

Chapter 6

To Thine Own Selves Be True-ish

Shakespeare's Hamlet as Formal Model

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If you're one of the many people who have the sentence "to thine own self be true" tattooed on their arm, wrist, or ankle, or one of the several who have used it as the title of a book, you may want to stop reading right now. Here's the thing: Shakespeare never said it. Shakespeare *wrote* it, but he wrote it as something for a character named Polonius to say. And Polonius, it turns out, is a grade-A nincompoop.

Yes, he's the guy who says "to thine own self be true"; but he's also the guy who tells Ophelia that Hamlet isn't really in love with her (thanks, *Dad*).¹ A handful of scenes later, he decides—equally confidently—that Hamlet loves her *too much*, and that this explains all of his weird behavior.² He is so pompous and long-winded that he gets lost in the middle of his own speech.³ Too dense to understand

1. 1.3.100–130.

2. 2.1.99–109.

3. 2.1.48–50.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

metaphorical insults, he thinks Hamlet is literally mistaking him for a fishmonger.⁴ He finds the actors boring.⁵ He dangles his own daughter as bait. He sends a lackey off to spy on his own son.⁶ Hamlet calls him a “great baby,” a “foolish prating knave,” and (three times over) a “fool.”⁷ Why on earth have we taken him so seriously all these years?⁸

You might think that none of this matters: a smart idea is a smart idea, regardless who we hear it from. Unfortunately, however, “to thine own self be true” is *not* a smart idea. It’s not wrong, exactly, but it’s so simplistic as to be almost useless. How should Hamlet, for example, apply it to his life? Hamlet is the son of a king. He’s also the son of a usurper’s wife. He’s a courtier. He’s a scholar (thirty years old and still in school!). He’s a mourner. He’s a man in love. He’s an avenger. He’s a poet and playwright and theatrical director.⁹ If Hamlet overheard Polonius’s injunction “to thine own self be true,” his only rational answer would be: “which one?”

This, I think, is the key question of *Hamlet*. How exactly can we be who we are? Being authentic sounds like a good thing, but it turns out to be massively complicated. Shakespeare is not offering us the potted aphorism “to thine own self be true” as a lesson to be learned, but as an invitation to think hard. For those who do think hard, a solution is available within the parameters of the play, one that

4. 2.2.171–72, 184–86.

5. “This is too long” (2.2.436).

6. 2.1.1–70.

7. 2.2.319; 3.4.213; 2.2.214; 3.1.131–31; 3.4.29. I realize, of course, that there are wise fools in Shakespeare. Polonius, however, is not one of them.

8. I was delighted, on reading Paul Woodruff’s chapter in this volume, to see how much agreement there is between our positions. Anyone who is interested in the question of Polonius’s untrustworthiness, and in the question of what follows from it, should look at that wonderful essay.

9. For the various selves, compare Harry Levin, “The Antic Disposition,” *Shakespeare, Hamlet: A Casebook*, ed. John D. Jump (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970), 122–36, 134–35. And compare Lionel Trilling’s discussion of *Rameau’s Nephew* in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 44.

JOSHUA LANDY

involves giving each part of the self its day in the sun. And something even more important is on offer: the opportunity to explore, through the very act of spectating, the kind of thing we need to do in order to pull it off.

We'll get to that solution, and to that exploration, at the end. Along the way, we'll see how this line of questioning helps us to resolve a number of tantalizing puzzles set by the play. Why is Hamlet already suicidal before he knows his father has been murdered? Why does he suddenly decide "we will have no more marriage"? Why does he have a play performed in which the ear-poisoner is a nephew, not a brother? Why is so much of that inset play about remarriage? Why does Horatio, the Stoic, lose faith in Providence? Why does Hamlet at one moment say he'll beat Laertes and at another that he won't? And why on earth does Hamlet force Claudius to drink the poisoned wine when he's already stabbed him with the poisoned sword? For all of this, stay tuned.

WHY SHOULD HAMLET KILL CLAUDIUS?

Let's start, though, by returning to the core issue: "to thine own self be true" is easier said than done. Some people might think, I suppose, that this doesn't matter very much; those people probably reckon that authenticity is a luxury, a narcissistic value invented by a decadent civilization, a "First World problem" if ever they saw one. But that's not how it looks to Hamlet. Hamlet has a monumental decision in front of him. He's been told his uncle killed his father, and he's been told he needs to make it right by killing the uncle back. If he does it, he'll have blood on his hands—the blood of the King, the blood of his uncle, the blood of his mother's new husband. And he may very well end up dead himself. So, should he do it? How can he decide? I'm going to try to convince you that he can only decide on the basis

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

of his own values. And if I'm right about that, then the only way for him to make a good decision is by being true to himself. And if I'm right about *that*, then being many things is a potentially paralyzing obstacle, not a First World problem.

Hamlet wouldn't need to appeal to his own values, of course, if there were something else that could settle the question for him. For example, maybe he should kill Claudius because, well, everyone else is doing it. Fortinbras is getting revenge for *his* father;¹⁰ Laertes is about to dole out rough justice for his;¹¹ and even the story told by the traveling players is one of a son (in this case Pyrrhus) taking up arms for a dead dad (in this case Achilles).¹² So, avenging one's father is simply the Done Thing. It's tradition. As a young Englishman said in the 1970s when asked why he mugged old ladies, "it's the *fing*, innit?"

That's all well and good, but "it's the *fing*, innit?" is not an entirely compelling argument. Very early on in the play, we hear of a local custom that is "more honoured in the breach than the observance":¹³ just because something is the done thing doesn't make it desirable. And let's not forget that traditions aren't always internally consistent. Enthusiastic smiting in return for ancestral wrongs does seem to be part of Hamlet's local culture, but Hamlet's local culture is also Christian, and Christianity is (at least officially) not too big on revenge; you know, "turn the other cheek," and all that. It's no coincidence that when Hamlet confesses a list of sins to Ophelia, being "revengeful" is one of the top three.¹⁴ (Isn't it fascinating that Hamlet sometimes feels guilty about wanting to kill Claudius and sometimes

10. 1.1.79–103.

11. 4.5.130–35; 4.7.26–30.

12. "After Pyrrhus' pause / A roused vengeance sets him new a-work" (2.2.425–26).

13. 1.4.15–16.

14. "I am myself indifferent honest but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious . . ." (3.1.121–24).

JOSHUA LANDY

feels guilty about not going through with it?) So Hamlet's tradition is telling him to do some smiting, and Hamlet's tradition is also telling him to *refrain* from doing any smiting. Way to go, tradition: you're a fat load of good.

