himself. He then stamps it with his father's signet ring, which he had inherited and which was the model for the Danish royal seal.

Hamlet thus demonstrates both the ability and the willingness to use the flexibility of words and the likeness of the royal seal to save himself. Moreover, he does not scruple to kill others in his own defense. He asserts that he feels no remorse for the deaths of the envoys: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "did make love to this employment./They are not near my conscience. Their defeat/Does by their own insinuation grow" (V.ii.64-66). After hearing the story, Horatio, in a striking and telling response for one who knows Hamlet uniquely, says only, "Why, what a king is this!" (V.ii.70.)

About his discovery of the letter, Hamlet tells Horatio, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.11-12). And he credits "heaven" with providing the signet ring that he happened to have in his purse (V.ii.54-6). Whereas previously Hamlet had considered man, together with man's institutions and actions, to be utterly corrupt and irredeemable, he now recognizes the presence of "heaven" and "divinity" in human affairs. This realization gives Hamlet the freedom to use the resources placed before him to his advantage.

Part VI: Concluding Thoughts

In taking action, Hamlet shows signs of recovering from despair about human things. He finds within himself a more princely disposition that takes advantage of present opportunities. Neverthe-

less, the play ends where it begins—with the conquest of Denmark by Fortinbras, in which he is assisted by Hamlet himself. Why does Shakespeare end the play this way? What are we supposed to learn about Hamlet from this ending? And what are we to learn about what it would take to fulfill duties of a prince of Denmark effectively?

The scene upon which Fortinbras stumbles is shocking. There are so many dead bodies strewn about that Fortinbras compares it to a battlefield. This pile of corpses reflects the chaos of the Danish kingdom preceding the slaughter. Hamlet had struggled to eradicate the kingdom's rotting weeds, but in doing so, he left it open to foreign invasion. Indeed, Hamlet's very success in destroying all corrupt influences allows Denmark to be invaded and conquered. By avenging himself upon Denmark's parasites without replacing them, Hamlet weakens Denmark and prepares it for Fortinbras's invasion.

Hamlet's strengths at the beginning of the play recommend him for the kingship of Denmark – and yet he fails to direct those strengths toward action *on Denmark's behalf*. The drama of his critique of Denmark manifests itself as a spiritual crisis that renders him ineffective in the public task of internally ordering the kingdom. Had he ascended to his father's throne unopposed, with no threat on the border and no competition for the crown, then his ability to elevate natural merit over vain custom, combined with his concern for the integrity of vows would have served the kingdom well. But because the times are corrupt and threatening, his strengths create a spiritual crisis he cannot overcome. He fails to understand the complexity of the dark actions necessary to secure the throne so that it would be safe to allow his natural strengths free rein. While Hamlet was potentially a great friend of Denmark, the qualities that made him a great potential friend also made him incapable of *becoming* a friend of Denmark. To put this same point another way: If a friend were to woo a bride for him, Hamlet would most likely end up being a very good husband. But he himself is hopeless at wooing, for he refuses to take the actions necessary to make him lovable to the beloved.

What I have just described as Hamlet's situation—that is, needing to act despite a spiritual crisis caused by corruption at

home—is one example of *all* political situations. There is no human context in which all questions of corruption have been settled and in which there are no threats on the borders, even though the dangers may be temporarily dormant. Healthy polities are constantly growing, weeding, and defending simultaneously. And the ruler of such a polity can never relax or let his guard down, even to attend to a spiritual crisis that requires heroic strength. Internally, his spirit must be constantly taut, ready either to fight on the border or to clean out the garden. A spiritual crisis may, as in Hamlet's case, be a distraction to the public task at hand.

Hamlet's spiritual crisis renders him impotent with respect to his public task. Although his spiritual condition improves when he discovers trust that the divine is present in human affairs, this trust also makes him resigned to whatever happens to him. He expresses his resignation when he agrees to the duel with Laertes in the final scene—even though he has had doubts about it and Horatio urges against it.

There is a
special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be
now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The
readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves
knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.233-8)

Hamlet here lays down his arms and his judgment. Providence weakens him by rendering him passive. He may be restored in his relationships with human beings and even in his relationship with God; but in the end he has not fully embraced the public task of Denmark's prince.

Hamlet's uncle Claudius, more than willing at all times to take the dark actions that secure his personal ambitions, seized the crown of Denmark for himself. His victory came, as the Ghost warned Hamlet, at the cost of wounding the kingdom, hollowing out its institutions, and exposing it to its enemies. He captured the kingdom but was no friend to it. We find ourselves sympathetic to Hamlet at the beginning of the play because Denmark is in crisis and he seems to have the virtues necessary to set it right. But he stands nearly at the opposite extreme from Claudius: He cannot bring himself to see winning the kingdom—

which would be necessary if he is to become a friend of Denmark—as a pious act, and he thus leaves the kingdom open to the ravages of internal corruption and to eventual conquest by an external enemy.