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Hamlet's Hard-Boiled Ethics

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It was a cold, foggy midnight in Elsinore. Evil lurked in every shadow. An emergency patrol on high-alert watched around the clock because of troop movements led by Young Fortinbras, son of an old enemy to the state. Not to mention: according to a Top-Secret report, filed by conscripts of the home-guard militia, an occult apparition had been seen stalking the battlements—in the shape of the late king of Denmark, Old Hamlet. Generally, paranormal dangers would not be investigated, but the political nature of the sighting caused concern. Marcellus, a corporal, and Horatio, a civilian investigator, confirmed the report. Circumventing the usual channels, they took their information to Young Hamlet, son of the dead king and a person of interest to the authorities. His first reaction to news of the ghost, was not indecisive. To quote: “If it assume my noble father’s person, / I’ll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace” (1.2.244-246). He also abjured his associates to keep their contact with him secret, even if he adopted an “antic disposition” (1.5.180). Subsequently, flouting conventional ethics, Young Hamlet took the law into his own hands to follow his conscience.

Popular tradition from Goethe and Coleridge to Freudian psychoanalysis has concentrated on Hamlet as an overly sensitive prince constitutionally unable to act. For example, in the voice-over introducing his 1948 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, Laurence Olivier posits that *Hamlet* is “the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind” (qtd. in Alexander v-vi).

But Hamlet's tragic flaw cannot be separated from the political background of his times and the uncompromising idealism of his ethics. In a book-length rebuttal to Olivier's film, Peter Alexander has argued that, contrary to the Romantic/Freudian stereotype of an indecisive prince, Shakespeare's Hamlet has "many of the ingredients of the hard-boiled" private investigator in the *film noir* tradition of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett (24).

In an essay distinguishing his hard-boiled Private “I” from the old-fashioned classical detective, Raymond Chandler could be describing Hamlet:

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man.... He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be ... a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability.... The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth. (par. [35])

Like the hard-boiled Private "I," Hamlet lives by his own ethical code, based on a gut-feeling of what he means by himself—which he interprets as the inner voice of his own sense of human conscience. His ethical choices may circumvent conventional norms. He is willing to defy the injustice of established authority. Yet, paradoxically, Hamlet defines secular authority and individual morality.

Far from creating an indecisive and weak-willed Hamlet, Alexander argues:

Shakespeare...brings home to us the truth of what Mr. Chandler would say when he calls his hero "a common man and yet an unusual man".... Tragedy, Shakespeare had come to see when he was writing *Hamlet*, is a kind of consecration of the common elements of man's moral life.... The play dramatizes the perpetual struggle to which all civilization that is genuine is doomed. To live up to its own ideals it has to place itself at a disadvantage with the cunning and treacherous. The problem Mr. Chandler sets his hero is infinitely complicated in *Hamlet*—to be humane without loss of toughness. (182-185)

A hard-boiled Hamlet would be valid in terms of Shakespeare's source materials from the *Historica Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus and the genre of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. It could also be relevant to define the authority of individual conscience amidst the ambiguity and ambivalence in our own time.

The ancient prototype for the Private "I" was Sophocles' King Oedipus investigating the death of the previous king. Using the detective techniques of his era, Oedipus turned to the Delphic Oracle—who had previously warned Oedipus that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Although Oedipus ran away, his Unconscious caught up with him at the place where the three-roads meet. Oedipus could solve the Riddle of the Sphinx. Yet he remained blind to tragic insight. It took

Oedipus years to discover the murderer in his own skin. Of course, the dirty little secret was that Sophocles made Oedipus a fall-guy, framed by the cosmic curse of his ancestors. Oedipus's guilt was his heroic quest for the truth. He was sucker enough to take seriously the Oracle's command to "Know Thyself."

Now, fast-forward to the confrontation with cosmic injustice in *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. Following the murder of his son, Hieronimo exclaims:

O sacred heavens! If this unhallowed deed,
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,

.....

