Hamlet and the Burden of Knowledge

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Fearing "a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown," Hamlet urges Horatio in his dying words: "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (V.ii.339–40). Shakespeare's play surely provides that full report, yet Hamlet's name is hardly cleared of blemish. It carries in the general censure associations of ineptitude, perverseness, and criminality that even the wide sweep of his mind would not have imagined. He is too sensitive, too shy, too contemplative, too melancholy, too death-bent, too sexually confused, too credulous, too egocentric. As diverse as the accusations are, they all agree on one point: Hamlet's anguish and inaction point to a personal deficiency in the protagonist. My approach, sympathetic to Hamlet's belief that a full accounting is to his credit, follows in the line of H. D. F. Kitto and D. G. James, who have spoken forcefully for what might be called the "metaphysical" school of Hamlet criticism, one that finds the flaw in nature or philosophy rather than in the Prince. "There is room," says Kitto, "though not very much, for subtle and judicious appraisal of [Hamlet's] character and conduct; the core of his tragedy is not here, but in the fact that such surpassing excellence is . . . brought to nothing by evil." While James addresses Hamlet's metaphysical beliefs rather than the actual metaphysics of his world, the effect of his approach, like that of Kitto's, is to find Hamlet's delay and his anguish reflective in no major way of a dispositional flaw in the hero.

Three observations by James neatly match assumptions underlying my argument in this paper: James urges us to "elevate Hamlet's intellectual distresses to an equality in importance with his emotional state." He notes that it was Shakespeare's innovation to make Hamlet a scholar. And he contends that "we often underrate" Hamlet's concern about the afterlife, that we "need to remember how close these Elizabethan days were to the Middle Ages." Hamlet's philosophical uncertainties, his identity as a scholar, and his concern for his soul's safety are the conditions which I wish to stress. My overriding view of the play for which the present paper attempts to lay a foundation is that until his departure for England Hamlet, in accordance with his Christian humanist training, holds his soul's safety as paramount and engagement in the affairs of the world as an absolute obligation. All during this period of the play, however, his experiences are lending credence to the Augustinian
emphasis on man's fallen nature and are calling into question whether the dual goals of Christian humanism—spiritual purity and worldly service—are mutually compatible. Moreover, this doubt raises in Hamlet the additional fearsome prospect that in trying to fulfill these goals, he is running an extraordinary spiritual risk, not only because of the sin-fraught potential of the mission commanded him by the ghost, but also because, as a scholar, he is more accountable before God for his actions than a person not so educated would be. This complex of doubts and dangers, which he fully appreciates because of his scholarly training and aptitude, comprises the burden of knowledge which inflicts upon Hamlet the torments of uncertainty and delay. The tragic flaws are not in Hamlet, but in the Christian humanist philosophy, of which he is the most capable proponent imaginable. The play is, on the one hand, a celebration of the magnificent achievement of the humanist program in fulfilling human potentials: Hamlet is every bit the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (III.i.151); and, at the same time, it is a devastating portrayal of humanism's other legacy, the burden of knowledge, dramatically rendered through Hamlet's suffering and his eventual abdication of reason's guidance.

The Christian humanism that Shakespeare is embodying in Hamlet and putting to the test bears a decidedly English stamp. In keeping with the English character, which before the eighteenth century at least was more practical and moral than philosophical and theoretical, English humanism was more a qualitative attitude toward experience and self than a catechistic doctrine. Symptomatic of this feature is the fact that its major forces, John Colet, Thomas More, and their kindred spirit from Rotterdam, Erasmus, could press for reforms in the Church without contesting its doctrinal premises. I will cite three closely related qualities in their brand of humanism that one finds in the conception of Hamlet as a way to define the cultural heritage which is being subjected to tragic pressures in the play. First, English humanism, though most obviously an educational program, is essentially rooted in moral objectives. Knowing (gnosis) is not an end in itself, but rather a vitally important prelude to doing (praxis). Secondly, a proper education would foster piety and bring faith and reason into a comfortable balance within the individual, with the latter faculty enhancing, not supplanting, the former. And thirdly, a proper education was conceived as capable of serving heavenly as well as earthly ends.