In fact, the "Denmark" we see in the play—which is, of course, really a version of England in 1600—is an unusually big mess, culturally speaking. Hamlet and Horatio have been studying in Wittenberg, a place made famous in Shakespeare's time by Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation. As John Dover Wilson brilliantly argued, Hamlet seems to have brought back with him a Protestant way of thinking about ghosts.¹⁵ And in case we miss these subtleties, Shakespeare has Hamlet drop the brilliant line "your worm is your only emperor for diet,"¹⁶ making absolutely sure we're thinking about Luther. Anachronistically, there are two different conceptions of Christianity floating about the twelfth-century Denmark of *Hamlet*, in addition to the residue of pre-Christian ways of doing things. Even if Hamlet wanted to follow tradition, then, which tradition should he pick?

The world of *Hamlet* is a world in which the sanction of authority no longer carries the weight it once used to. We don't have to believe any more that the sun turns around the earth, just because the Bible and Aristotle and Dante say so.¹⁷ We don't have to believe any more

15. As Wilson shows, *Hamlet* stages three different responses to the question of apparitions.

The Ghost himself says he is on a visit from Purgatory (1.5.9–13), returning to the world of the living in order to right a wrong; that's the Catholic position on ghosts. Hamlet, however, worries that "The spirit that I have seen / May be a de'il" (2.2.533–34): if, as Protestants believe, there is no Purgatory, then no sinners are coming back from the afterlife. (Death, remember, is the "country from whose bourn / No traveller returns," 3.1.78–79.) And Horatio simply thinks the Ghost is an "illusion" (1.1.126). See John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 61–70.

16. 4.3.21. The Diet of Worms was the meeting convened by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1521 to try Martin Luther for heresy.

17. There is a subtle allusion in the play to the Copernican revolution. Whereas Claudius says that "the star [sun] moves not but in his sphere" (4.7.16), Hamlet, perhaps archly, invites Ophelia to "Doubt that the sun doth move" (2.2.115). The decline of traditional systems of belief is on everyone's mind.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

that the communion wafer really contains the body of Christ.¹⁸ There is more than one way of thinking about life, and more than one “done thing”; everything is potentially up for grabs. We are free, and perhaps obliged, to take our own stand on which version of physics, which version of religion, and which version of morality actually have it right about the world.

A WORLD WITHOUT JOINTS

Here’s a second potential reason why Hamlet should kill Claudius: because the universe needs him to.¹⁹ “The time is out of joint,” says Hamlet.²⁰ What Hamlet means is that things have fallen out of their natural resting-places. Your humerus is supposed to be inside your shoulder-socket; if it’s not, you’ve got yourself a dislocated shoulder, and you really need to pop that thing back in. Similarly, Denmark is supposed to be ruled by an elected monarch; if it’s not, you’ve got yourself a dislocated kingdom, and you really need to pop that guy back out.

I think Hamlet is seriously tempted by this kind of idea. He’s seriously tempted by the thought that there’s a way the world is meant to be, with a proper place for everything. Hamlet Senior *belonged* on the throne of Denmark; Gertrude *belonged* with Hamlet Senior;

18. There is a hint of this debate, perhaps, in the line “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body” (4.2.25–26).

19. An additional candidate, of course, could be Hamlet’s love and respect for his father (1.5.23–25). Hamlet’s father has asked him for a favor, and Hamlet loves him: shouldn’t he do what he asks? Maybe, but maybe not. It would not be morally right, for example, for Laertes or Ophelia to follow the instructions of *their* father, that prating knave Polonius. (Never lend anything to anyone? That’s a bit cheap!) And it’s not at all clear, even in the case of the vastly superior Hamlet Senior, that his paternal wishes are enough to justify murder. In the world of *Hamlet*, a parent’s charge is no more binding than the injunctions of religion and custom.

20. 1.5.186.

JOSHUA LANDY

Claudius *belongs* in the ground. When things fall out of their proper places, the world goes out of joint, and our job is to “set it right.” If that’s true, then Hamlet’s decision is easy. There’s no need for him to inspect his soul; all he needs to do is answer the call of the universe. So, is it true? Does everyone have a place she’s meant to occupy and a partner she’s meant to be with? Does the world have joints? Is there such a thing as setting right the times in which we live?

LOVE AND (RE-)MARRIAGE

No, there isn’t. And Hamlet knows it. And it’s precisely his knowledge of this fact that has sent him into a tailspin. What drives him to despair, as he famously says in the “To be” speech, is “outrageous fortune,” with its endless “slings and arrows.”²¹ (In fact it’s remarkable how often the word “fortune” crops up in the play: some eighteen times, including four within the space of six lines.)²² Hamlet *wishes* the world were an orderly place, only troubled every now and then by villains like Claudius; the reality, however, is that outrageous fortune is running the show, and that there are no joints for things to fall out of. The depth of his current despair shows us just how much he needed to believe the opposite.

We see the same thing, though more indirectly, in the *other* reason Hamlet gives for his suicidal despondency. His very first soliloquy expresses a desire to be dead, and the reason he gives is—astonishingly perhaps—that his mother has remarried.²³ That

21. 3.1.57.

22. 3.2.195–200.

23. “Oh that this too sallied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter. . . . A little month, or e’er those shoes were old / With which she followed my poor father’s body / Like Niobe, all tears. Why, she . . . married with my uncle” (1.2.129–32, 147–51).

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

could well strike us as, to put it mildly, a bit of an overreaction. Why shouldn't a widow find a new husband, if that's what she wants? And why should it affect Hamlet? The answer, I think, is that it obliterates his view of love, and with it his sense that there's a way things are meant to be. Gertrude's remarriage demolishes a picture of life in which each of us has an "other half," a person we are uniquely suited to, perhaps even destined to be with; once we have found our other half, an encounter with anyone else should seem insipid, drab, even pointless. If Gertrude found her other half in Hamlet Senior,²⁴ and if Gertrude nonetheless went on to fall for Claudius, then Hamlet must have been massively wrong in his initial assumption.

If you don't believe that Hamlet has theories of love on his mind, consider *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play he stages in act 3. I know, this play-within-the-play is supposedly all about "catching the conscience of the King": when Claudius sees a monarch having poison poured in his ear while he sleeps, his face will reveal whether he did something like that to Hamlet Senior. And yes, that's part of what Hamlet is using it for. But considering that it's officially about poisoning, there's an awful lot about warm fuzzy feelings. Seventy-five whole lines about them, in fact.²⁵

"I'm getting old," Gonzago says, "and I want you to find a new husband after I'm gone." (I'm paraphrasing.) No, says his wife Baptista: "Such love must needs be treason in my breast." "In second husband let me be accurst," she continues; "None wed the second but who killed the first."²⁶ Note the use of the word "love" here: the

24. We know that Gertrude and Hamlet Senior loved each other, because the Ghost tells Hamlet "I had love for Gertrude" (1.5.48) and Gertrude doesn't deny it when Hamlet says she reciprocated with "an innocent love" (3.4.41). According to Hamlet, indeed, Hamlet Senior was "so loving to my mother / That he might not beteen the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly" (1.2.140–42); as for her, "Why, she would hang on him, / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" (1.2.140–42, 143–45).