Shall unrevealed and unrevenged pass,
How should we term your dealings just,
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (3.2.5-11)

In both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*, the central conflict of the drama turns on the ethical challenge of reconciling the "task of revenge and the universal mysteries of man's being" (Jenkins 127). For both Hieronimo and Hamlet, personal revenge becomes a cosmic quest: "For justice is exiled from the earth" (Kyd 3.13.140). Both Hieronimo and Hamlet must use a detective's analysis of clues to verify the guilty culprit before bringing down the sword of execution. Both must employ deceit to deceive the deceiver and feign madness to conceal a quest for justice at any price. Yet their differences trump their similarities.

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," as Marcellus notes in the opening act (1.4.90). The ethical imperative of the Ghost of Old Hamlet represents the lost legitimacy of a sovereign authority become, in Claudius own words, "disjoint and out of frame" (1.2.20). "The time is out of joint," and Young Hamlet, cursed with tragic awareness, has been "born to set it right" (1.5.197).

Going beyond Kyd, Shakespeare transformed the Senecan personification of Revenge as portrayed in *The Spanish Tragedy*. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost is not merely an outside observer serving as a kind of chorus on the action, but is "invested with a new dignity and endowed... with a new purpose," entering into the drama and communicating directly with the other characters Moorman (93, 95). Moreover, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is "no longer a Greco-Roman anachronism," but has become the

uncanny visitation from “a Christian, not a Hellenic afterworld” (Reed 29).

While Kyd portrays Revenge as a Nemesis of pre-destined fate, Shakespeare's Ghost is a Christianized harbinger of conscience. Hieronimo effects “the fall of Babylon” (4.1.195). In a gesture of anarchic defiance, Kyd's revenger brings down the empire of lies represented by the status quo, as Revenge drags them all off to “their endless tragedy” (4.5.48) in a pagan hell. For Hamlet, the tragic denouement is neither so neat nor so utterly nihilistic.

Shakespeare did not need to develop his tragic vision from ancient sources such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. As detailed by Bernard Spivack in his *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, medieval drama provided Elizabethan theater an indigenous tradition of dramatic conflict both within the individual and within society, going back to the Psychomachia of earliest morality tradition and the popular Mummings plays which pitted Good against Evil in a battle for the soul.

Shakespeare's tragic wisdom evolved in his cycle of history plays, which establishes that political drama is not merely a “struggle for power” but always, crucially, also a “struggle for legitimacy” (Lindenberger 160). The divine right legitimacy of Shakespeare's King Richard II is futile when confronted by the calculated clout of Bolingbroke. Yet the thrilling wickedness of the playwright's King Richard III cannot counterfeit legitimate authority for good. Only the combination of might-with-right can make a ruler credible *and* effective.

In *Hamlet*, Claudius has not merely usurped the throne. He has displaced the source of authority, supplanting the sacred with the profane. In terms defined in Elizabethan times by Edmund Plowden and applied to literary analysis by Ernst Kantorowicz in *The King's Two Bodies*, the “body-natural” of Old Hamlet has been supplanted by Claudius without the sanction of the “body-politic”:

For the King has in him two Bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal.... But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the Public weal.... (Plowden qtd. in Kantorowicz 7)

Kantorowicz demonstrates how the “legal fiction” of a body-politic was “transferred by the jurists from the theological sphere to that of the state the head of which is the king” (16). The body-politic may be passed from one body natural to another through the death or “Demise” of the monarch, as when Bolingbroke replaces King Richard II. But, the body-politic itself “never dies” (13).

Thus, when Barnardo in the opening lines of *Hamlet* answers his own existential query “Who’s there?” with a password “Long live the King!” it would seem to be moot which body-natural of the King he is wishing longevity (1.1.1, 3).

For his part, even after killing his brother to usurp the throne, Claudius blithely claims divine sanction when Laertes challenges his authority: “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will” (4.3.123-125).

In a world ruled by Claudius, there is no longer any distinction between the counterfeit and the genuine. He has supplanted the *de jure* authority represented by the Ghost of Old Hamlet with the *de facto* control of power politics.