On the first of these points, E. H. Harbison has observed that John Colet's interest in learning was "personal, moral, and religious, rather than dogmatic or theological." He saw education as a valuable vehicle for purifying one's own nature and shaping a more virtuous society. In a similar way Hamlet's intellect impresses us with the speed and subtlety with which it responds to
the moral and religious implications of a situation. His scholarly nature parades none of the pedantries of a Jaques or Holofernes. Study appears in him to have been a training of the spirit, not a thirst for knowledge or a vain indulgence. On the second point, Harbison singled Colet out especially for his successful marriage of learning with piety. Whereas Petrarch, like most other would-be synthesizers of Christian and classical ideals, "could never quite bring his scholarly activity and his Christian faith into any organic relationship with each other," Colet finds no conflict between the personal authority which learning invests in the scholar and the humility which an appreciation of God’s grace inspires. Colet declares simply that one should order his life "by reason and grace" and that one should "use well temporal things [and] desire eternal things." Hamlet, as I shall detail presently, maintains a sensitivity to the need for prayer and for obedience to canon law and divine will at the same time that he trusts in the efficacy of his own reason. In effect, it is faith that reason has a place within God’s providential scheme that makes its operation efficacious ( nisi creditoris, non intelligitis). The third important feature of English humanism reflected in the character of Hamlet is the qualified role accorded learning in personal salvation. The English humanists were less sanguine than many of their Italian counterparts and than those of the scholastic tradition about reason’s powers, and the English humanists cannot be charged, as others often were, that in so valuing their reason, they no longer felt the need of God’s grace. But, if the English were not overly presumptuous about man’s intellectual powers, neither were they so confidently pessimistic, as Luther and Calvin, in denying to learning and reason any role at all in one’s salvation. The English humanist’s middle ground is charted in a passage of a letter written by Thomas More: "No one has ever claimed that a man needed Greek and Latin, or indeed any education, in order to be saved. Still this education which he calls secular does train the soul in virtue. . . . There are some who through knowledge of things natural construct a ladder by which to rise to the contemplation of things supernatural." In Hamlet Bernardo and Marcellus are right in seeking out the scholar Horatio to help them cope with the phenomenon of the ghost and Horatio is right, likewise, in turning to Hamlet whose scholarship as well as kinship with the assumed form makes him the most reasonable choice among men to deal with the apparition. Moreover, what Hamlet’s training teaches him about dealing with the supernatural is not knowledge of its intents and nature, but rather circumspection, so that even when the ghost’s words mirror his “prophetic soul,” Hamlet with a humble recognition of his own limited powers of mind, will “have grounds / More relative than this,” before acting. The intuitive component of right reason (discretion, conscience, judgment) is the basis upon which the English humanists cherish this human faculty as
Godlike; but they are also aware that wish fulfillment, which is passion-bred, can take on the seductive appearance of divine intuition.

If reason joins with faith in aiding man to apprehend—comprehend things divine, reason also joins with piety in aiding him to curb sinful inclinations. Erasmus observed of Colet that he managed his passions “by philosophy and sacred studies, watching, fasting, and prayer.”\(^9\) In like manner we watch Hamlet both invoke divine assistance\(^1\) and also exercise his own educated intellect to guide his actions and contain his passions. By unpacking his heart with words, he sets at a distance and gains perspective on the frustrations of the moment, thus avoiding impulsive actions unauthorized by conscience. Hamlet’s method typically is to set the immediate objects of his anger into general topoi, learned categories: “Frailty, thy name is woman”; “My tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!”; “Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across . . . .”; “the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards . . . .” (italics mine). In such instances as these, we see Hamlet applying tools of learning for personal, moral therapy.

Shakespeare creates the tragic circumstance, the “‘boundary situation,’ man at the limits of his sovereignty,” by setting his marvelous integration of intellectual authority and personal piety, conceived by English Christian humanism and embodied in Hamlet, against the seemingly irreconcilable demands of the ghost: to exact revenge against Claudius, his kin and king, and to keep his mind from taint in the process.\(^1\)

To receive such an order from a ghost who has just referred to the unspeakable torments of hell should make even a non-Christian fear for his soul’s health; and such a fear rightly colors Hamlet’s acceptance of the task with an expression of deep reluctance: “O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I.v.188–89). Hamlet commits himself to facing and dealing with the ghost’s command because he believes in the Christian humanist tenet that one’s reason, refined through education, is “sovereign” and “god-like,” capable of and responsible for charting a moral course in worldly affairs. References by Horatio and Ophelia, as well, to reason’s sovereignty make clear that these values are orthodox in Elsinore and that Christian humanism is the philosophy seen to be under attack by more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in it.\(^1\) Hamlet is rightly as anxious to preserve his mind from taint as he is anxious to revenge; and his caution, gallingly though it is to his honor and passions, is the necessary holding action until he can find a way that satisfies both parts of the ghost’s injunction. Hamlet’s all-embracing awareness of the risks of damnation that he is running gives his conscience its tenacity against the assaults on it by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