25. The seventy-five lines in question are 3.2.148–222.

26. 3.2.172–74.

JOSHUA LANDY

only reason Baptista can imagine for marrying a second husband is if she falls in love with him. (Follow me to the footnote if you want to quibble.)²⁷ But she can't possibly do that, because, she says, she loves her current husband—really, *really* loves him. (The word “love” crops up a staggering fourteen times in forty-nine lines, including a stretch where it's mentioned four lines in a row.)²⁸ Remarriage is inconceivable because marrying twice means loving twice, and there is no such thing as loving twice.

And if there is no such thing as loving twice, that is because the world has joints: for every individual, there is one and only one partner he or she is meant to be with. No one else in the world could elicit the overwhelming feelings that he or she stirs up in us. If you fall in love with someone new, that can only mean one thing: *your original partner was not your other half*. To marry again is to reach back and destroy the romance of the original match; “none wed the second but who killed the first.”

Guess what happens after Gonzago is killed . . . Yes, Lucianus, the murderer, “gets the love of Gonzago's wife.”²⁹ Again, note the wording. Gonzago's wife doesn't just *marry* Lucianus; she *loves* Lucianus. And if she loves him, according to her own logic, that means she never really loved Gonzago. The lady did indeed protest too much.

27. It's true that Gonzago's wife says, at another point, “The instances [motives] that second marriage move / Are base respects of thrift [gain], but none of love” (3.2.176–77). But this does not appear to be her settled view. In addition to the line we started with (“Such *love* must needs be treason in my breast”), there's also the fact that she ends up falling in love with Lucianus (“You shall see anon how the murderer gets the *love* of Gonzago's wife”), not just coveting his property; and then again, it's not clear why remarriage for convenience would be such an affront to one's first husband, let alone prove that one did not love him. One thing is for certain: Hamlet does not think *Gertrude* remarried for money. He berates her for everything under the sun, but not once does he so much as insinuate that she's in it for the cash.

28. 3.2.148–222; 3.2.164–66.

29. 3.2.256–57; cf. 3.2.128.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

Now Hamlet probably wrote some or all of these lines himself,³⁰ and he is extremely pleased with them. They are designed to catch the conscience of the *Queen*, not that of the King; if the ear-poison scene is a replaying of his crime, the remarriage scene is a replaying of hers.³¹ Hamlet has Baptista fall in love with Lucianus because he takes his mother to have fallen in love with Claudius.³² And (to say it again) if Gertrude has fallen in love with Claudius, after also being in love with Hamlet Senior, then Hamlet's view of love is utterly bankrupt.³³

30. "You could for need study a speech of some dozen lines, or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?" (2.2.476–78)

31. For the play as "all-purpose mousetrap," compare Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949) 122–23

32. Here's what Hamlet *doesn't* say to his mother in the Closet Scene: (1) that she remarried for political or financial reasons; (2) that she married the murderer of her husband; (3) that it would all have been fine if she had just waited a little longer. Here's what Hamlet *does* say to his mother: (1) that she finds Claudius attractive (3.4.84); (2) that she is having sex with Claudius on a regular basis, and enjoying it (3.4.89–91); (3) that in private the two of them are "honeying and making love" (3.4.91), i.e., speaking sweet nothings to each other; and (4) that he knows it will take real effort on her part to keep her hands off him (3.4.157–58, 163–68). It's true that Gertrude could merely be infatuated with Claudius, but (a) that goes against what we learn in *The Murder of Gonzago* (if you remarry, that must mean you *love* the guy) and (b) this subtle distinction probably wouldn't matter much to Hamlet (if you've found your other half, you shouldn't even be able to become infatuated with anyone else).

There's an interesting moment when Hamlet tells Gertrude she cannot possibly be in love with Claudius. "You cannot call it love," he says, "for at your age / The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgment: and what judgment / Would step from this [Hamlet Senior] to this [Claudius]?" (3.4.66–69). But of course Gertrude *has* stepped from this to this. And as Hamlet is about to admit only a handful of lines later, the hey-day in her blood is *not* tame: "Rebellious hell, / If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones, / To flaming youth let virtue be as wax" (3.4.80–82). Clearly it's just wishful thinking on Hamlet's part when he says it isn't love. If the only reason it can't be love is a lack of desire, and if desire is present, then— isn't it love?

33. A note for pedants: it is of course true that someone in Gertrude's position could marry someone in Claudius's position for reasons of expediency. But nobody in the play claims that this is what's going on here. The Ghost doesn't say it: he tells Hamlet that Claudius won Gertrude over "with witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts— / O wicked wit and gifts that have the power / So to seduce" (1.5.43–45). Hamlet doesn't say it: he blames demonic possession rather than Claudius's smooth-talking charm, but he too thinks Gertrude has the hots for him. And Gertrude doesn't say it either: when Hamlet points out that she and Claudius are constantly "honeying and making love" (3.4.91), all she says is "Thou turn'st

JOSHUA LANDY

That's why Hamlet is suicidal from the very first soliloquy. That's why he devotes so much of the play-within-the-play to Gertrude. (He's watching her reaction, by the way, much more than he's watching that of Claudius.) That's why he prefaces it with a snide quip about the brevity of "woman's love."³⁴ That's why he keeps hounding Gertrude after the play is over, badgering her into admitting her betrayal. (The Ghost, at one point, has to remind him to get back on uncle-stabbing track.)³⁵ That's why Hamlet ends up turning against marriage altogether—"I say we will have no more marriage"³⁶—and driving Ophelia away, with fatal consequences. What's the point of relationships, after all, if love is never true?³⁷ ("How should I your true-love know," Ophelia asks, "From another one?"³⁸ Answer: you can't, because there's no difference, because there's no such thing as a "true-love," because the world has no joints.)

If Hamlet is deeply troubled by his mother's second marriage, then, it is not for absurd Freudian reasons; it is because the possibility of remarriage has exposed the vanity of the idea that couples are destined to be together. There is no necessity ruling human affairs. There are no proper places for things to occupy. There is no such thing as the world falling out of joint. So putting things back in their proper places cannot be a sufficient reason for him to take Claudius's life. Once again, he is entirely on his own.

my very eyes into my soul / And there I see such black and grieved spots / As will leave there their tinct" (3.4.87–89). In other words, "guilty as charged." This is clearly a marriage of mutual affection, not a union of reciprocal convenience.

34. 3.2.147.

35. 3.4.103–7.

36. 3.1.146.

37. Compare to some extent G. Wilson Knight, "The Embassy of Death: An Essay on *Hamlet*," *Hamlet (Bloom's Major Literary Characters)* (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 80–94, 87 and Levin, "The Antic Disposition," 124.