This transition from medieval theology to modern politics first begins, as portrayed by Shakespeare, when Bolingbroke claims the crown as King Henry IV. The rise of the House of Lancaster, followed by the accession of the House of York, enabled the secular state to identify with the mystical body-politic. To justify their legitimacy, the new *de facto* rulers transferred the concept of divine right from ecclesiastical law to a quasi-sacred sovereign nation-state.

Yet when Hamlet—after killing Polonius in a case of mistaken identity—taunts Claudius with seemingly deranged double-talk, declaring that, “The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body” (4.2.26-7), he is also reminding his uncle that “the king’s body can be killed without impairing his kingship” (Jenkins 526).

By unintentionally killing Polonius, Hamlet becomes heaven’s “scourge and minister” (3.4.177). He must adjust to the “paradox of being...both punisher and punished” (Jenkins 523). As a student of Renaissance humanism, Hamlet assumes the independent free-will attributed to the “second cause” of historiography, subordinate but necessary to the hidden purposes of providence (Levy 287). Clearly, Hamlet implies, his destiny is to restore legitimacy with his own hand,

following the dictates of his own conscience. The crucial question, after he has killed Polonius, becomes not whether he always does the right thing, but whether he always takes responsibility for his actions, even the unforgivable blunders.

In *Hamlet*, the wisdom of the oracle emerges as a platitude of the prattling Polonius: “This above all: to thine own self be true” (1.3.78). That these words come from the mouth of the phoniest politician in Elsinore demonstrates the difference between spouting a truism and living for the truth. Like Oedipus, Hamlet may try to escape his destiny but he cannot avoid the tragic insight: thine own self is divided in its depths, conditioned by social convention, limited by definition. The “I” is Incomplete, an Ideal that never was.

Hamlet confronts what Norman Rabkin (transferring a term from quantum physics to literary analysis) has called the “complementarity” of an unresolvable complexity of life as life presents itself to the fullest human consciousness” (26). Hamlet must “recognize that in the providentially ordered even fatalistically determined, universe in which he lives all plans must fail.” Humanistic reason may be his conscious ideal, but “only the surrender to impulse can keep Hamlet from interposing his ego between himself and his destiny.” The “dialectic between conflicting ethical systems” requires that Hamlet fulfill the honor code of revenge without renouncing monotheistic morality (Rabkin 5-6).

Spooing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his ethical truth seems relativistic: “[T]here is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.249-50). But, assuming that Hamlet’s ethical standards depend on the inner realization of a moral absolute, how can he know whether to trust the word of the Ghost?

Following the precedents of Oedipus and Hieronimo, Hamlet must set the stage of private investigation. Using the classical detective method of induction, eliminating all possibilities other than the truth, he devises the play-within-the-play to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601). The most unlikely aspect of the investigation is that Claudius, evidently, retains traces of a buried conscience. The fact that the guilty King interrupts the play-within-the-play does demonstrate that he feels remorse, a clue that Hamlet does not miss. Moreover, out of Hamlet’s hearing, Claudius secretly confesses his crime of fratricide “the primal

eldest curse” (3.3.39). Thus, the audience knows with certainty what Hamlet can only assume based on his limited investigative methods.

Yet, following the classical detective model, as analyzed by Susan Baker, would merely confirm that “Shakespeare equals good taste equals social superiority equals intellectual superiority equals moral superiority” (445). Instead, Hamlet and his audience need the world of *film noir* to allow for the “political position of the literary humanist, who must acknowledge complicity with the social and political formations he or she critiques” (Hedrick 39).

According to the analysis of Linda Charnes, based on a definition of terms by Slavoj Žižek, the distinction between the points of view of “classical and *noir*” detectives invokes “contradictory forms of symbolic authority.” The old-school investigator, relying on his own intellect, “offers a pragmatic or rationalist ethos” of catching criminals and punishing them in the name of impartial legal authority. In contrast, what may be called the *noir* detective “offers a *paranoiac* ethos” that is not satisfied with identifying the culprit of a particular offense, but goes further “to explain what has really gone wrong” by focusing the investigation on “a more pervasive social problem” (29). In this sense: *Hamlet* “offers the first fully *noir* text in western literature and prince Hamlet the first *noir* detective” (31). Hamlet, in other words, confronts the challenge of how to integrate the god-like potential for human greatness and the irrepressible urges of the human beast.