38. 4.5.23–24.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

We are slowly but surely working our way back to the idiocy of Polonius. Authenticity is going to turn out to be vital—and dividedness a critical problem—because Hamlet has nothing else on which to base his decision. The fact that revenge is the done thing is not sufficient reason for him to kill Claudius; nor can he convince himself that he needs to put things back into their proper places, since there simply *are* no proper places.

Everything would be OK, of course, if only God were around to tell us what to do. What, for example, if God were responsible for deciding which monarch belongs on which throne? If that were the case, then again Hamlet's decision would be easy. Potential reason three: Hamlet must kill Claudius because God hates usurpers.

There's a fascinating hint in this direction in act 4, when Laertes storms into the castle accompanied by an insurrectionary mob. Claudius tells Gertrude not to worry: "there's such divinity doth hedge a king," he reassures her, "that treason can but peep to what it would."³⁹ Claudius is here alluding to the "divine right of kings," which is to say the idea that kings and queens are chosen by God. Since kings and queens are put on their thrones by God, Claudius is saying, they are also protected by God; so we really don't have to worry about a pesky little revolution.

Now this is a pretty standard thing for someone to claim in the twelfth century (when the play is set) or even in the early seventeenth century (when it was first performed). But it's a wildly strange thing for *Claudius* to be saying. He of all people—the guy who murdered Hamlet Senior—should know that God does not protect kings. He of all people should know that treason can be exceedingly effective.⁴⁰

39. 4.5.123–24.

40. In Shakespeare's time, some considered regicide compatible with the "divine right of kings," on condition that the ruler be despotic. Many, however, did not sanction rebellion even

JOSHUA LANDY

Claudius telling Gertrude “don’t worry, God protects kings” is a bit like Don Corleone telling his henchmen “don’t worry, God protects mobsters. Now go kill the Tattaglias.”

Kings and queens are not protected by God, because kings and queens are not chosen by God. There is no natural, necessary, preordained relation between monarch and country, any more than there is between lover and beloved. In the political domain as in the romantic, there are no natural joints to the world. Who ends up ruling a country comes down to a pinch of human agency and a heaping spoonful of chance.

A DIVINITY THAT SHAPES OUR ENDS

I think I know what you’re going to say at this point. (If I’m wrong, and you don’t care about objections, please feel free to skip to section “Reasons Must Come from Within”; I won’t be offended. On the other hand, you’ll miss some fun stuff about sparrows and Satanists.)

Here’s what I think you’re going to say: I’m forgetting about Providence. How can I pretend that God is not operating in the world of *Hamlet* when Providence is so clearly all around us? Doesn’t H. D. Kitto say “we are made to feel that Providence is working in the events”? Doesn’t Francis Fergusson agree that “we are returned, with the healthy rhythms of young Fortinbras, to the wider world of the order of nature, with the possibility . . . of divine sanction”? And doesn’t David L. Edwards find that “‘Providence’ has established justice through this apparently total confusion”?⁴¹

then. And in any case there is no evidence within *Hamlet* to suggest that Claudius’s victim was a tyrant.

41. H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1956), 527; Fergusson, *Idea of a Theater*, 137–38; David L. Edwards,

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

Prominent scholars such as these are, of course, taking their lead from Hamlet himself, who appears to have undergone some kind of conversion between acts 4 and 5. “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” he tells Horatio, “rough-hew them how we will”; “there is special providence,” he adds (quoting the Gospel of Matthew), “in the fall of a sparrow.”⁴² Specifically, when it comes to having his father’s signet ring in his purse while on the boat, “even in that was heaven ordinant.”⁴³

But hang on—really? *Was* heaven ordinant? *Is* there a divinity shaping Hamlet’s ends? Did Providence prompt Hamlet to rummage through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s luggage late one night? Did God put Dad’s signet ring in his purse? Not on your life.

I must to England—you know that . . .
 There’s letters sealed and my two schoolfellows—
 Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged—
 They bear the mandate, they must sweep my way
 And marshal me to knavery. Let it work.
 For ’tis the sport to have the engineer
 Hoist with his own petard, and’t shall go hard
 But I will delve one yard below their mines
 And blow them at the moon.⁴⁴

This is Hamlet speaking to Gertrude in act 3, scene 4. Two whole acts earlier than his conversation with Horatio, then, Hamlet is already telling his mother that he knows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are up to no good; that he knows they have a deadly letter; and that

Poets and God: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Herbert, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2005), 74.

42. 5.2.10–11, 197–98; Matthew 10:29.

43. 5.2.48.

44. 3.4.198, 200–207.

JOSHUA LANDY

he has every intention of destroying them by means of their own weapons. Heaven? Providence? Divinity? Come on. God did not do this: Hamlet did.⁴⁵ *He* stashed the ring in his purse (if you want to unseal an envelope, you'd best carry something to reseal it with); *he* got himself up at night to find the letter, which he already knew was there; *he* had Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed, as he had planned to all along. There is no Providence at work in this play; there is a battle between chance and human agency, and there is nothing else.

HAMLET AND HORATIO, PROVIDENCE-DENIERS

At the end of the play, Fortinbras enters to find a huge pile of dead bodies, and naturally enough asks what on earth he's missed. Horatio offers to fill him in. Now Horatio is a Stoic,⁴⁶ and Stoics are big believers in Providence; they think that everything happens for a cosmic reason, and that we should be happy even if our dog dies, an idiot becomes emperor, or our legs fall off. Thus when Marcellus says "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," Horatio immediately responds "Heaven will direct it"; and when Hamlet says "There's a

45. Compare to some extent Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," in *Hamlet, Shakespeare, Hamlet: A Casebook*, ed. John D. Jump (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970), 86–107, p. 105.

46. For Horatio as Stoic, see for example D. G. James, "Moral and Metaphysical Uncertainty in Hamlet," in *Shakespeare, Hamlet: A Casebook*, ed. John D. Jump (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970), 78–85, 82; Charles and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: An Introductory Essay* (London: Routledge, 2005), 166. Horatio describes himself as "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.325), and elsewhere Hamlet admiringly describes him as "A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards / Hast ta'en with equal thanks." "Blest are those," he continues, "Whose blood and judgement are so well co-meddled / That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please. Give me that man / That is not passion's slave and I will hear him / In my heart's core—ay, in my heart of heart— / As I do thee" (3.2.62–70).

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

divinity that shapes our ends,” Horatio says (in so many words) “amen, brother.”⁴⁷ So, does Horatio begin his speech to Fortinbras by saying “let me tell you an amazing story about God’s Providence working through human beings”? Not in the slightest. Instead he says his story will be full

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause,
And in this upshot purposes mistook
Fallen on th’inventors’ heads.⁴⁸

Horatio then goes on to say they should hurry up with the coronation, in case yet more bad stuff goes down:

let this same be presently performed,
... lest more mischance
On plots and errors happen.⁴⁹

Mischance? Errors? Accidents? These are not the words of a believer in Providence. Fascinatingly, *Horatio has changed his mind*. What he has seen, especially in the last five minutes or so, has disabused him of the idea that there is a Divine Plan working for the ultimate good of human beings, making sure that the good prevail and the bad are punished.⁵⁰

Nor do I think Hamlet would accuse Horatio of getting the story wrong, if he were to show up at this point as a second ghost. “In this

47. 1.4.90–91; 5.2.11.

48. 5.2.365–69.

49. 5.2.377–79.

50. *Pace* Andrew Hui, who says accidents are consistent with Providence as long as one is a Neostoic like Justus Lipsius (“Horatio’s Philosophy in Hamlet,” *Renaissance Drama* 41.1–2 [2013]: 151–171, 164–66.

JOSHUA LANDY

harsh world draw thy breath in pain,” he has just begged Horatio, “to tell my story.”⁵¹ He has not said “in this great world draw thy breath in bliss, / To tell my story of how everything worked out for the best in the end / Thanks to, you know, that Divine Providence we talked about earlier.” At least in act 5, scene 2, Hamlet does not appear to be a believer in the Grand Cosmic Plan.

So what about the fall of a sparrow, heaven being ordinant, and all that stuff? Well, yes, Hamlet does say that. But then, Hamlet says all kinds of things. In the very same scene, Hamlet tells Laertes that he, Laertes, will beat him at fencing. (“I’ll be your foil, Laertes. In mine ignorance / Your skill shall, like a star i’th’ darkest night / Stick fiery off indeed.”) He then says the same thing to Claudius: “Your grace has laid the odds o’ th’ weaker side.” That is all very gallant, but consider this: *Hamlet has just told Horatio exactly the opposite*. “Since he [Laertes] went into France,” he says, “I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds.”⁵²

Hamlet cannot possibly believe that he is going to win *and* that he is going to lose. Maybe he is telling Laertes what Laertes wants to hear, to put him off his guard; or maybe Hamlet is telling Horatio what Horatio wants to hear, to allay his fears. Either way, Hamlet is using a little bit of rhetoric. Why not think this applies to the Providence chatter too? Hamlet knows full well that he deliberately brought the signet ring with him on the boat; surely he cannot actually imagine it was an act of God. There is no reason for us to think he is giving his honest opinion. When Hamlet says he’ll lose the bout, he is telling Laertes what Laertes wants to hear; when he deploys a string of fifty-dollar words to the puffed-up Osric, he is telling Osric what Osric wants to hear.⁵³ And when he says the world is ruled by

51. 5.2.332–33.

52. 5.2.232–34, 238, 189.

53. For the string of fifty-dollar words, see 5.2.98–105.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

Providence, he may well be telling Horatio, the Stoic, what Horatio wants to hear.

I don't think Hamlet ever really believes in Providence. As for Horatio, we saw a moment ago that he learns to let go of the idea. And surely they are both right. The play we have actually seen is Horatio's version—the “casual slaughters” version—not the one told by all those starry-eyed scholars. Why does Polonius die? Because he's in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why does Fortinbras succeed? Because he's in the right place at the right time. Why do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die? Because they are caught in the crossfire.⁵⁴ Why does Gertrude die? Because she drinks from the wrong cup. Why does Laertes die? Because the foils get swapped in the confusion. Why does Claudius die? Because the poison works too slowly on Hamlet. (Note to the vengeful: when buying poison, spend the extra dollar for the fast-acting kind.) Above all, why does Hamlet die? If it's Providence that kept him alive on the boat, where is Providence now?

DESPERATE DEFENSES OF
THE PROVIDENCE VIEW

Over the years I've made these arguments to a number of people, and it's been surprising to me how many still want to make a case for Providence being operative in *Hamlet*. For some of them, it's sufficient that the usurper meets a sticky end. But taking out the usurper is only half of the job; the other half is putting a rightful

54. Hamlet says so himself: “’Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes / Between the pass and fell incensed points / Of mighty opposites” (5.2.59–61). As pawns in the battle between Hamlet and Claudius, they arguably don't deserve what happens to them. And even if *they* merit death, surely Gertrude doesn't (despite her bad taste in men) and neither does Polonius (despite his idiocy and intrusiveness).

JOSHUA LANDY

ruler in his place. And that's not what happens here. Fortinbras is a Norwegian, which means that the Danish kingdom has fallen to one of its enemies—hardly what Hamlet Senior had in mind when calling for revenge. What's more, Fortinbras is a bit of a lunk, compared to Hamlet. True to his name, he is a strong commander, but he is hardly the smart, thoughtful, charismatic leader Hamlet would have been. The throne of Denmark has fallen to Norwegian GI Joe; Providence apparently fell asleep halfway through the planning meeting.

Other fans of the Providence theory prefer the Mysterious Ways defense. "Yes," they'll say, "Hamlet is dead and Fortinbras the Norwegian has seized the throne. Ophelia is drowned. And Gertrude is poisoned. But who knows: maybe all these calamities are going to lead to something amazing later on. The Lord moves in mysterious ways, in *Hamlet* as in real life." Well, maybe. But using that logic, I can prove that the entire plot—even the apparently happy moments—was masterminded by *Satan*, who presumably moves in equally mysterious ways. Why does Ophelia die? Because the Devil is in control, of course. Why does Hamlet live? Because the Devil wants as many violent deaths as possible. If Hamlet were to die too soon, Laertes and Gertrude would probably live to a ripe old age and die in their sleep—and that would be no fun at all. So why not think that Hamlet's survival is the work of the Devil? Who is to say? The same arguments that can be used to show that bad events turn out for the best can also be used to show that good events turn out for the worst. At the end of the day, nothing we see in the play proves that there's a providential design (whether divine or satanic) behind the massive heap of bodies.

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

The theodicy-believer is now left with only one card to play: the afterlife card. Doesn't the Ghost return from Purgatory? If there's a

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

Purgatory, mustn't there be a hell and a heaven (that place Hamlet worries he'll send Claudius to if he kills him at prayer)? And if so, doesn't that mean that God is, after all, making sure the wicked are punished and the virtuous rewarded?

Well, yes, God is indeed doing that; but only in the afterlife. Providence means God acting *in the world* and *for our good* and *in a way we can understand*. It doesn't mean God doing whatever he wants and calling it good; it doesn't mean God intervening at random in the world; and it doesn't mean God waiting until the afterlife to take action. It means God acting now, here, in the realm of the living.⁵⁵ Surely God isn't doing that when he lets Ophelia sink to her watery grave, Gertrude drink the poisoned cup, and Fortinbras ascend the throne. (Gertrude's recent choices may have been in poor taste, but they hardly warrant death.) Indeed, one might wonder why God would *bother* doing any of that, given that he's got the whole afterlife in which to settle accounts. The Ghost tells Hamlet to leave Gertrude to heaven; why not leave *everyone* to heaven, Claudius included?