Raymond Chandler has acknowledged Arthur Conan Doyle’s mastery in the creating the detective’s detective, Sherlock Holmes, who bridges the worlds of *Hamlet* and the hard-boiled Private “I.” Holmes outwitted master criminals, based on pure ratiocination of the investigator’s sublime intellect. Yet Holmes also implicitly echoes Hamlet’s first soliloquy: “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world” (1.2.133-4). In explaining his craving for cocaine as surrogate for solving crimes, Holmes mutters:

“Was there ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world?” (Doyle 130). Like Hamlet, Holmes is an outsider, with a sense of alienation from conventional society.

A similar attitude informs Dashiell Hammet’s hard-boiled detective.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade tells the ethical tale of “a man named Flitcraft” who seemed to live rather profitably in the dreary, dismal, world:

“Here’s what happened to him. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up—just the skeleton. A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him.... He was scared stiff of course, he said, but he was more shocked than really frightened. He felt somebody had taken the lid off and let him look at the works.” (Hammett 65-66)

As Hammett’s enigmatic protagonist explains, Flitcraft glimpsed a reality that conventional ethics chooses to ignore:

The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things.... It was not, primarily, the injustice of it that disturbed him: he accepted that after the first shock. What disturbed him was the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life.” (66)

Far from a tragic protagonist, Flitcraft resolves his existential parable by gradually returning to the everyday conventional existence he chose to abandon. “But that’s the part of it I always like,” Sam Spade allows himself to conclude. “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling” (67).

For Sam Spade, the world in which beams never fall is the world of conventional unreality. The Private “I,” in contrast, chooses to live in awareness of the dangers of “blind chance” (66) and the inevitable “day of reckoning” (184). In Act 1, Hamlet is foundering in the world of Flitcraft. The death of his father falls like a beam, followed by the shock of the marriage of his mother and Claudius, who biffs him out of the throne. Hamlet faces his first test—despair. He resists the temptation of “self-slaughter” only because suicide is prohibited by the “canon” of the “Everlasting” (1.2.131-2). Hamlet’s next challenge is the suspicion aroused by the ghost of his father—or is it the devil in disguise?

If Hamlet is a *noir* protagonist from his first appearance in Act One, he still must evolve into a hard-boiled, tough-minded Private “I.” For Hamlet, the decisive shift from the classical detective into the hard-boiled consciousness is the result of a misidentification, killing Polonius instead of Claudius. Hamlet can no longer wear white-gloves and claim

purity of intent. He has blood on his hands, and he must recognize his own complicity in the corruption of Elsinore.

Why, then, did Hamlet fail to finish off the guilty King Claudius when he catches him in a pose of prayer?

Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying.

And now I'll do't. [*Draws his sword*]

And so a goes to heaven

.....

No.

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:

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 damn'd and black

As hell, whereto it goes. (3.3.73-95)

Since Hazlitt, critics including Coleridge, Bradley, and Sigmund Freud, have seen Hamlet's hesitation as "only an excuse for his want of resolution" (Hazlitt qtd. in Jenkins 513). But the desire to cause not only the death but also the eternal damnation of his enemy would have been unquestioned in the revenge code of Elizabethan theater. Perhaps Hamlet is rationalizing because he recognizes Claudius as the embodiment of his own repressed Oedipal complex. Yet, at the same time, it might be that Hamlet's rage for revenge still needs to be cooled by the hard-boiled wisdom of experience—which he attains only in Act 5.

By the end of the drama, civil order is restored to Elsinore only after Hamlet sacrifices his own body-natural in the name of a justice that eludes reality. Thus, the problem of the play is not contained within the inner-struggle of the protagonist. As a secular martyr, Hamlet devotes his life to a truth that is beyond revenge or the punishment of law, a messianic striving for absolute justice—not in a world-to-come of eternal Being but in the present-time of endless Becoming.