No, this is not a play in which a benevolent God reaches down into the human realm to make sure that everything works out for the best in the end. There's a word for plays like that: comedies. *Hamlet*, by contrast, has the word "tragedy" right in the title. And whatever else the word "tragedy" means, it does not mean God making sure good people get rewarded and bad people get punished. (That's poetic justice, not tragedy.) The very existence of tragedy depends on

55. A note for pedants: I know that the term "Providence" has been used in all kinds of different ways. But when Claudius says "there's such divinity doth hedge a king," he means God protects us *now*, not in the afterlife. When Hamlet says "even in that was heaven ordinant," he means heaven was ordinant *now*, not in the afterlife. And again: when Claudius talks of God protecting kings, he is referring to God doing something that is good for us, in ordinary human terms. When Hamlet talks of heaven saving his life on the boat, he is referring to heaven doing something that is good for us, in ordinary human terms. There's no need for fancy footwork here: when Hamlet and Claudius and Horatio paint a portrait of divine Providence, they mean God operating *in the world* and *for our good*, where this means *good by everyday human standards*. They're wrong.

JOSHUA LANDY

a belief that bad things happen to good people—which is to say, on a belief that Providence does not operate in the world of the living.

So let's not get confused: in *Hamlet*, God is not intervening in the lives of mortals. The only two forces at work are human agency and blind luck. Hamlet would *love* there to be a divinity shaping our ends, but there isn't one. Instead, as Horatio comes to realize, the world is full of "mischance" and "errors," of "accidental judgments and casual slaughters." The world is a "harsh" place, one where bad things happen to good people, like Hamlet, and where good things happen to mediocre people, like Fortinbras. Human agents can work against that randomness, to try to control it; but God appears to be entirely out of the picture.

REASONS MUST COME FROM WITHIN

That, then, is what Hamlet has come to understand: the earth is a giant swarming chaos, marginally tamed in a few places by human decision-making. And so Hamlet's position, after hearing the Ghost's injunction to dispose of Claudius, is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. It's easy to imagine that Hamlet's task is blindingly obvious: do the thing, stab the king. It's easy to be puzzled—maybe even a little impatient—at the fact that Hamlet doesn't start stabbing right away. But his hesitation really shouldn't be so baffling. He cannot feel like an agent of Providence, because he has no evidence that God intervenes in the human realm. He cannot feel like a dutiful follower of tradition, because his tradition is internally contradictory. And he cannot feel like a restorer of order, since there was never any order to begin with. It's not open to Hamlet to inspect the state of the universe, notice a "disturbance in the Force," and automatically feel compelled to fix it. Maybe there's no way that things absolutely need to be. Maybe there are no "joints" to experience.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

No wonder Hamlet hesitates. No wonder he *keeps* hesitating, even after he is sure that the Ghost is telling the truth.⁵⁶ It's simply not enough for him to know that his murdered father calls for revenge; Hamlet needs to find his *own* reason for doing it. He needs to make sure that it is what *he* wants, not just what the Ghost wants. If you can't rely on tradition or divine sanction, you are going to have to get your reasons from within.

HAMLET'S MANY SELVES

We are back, finally, to the hopelessly vague advice of prating Polonius. Hamlet, it turns out, desperately *needs* to be true to himself; not so that he “cannot be false to any man” (ridiculous),⁵⁷ and not just for his own satisfaction, but because it is the only way to move forward. It's the only way he can make decisions about vitally important questions, such as whether or not to take revenge on Claudius. It's the only kind of grounding he can give to his actions, now that Providence and tradition have proven themselves ineffectual resources. It's the only guarantee that he won't keep doing things

56. A note for pedants: yes, Hamlet does delay; we know this because he beats himself up about it. In act 2, Hamlet calls himself a coward, explaining that he must be “pigeon-livered . . . or ere this / I should ha' fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal” (2.2.512–15). In act 3, when the Ghost shows up in Gertrude's room, Hamlet asks him “Do you not come your tardy son to chide . . . ?” (3.4.102). (Yes, says the Ghost: “this visitation / is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose,” 3.4.106–7.) In act 4, after Hamlet has had a chat with Fortinbras's captain, he feels renewed pangs of remorse. “How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge!” he exclaims. “I do not know,” he continues, “Why yet I live to say, ‘This thing's to do,’ / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't” (4.4.31–32, 42–45). Uncertainty about the murder of Hamlet Senior isn't a factor in any of these speeches, especially not the last two, which come after the moment when Hamlet says he'll “take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound” (3.2.278–79).

Of course, Hamlet isn't completely idle during this time, and he even manages to kill Polonius, taking him (so he claims) for Claudius. And the refusal to kill Claudius at prayer (3.3.76–86) is probably not a case of delay. But Hamlet must have had other opportunities to do the deed, otherwise he wouldn't be feeling so guilty about it.

57. As Polonius sees it, honesty is an inevitable consequence of authenticity: “This above all, to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be

JOSHUA LANDY

he regrets—reckless, impulsive quasi-actions like the stabbing of Polonius—and will, instead, do things he can be proud of.

But, to say it again, Hamlet has multiple selves to which he could be true. He is a mourner, an avenger, a lover, a son, a scholar, a poet. And no single one of these facets *defines* him. He isn't *just* a mourner. He isn't *just* a poet. And crucially, he cannot give up everything else and become an avenger, in spite of what he tells the Ghost in act 1:

Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records . . .

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain⁵⁸

Hamlet does no such thing, of course—and that is exactly as it should be. To forget everything else and become pure Avenger would be an enormous, brutal reduction. Each of his various roles captures a genuine part of who he really is; none of them, however, can lay claim to constituting the whole truth of his being, an essence next to which the others are mere sideshows. Hamlet has many, many selves to which to be true. Hamlet, *pace* Polonius, has a major problem on his hands.

LIVING LIKE AN ACTOR

The predicament is clearly a very bad one, but there is an ingenious solution on offer, one that allows Hamlet to move forward in the brief

false to any man" (1.3.77–79). But is that really true? Setting aside the ironic fact that Polonius himself is a bit of a fibber (3.2.367–73), and that he tells his own son in the very same speech (!) not to reveal his true thoughts to anybody (1.3.58), let's consider the case of a diplomatic soul, a compulsive liar, or a natural-born Machiavellian schemer (like Claudius, perhaps). For people such as these, being true to themselves is perfectly compatible with being false to anyone else they please. Indeed it may at times *require* them to lie. "As the night the day?" Not so much.

58. 1.5.97–103.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

time he is allotted. That solution is, in a nutshell, to *live like an actor*. It is to take what actors do on stage and import it into your everyday life. It is, in a way, to *play at being yourself*.⁵⁹

Think about what many actors do (the “method” ones, at least). When they want to convince us that they’re feeling sad, they draw on a genuine source of sadness in their own heart. (Who, after all, has never known adversity?) They magnify it, intensify it, amplify it, until they are melancholy through and through. Maybe sadness is only 5% of what they are feeling right now, but they take that 5% and inflate it to 100%.

Now think about your own life. You’re someone’s son or daughter; you are, perhaps, someone else’s parent; you’re someone’s employee (or student), maybe someone’s boss (or teacher); you’re someone else’s best friend, someone else’s life partner, someone else’s squash buddy . . . At any given moment, you are mainly called upon to be just one of these things. At work, you’re called upon to be the employee; at home, the child or parent; at squash, the fearsome but gracious opponent. And you have a choice. You can bring all of yourself to each moment, thinking about your kids while reaching for the drop shot, practicing your backhand while listening to Jimmy talk about his day at school, and worrying about emails while kissing your beloved; or you can attend fully to what’s in front of you, relegating everything else to the deep background. While helping with homework you can be *just* the parent. While hitting a cross-court volley you can be *just* the squash buddy. While writing an essay you can be *just* the student.

59. Self-fashioning was of course a topic of considerable interest in the Renaissance: think of Montaigne (“I have no more made my book than my book has made me”), Erasmus (“homines non nascuntur sed finguntur”), Pico della Mirandola, and so on. Stephen Greenblatt’s examples are More, Tyndale, Wyatt, Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare; see *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

JOSHUA LANDY

That's what it means to live like an actor. It means taking your many parts and giving each its day in the sun. It means identifying completely with one aspect of yourself at any given time. For as long as the moment lasts, you take that 5% and inflate it to 100%. You live it to the full, giving it your undivided concern. You *pretend* that it defines you; you act *as if* it defines you; you *make believe* that it defines you.

Here are some things this kind of life is *not*. It is not, first of all, a matter of inventing a persona for the benefit of other people; we're talking here about the part that "passes show."⁶⁰ It is not, second, a matter of picking a single aspect and calling it "the real you." (Hamlet tries that with The Avenger, remember, and it doesn't work.) It is not, third, a matter of combining all the parts into a single super-self. It's not at all clear, for example, how Lover and Avenger and Scholar could go together. And it is certainly not a matter, lastly, of inventing yourself out of nothing: *each of those roles is a genuine part of you*, even if none of them exhausts who you are. (To say "I'm a scholar" is not a *lie*; it's just a *simplification*.) This may be acting, but it's not *performance*. Instead, it is a matter of taking the many things you already are and giving each of them a proper run-out when its moment comes around.

WHAT HAMLET LEARNS FROM THE PLAYERS

This, it seems to me, is what Hamlet learns from the actors when they come to town. Hamlet, you'll recall, is fascinated by their ability to get all worked up over a long-gone and probably legendary figure.

60. 1.2.85. My argument here has nothing, for example, to do with Erving Goffman's fascinating discussion of performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Press, 1959). Goffman is talking about (intended) effects on an audience; I am talking about effects on one's own psyche.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

(“For nothing— / For Hecuba!”).⁶¹ Somehow the man playing Hecuba has managed to “force his soul . . . to his own conceit”⁶²—to convince himself, in other words, that he actually is the Trojan queen, complete with her sorrows and fears. And if the actor can do that, Hamlet reasons, then surely he can convince himself that he is Hamlet. All he needs to do is to borrow the technique.

Sure enough, what we see in act 5 is Hamlet playing at being himself.⁶³ In the graveyard scene, he inflates his love for Ophelia into something truly gargantuan: “Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum.”⁶⁴ (He really *does* have strong feelings for Ophelia—he is not lying—but he is inhabiting that affection to the greatest degree possible, with the full commitment of his entire being.) With Horatio he is pure friendship, even to the point, as we saw above, of pretending that his masterful jujitsu with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was all a stroke of luck sent from Heaven during a fortuitously sleepless night on shipboard.⁶⁵ With Osric, he is all courtier. And with Claudius, at last, he is pure revenge.

The death of Claudius is an extraordinary moment, one whose weirdness has not, I think, been fully appreciated. Yes, revenge heroes always kill the bad guy. But they don’t usually do it *twice*. And yet that’s exactly what Hamlet does: after stabbing Claudius with the poisoned rapier, he turns around and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup. Why do both? Why not let the wound do its work, as it

61. 1.5.97–103.

62. 2.2.488.

63. For this idea, compare Eric R. Boyer, “Hamlet and Absurd Freedom: *The Myth of Sisyphus* as Commentary on Shakespeare’s Creation,” *Ball State University Forum* 16.3 (1975): 54–66, 62–63 and, to some extent, L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes: An Approach to Hamlet* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 231. Boyer’s essay is inspired by Albert Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus*, and mine is too, to some extent; I am thinking in particular of the section on “Don Juanism” (*Le mythe de Sisyphe* [Paris: Gallimard, 1942], 99–107).

64. 5.1.258–60.

65. Note that he is being true to himself (as good friend) precisely by being “false” to Horatio; sorry, Polonius.

JOSHUA LANDY

just did on Laertes? On Laertes it took a mere thirty lines.⁶⁶ Is Hamlet really in that much of a hurry?

No. Hamlet needs to give Claudius the cup because he killed him the wrong way the first time. When he ran at Claudius with the rapier, he was moving impulsively (just as he had been earlier, when Polonius stirred behind the arras); he was reacting, not acting; he was simply getting his own back for the plot against his life. And his one-line avenger speech—“The point envenomed too? Then venom to thy work!”⁶⁷—was a serious disappointment, a crashing anticlimax. Four and half acts of waiting for him to stand triumphantly over Claudius’s corpse, and then *this*? It is hardly “you killed my father, prepare to die.”

Everything changes, however, when Hamlet forces the wine down Claudius’s throat. His gloating, for one thing, is vastly improved: “Here, thou incestuous, murd’rous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion.” (Not bad.) And this is a sign that Hamlet is remembering why he is *supposed* to be killing Claudius. Claudius is “murd’rous” not just because he has plotted against Hamlet Junior but also because he plotted against Hamlet *Senior*, going on, “incestuously,” to seduce and marry the latter’s widow. Hamlet is picking up from where he left off in the chapel, when his aim was to avenge his father. As though regretting his rush of blood, Hamlet is making up for it by killing Claudius a second time: no longer for himself but for his father and mother; no longer absent-mindedly but with full premeditation; no longer as an impulse but now as an *action*.

HOW HAMLET USES THE THEATER

How did Hamlet get to this point? How did he get from observing the actors to turning in such a bravura performance of his own? The

66. 5.2.285–315.

67. 5.2.206.

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

bridge, I think, is *The Murder of Gonzago*, that same play with which, as we saw, he aimed to catch the conscience of both King and Queen.