As in his English history plays, Shakespeare represents the "complementarity" of pragmatic politics and providential design. Machiavellian strategy is required in a world of *realpolitik*, but demands a conscience with humanity to integrate the fragments of mortal strife.

While Shakespeare is frequently invoked as a cultural authority, Hamlet is a subversive non-conformist, dedicated to exposing the hypocrisy and injustice of the reigning establishment.

According to Margreta de Grazia, the literary history of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* traces the evolution of modernity. For the Romantics, Hamlet "inverted Aristotle's stress on the primacy of action over character" (254). To Hegel, Hamlet embodied the quest for "self-consciousness...and self-determination" (255). The famous early twentieth century critic A.C. Bradley followed Hegel to formulate his "key principle of Shakespearean tragedy: 'action is essentially the expression of character'" (257). But psychoanalysis trumped self-consciousness, claiming that only the Freudian Unconscious "can account for why a character distinguished by self-reflection cannot know his own motives" (260). Expanding on Freud, Jacques Lacan redefined Hamlet—and modern awareness—no longer reading the text as a tragedy merely of repressed desire but as a tragedy of "mourning for what it has had to give up" (261).

Most recently, Jacques Derrida identifies the Ghost of Hamlet with the Marxian "spectre" haunting Europe in the first line of the *Communist Manifesto*. In this deconstructionist reading, Hamlet represents "a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation" (qtd. in de Grazia 264), implying an absolute justice "beyond the logic of vengeance" existing in a non-linear "deferred time" (265).

Hamlet struggles within himself, beginning in his first soliloquy in which he contemplates suicide: "O that this too solid flesh...." (1.2.129). He is still wrestling with his identity in his last soliloquy, expressing his frustration as Fortinbras marches off to conquer "a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.18-19): "How all occasions do inform against me...." (4.4.32). But a funny thing happens to Hamlet on the way to England. It is like the last beam falling for Flitcraft.

The change begins with insomnia, and the same old inner conflict: "...in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep" (5.2.4-5). Suddenly, like a prisoner breaking the shackles of his mind, Hamlet acts: "Rashly— / And prais'd be rashness for it...." On a hunch, he pilfers the "grand commission" entrusted to his companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the purloined letter, Hamlet discovers his own death warrant (5.2.6-7, 18). In a flash, Hamlet realizes the

complementarity of impulse and destiny: "...and that should learn us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.9-11). With mirthless irony, Hamlet tells Horatio how he employed diplomatic jargon replete with "as'es of great charge" to revise the original order of summary execution, replacing his own name with those of his false friends (5.2.43). Confirmation of a hidden-hand of providence is provided by Old Hamlet's "signet" with which Young Hamlet seals his "changeling" letter (5.2.49, 53).

Hamlet's hard-boiled ethics allows for no remorse. Forget about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern! "They are not near my conscience" (5.2.58).

The next day, still on the ship to England, Hamlet proves in trial-by-battle that his inner conflict has been resolved. Forced by "a pirate of very warlike appointment" to a "compelled valour," he takes the lead "in the grapple" (4.6.14-17). As related in his letter to Horatio, he "alone" boards the pirate ship (4.6.18). "On the instant" as the pirates withdraw, however, Hamlet finds himself a prisoner (4.7.14ff). Nevertheless, the pirates turn out to be "thieves of mercy" (4.6.19). In their company, Hamlet finally integrates his own role as outsider and true prince. When he returns to Denmark, Hamlet has experienced an inner conversion to a faith in the hidden purpose of random chance.

Hamlet rhetorically asks Horatio, "is't not perfect conscience" to kill Claudius to prevent "further evil" (5.2.67, 70)? Hamlet's usage of "conscience" in this sense may be found in the Oxford English Dictionary as not only according to "right and law" but also "equity" in terms of a higher justice (754). No longer alienated from himself, Hamlet has become a hard-boiled Private "I."