In *The Murder of Gonzago*, one man (Lucianus) kills another (Gonzago) by pouring poison into his ear. This, of course, is supposed to remind Claudius of his own dastardly crime: “I’ll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle”; “If his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech / It is a damned ghost that we have seen.”⁶⁸ But there’s one enormous difference between the two scenarios. Whereas Claudius is the brother of the man he kills, Lucianus is the nephew. Lucianus is to Gonzago, that is, as Hamlet is to Claudius.

Why, then, does *The Murder of Gonzago* suit Hamlet’s purposes so well? It’s not just because of the ear-poison. And it’s not just because of the remarriage subplot that we talked about earlier. It’s also because the killer looks a bit like Hamlet. So the play-within-the-play is more than a repetition of a past act of violence; it is also a preview of (and practice for) a *future* act of violence. It’s a way for Hamlet to imagine what it will be like to take up arms against his uncle. It’s a way for him to act out the murder in his imagination.⁶⁹

Kenneth Branagh’s film version captures this beautifully. Not content to remain within the audience and observe his mother (with Horatio keeping an eye on Claudius), Hamlet dashes onstage and stands right next to the actor playing Lucianus, yelling “the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge”⁷⁰ (fig. 6.1). (Notice, incidentally, how weird this line is: Lucianus is a murderer, not an avenger! Unless, of course, Lucianus is a figure for Hamlet . . .) Then, when Lucianus

68. 2.2.529–31; 3.2.76–78.

69. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, too, the protagonist (Hieronimo) writes a play and gives himself the role of the killer. But here it is so that he can actually take his revenge: Hieronimo makes sure that the swords used on stage are real. Hamlet, by contrast, uses the play in order to prepare himself, psychologically, for the task ahead.

70. 3.2.247.

JOSHUA LANDY



Fig. 6.1 Hamlet and “Lucianus”

Source: *Hamlet*, directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.



Fig. 6.2 Hamlet as Lucianus

kneels, Hamlet kneels along with him; and finally Hamlet goes so far as to take the vial of poison in his own hand, holding it menacingly beside the head of sleeping Gonzago (fig. 6.2).

What we are seeing here is the third and most important function of the play-within-the-play. It’s not just a trap for the conscience of the King (thanks to all the talk of ear-poison); it’s not just a trap for the conscience of the Queen (thanks to all the talk of remarriage); it’s

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

also a model for the prince, allowing him to imagine his way into the skin of a full-blown avenger. Hamlet sees himself as Lucianus, and indeed as the actor playing Lucianus. He is learning, by example, how to be the actor—the honest but amplifying actor—of his own multifarious selves.

WHAT REALLY CHANGES IN *HAMLET*

So, is there a transformation in *Hamlet*? Yes. But it's not the one we might imagine. It's not that Hamlet has become able to act; it's that he's become able to act in the right way. (He is already perfectly capable of killing as early as act 3—but impulsively, not deliberately.)⁷¹ It's not that Hamlet has found Providence; it's that he's found a way to live without it. And above all, it's not that Hamlet has found himself; it's that he's found a way to be true to his various selves.

Hamlet has learned how to live like an actor, taking the 5% and inflating it to 100%, letting each component have its day in the sun. That's how he's able to play the role of the lover, which he is in part but not entirely; that's how he's able to play the role of the friend, which he is in part but not entirely; and that's how he's able to play the role of the avenger, which he is in part but not entirely. When he kills Claudius for the second time, he is absorbedly inhabiting that last position, in the clear awareness that it does not completely define him. To Polonius's glib “to thine own self be true,” I like to think of Hamlet countering “to thine own *selves* be true-*ish*.”

71. Up to this point, Hamlet has only been able (a) to think without acting (as, say, in the Dull Revenge speech) or (b) to act without thinking (as when he kills Polonius). Authentic action requires both. Hamlet's problem is not that he thinks too much, and his solution is not to stop thinking; that's a recipe for a whole bunch of additional dead bodies. (It's worth remembering that Hamlet comes to regret the murder of Polonius; impulsive action often leads to remorse.) The proper solution is to connect actions up to intentions.

JOSHUA LANDY

HOW WE SHOULD USE THE THEATER

Being the actor of your life, living with full commitment to whatever part of yourself you are being at any given moment, inflating the 5% to 100%—that’s a pretty good way to live with intensity. It’s a pretty good way to be everything you are. It’s a pretty good way to be true to yourself (or rather, to your selves). Although the terms “acting” and “performance” may suggest deceit and invention, let’s not be confused: these selves really are part of you. You really are the parent, the child, the coworker, and the squash buddy.

It is not, however, a solution to all the problems of life. It won’t protect you from failure, from sickness, from death. It won’t protect you from fiendish plots hatched against you; for that you need a bit of prudence, a few friends, and a whole lot of luck. Hamlet, of course, isn’t so fortunate: he inhabits his roles for a heartbreakingly short time, and the play remains a tragedy. We should not be misled by this into thinking that he must be getting it wrong, since Shakespeare would have let him live longer if he had been getting it right. (Great literature doesn’t work that way.) But we should be aware that cultivating our many selves is not sufficient to guarantee us a long life safe from danger.

It is also not sufficient to guarantee us a *moral* life. Perhaps many of the parts of your personality are altruistic: you are the *caring* parent, the *dutiful* child, the *inspiring* boss. (For most of us there’s a moral self in there, and that self too needs her day in the sun.) But some parts are no doubt morally neutral, and one or two may be positively antisocial. In that case, again, you will need something else beyond a desire to live your components out to the full.

Finally, it won’t help you choose which self to bring online in cases where it’s not obvious. It won’t help you make a hierarchy out of the selves (should your status as CEO trump your status as parent? should you skip your grandchild’s wedding to attend your weekly

TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

squash game?). It won't help you organize the various components into a single mass; you may at times feel fractured, scattered, at odds with yourself.

But who knows: perhaps this fascinating option could still have its place in a well-lived life. And if it is, then our time spent with *Hamlet* is as worthwhile as Hamlet's time with *The Murder of Gonzago*. What we learn from the play is not some two-bit piece of folk wisdom from a doddering fool but a technique, a practice, a method.⁷²

Armed with our understanding of what life might require of us, we too can examine the activity of the performers, wonder what it would take to do what they do, imagine ourselves imbuing our day-to-day experience with that special state of mind. All that talk about the importance of theater; all that discussion of the miracle of imagination; all those indications that Hamlet is using dramatic performance as a formal model for self-fashioning—everything invites us to engage with the play before us in a similar spirit, learning not its “lessons” but its techniques. Maybe we won't live longer, but we surely will live more.

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72. For the difference between knowledge and know-how, see Gilbert Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” in *Collected Papers 1929–1968* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 2:212–25. For a book-length elaboration of the idea that some literary works are designed to transmit techniques, rather than to deliver lessons, see my *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

JOSHUA LANDY

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TO THINE OWN SELVES BE TRUE-ISH

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