He makes his self-discovery explicit when he leaps into the grave of Ophelia: "This is I / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.250-51). It is finally clear that Ophelia was Hamlet's tragic soul-mate. Her death signals the death of innocence.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the *femme fatale* Bel Imperia aids and enables Hieronimo in his mad devotion to individual, social, and political destruction. Although she entices her three lovers—Andrea, Horatio and Balthazar—down the path to doom, Bel Imperia proves herself to be the soul-mate of Heironimo. She supplies Heironimo with the clue he needs to identify who murdered his son, following Hieronimo's appeal to

providence (3.2.24). She also participates actively in Heironimo's plan, despite the strictures imposed by a patriarchal society and a Machiavellian brother, killing Balthazar with her own hand before committing suicide in the macabre finale of the play-within-the play.

Ophelia, in contrast, plays the bland and seemingly-safe foil to the dangerous woman of the *noir* world. She renounces her love for Hamlet when her father and brother tell her to, against the mandate of her own heart. She reports on Hamlet's behavior in private, surrenders the love letters and poems he has written for her, and allows herself to be co-opted by Polonius and Claudius. No wonder Hamlet's love turns to misogynistic contempt after Ophelia obediently lets her father "loose" her to him as the honey-trap in a spy set-up (2.2.162).

Clearly, Hamlet cannot trust Ophelia, although he does not sound convincing when he denies his own love for her:

HAMLET: ...I did love you once.

OPHELIA: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET: You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

OPHELIA: I was the more deceived.

HAMLET: Get thee to a nunnery.... Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go—and quickly too. Farewell. (3.1.115-142)

Hamlet's attitude is echoed by Sam Spade to Brigid O'Shaughnessy: "I don't care who loves who. I'm not going to play the sap for you" (Hammett 225).

Ophelia shares Hamlet's alienation and anguish. But she lacks the defense mechanisms to turn her loss of sanity into a form of camouflage. Hamlet plays crazy in order to conceal how mad he really is. Ophelia never learns to hide her love or her broken heart. She is good to a fault, and that is her tragic flaw. Unfortunately, Ophelia suffers in silence until her former lover kills her father. Then, her mind snaps. Hamlet denies his love, yet he also pays the tragic price.

In the final duel with Laertes, Hamlet reminds us of Chandler's warning that the Private "I" "is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him" (Chandler

[par. 35]): “For though I am not splenative and rash, / Yet I have in me something dangerous, / Which let thy wiseness fear” (5.1.254-56). In Act 5, Hamlet transcends passivity. He is non-attached. He has learned acceptance of the world and himself, ready to play his role and fulfill his tragic destiny. Claudius needs to be killed. If Hamlet does not kill him, who will?

And yet—Hamlet never decides to kill the king. He accepts his destiny without trying to determine circumstances beyond his control. Knowing, as Horatio points out, that his time is short, Hamlet lives only in the here-and-now: “It will be short. The interim is mine. / And a man’s life no more than to say ‘one’” (5.2.73-4). He recognizes his faults and accepts the consequences of his actions. He neither calculates nor manipulates. He *does nothing*. He goes with the flow. He has attained what Nietzsche calls “the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence” (qtd. in Bloom 38). Although not religious in a conventional sense, Hamlet invokes Scripture: “We defy augury. There is 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” (5.2.215-18). After he accepts the duel with Laertes, Hamlet lets events take their course. In the end, he does not take revenge on Claudius. He kills the king in self-defense.

Fortinbras gives Hamlet a soldier’s burial and claims the crown for himself. Although Hamlet has avenged his father’s honor, the legitimacy of the mystical body politic remains an unrealized ideal: The King is Dead; Long Live the King!

We can imagine the aftermath. Fortinbras’ district attorney hauls Horatio downtown for an all-night interrogation, accusing him of being an accessory before and after the crime. The press has a field day, with sensational stories about Hamlet’s past. But Horatio sticks to his story: “As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing, / A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards / Has ta’en with equal thanks...” (3.2.66-68). More the hard-boiled Private “I” than Hamlet ever was, Horatio keeps his cool.

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