As powerful as Hamlet’s sense of filial honor and his hatred of Claudius
are as goads to action, they are in themselves not equal to the moral authority of Hamlet's conscience, his right reason. But contemptus mundi sentiment, fed by experience and reinforced by time-honored Christian tradition, attacks Hamlet's understanding from within, tearing down the pales and forts of the humanist philosophy on which his trust in reason is pinned to where outside forces can make a breach. The Achilles heel of Christian humanism lay in its failure to accommodate adequately the doctrine of the fall. "Erasmus," William Woodward has observed, "was constantly accused by his enemies of a lack of one of the deeper instincts of the Christian consciousness, the sense of the depravity of human nature" (p. 46). Hamlet, a product of Erasmian principles, would hold by precept that only "defective training, evil circumstances, made men bad: by nature they were created for good" (Woodward, p. 46). But in competition with his ideal, Hamlet feels a deep sense of man's fallen nature. The events surrounding and following his father's death by their very nature call to Hamlet's mind and to ours that first fall, the source of man's depravity: King Hamlet's death in the garden, Claudius' "primal eldest curse" of killing a brother, and the sense of Elsinore as an "unweeded garden" where "things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (I.i.135–37). On the philosophical level Hamlet presents a contest between reason and the effects of the fall for the right to define the essential nature of man. Called into question by the contest is the purpose and value of education.

In presenting this conflict, Hamlet reflects the concerns and mood that emerged in England around the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, when a stronger than usual current of pessimism manifested itself. Optimistic assumptions about man and society which undergirded the Christian humanist educational movement came under attack by scholar products of the system whose contemptus mundi sentiments like those of the late Middle Ages reflect not so much a single philosophical school as a pervasive mood of the times, rooted more in disillusioning experience than in a systematic logic, more in feeling than in thought, more in social and psychological impulses than in scriptural exegesis and reformation doctrine. Of the fifteenth century Johan Huisinga has observed, "It was . . . bad form to praise the world and life openly. It was fashionable to see only its suffering and misery." Hershel Baker notes the resemblance and indebtedness of the late English Renaissance to this earlier era: "The Jacobean playwrights are very near the mortuary horrors of the late Middle Ages. . . . To say that Raleigh, the last Elizabethan, Dr. Browne, the amateur of Baconian science, Donne, the sporadic skeptic, and Taylor, the exponent of Anglican via media, could draw at will on the venerable tradition of pessimism is not to charge them with insincerity; it is to suggest that in the early seventeenth century men were still close to their
medieval heritage, and that the inherited patterns of thought and emotion were still powerful."\textsuperscript{15}

A number of postmedieval influences helped to shape the particular forms which this later period of pessimism took. The Puritan temperament found ample stimulus for feeling contempt toward the human condition in the theology of John Calvin.\textsuperscript{16} Humanists could look to Ficino and Dürer who had revived in their own works the classical concept of the melancholy wise man found in Problems attributed to Aristotle and embellished by astrological associations with Saturn.\textsuperscript{17} Sixteenth-century Italians, it seems, adopted melancholy as a national posture, and English travellers in the late Renaissance paraded their high culture by transporting this manner to England.\textsuperscript{18} Young gentlemen scholars of the 1590s, especially those products of the Inns of Court environment, fostered the mood by their revival and imitation of the classical satirists, especially Juvenal, the darkest and most cynical one.\textsuperscript{19} The multiple forms which pessimism took at this time suggest that they are reinforcements or manifestations of a general condition, not causes of it, and that what they betoken collectively is a reaction against the orthodox value system, that is, against the Christian humanist vision of society and the educational program which for close to a century had promoted this vision.

Especially under attack were the humanist notions that learning made one more virtuous and that society would welcome and be moved to virtue by the learned man. This Augustinian distrust of humanistic optimism finds its consummate popular expression in the medieval treatise attributed to Thomas à Kempis, \textit{The Imitation of Christ}, written in 1427. The English of the Tudor period never lost sight of the medieval reservations about learning even as they sought to realize the hopeful premises of their Christian humanist alternative. As recent studies have shown, \textit{The Imitation} was held in high regard by Thomas More: his devotional writings manifest the debt directly, and \textit{The Imitation} was one of three pious tracts which More especially recommended to the lay reader in his \textit{Confutation of Tyndale's Answer} (1532).\textsuperscript{20} More's and Erasmus's friend, Richard Whitford, translated \textit{The Imitation} in 1530, and as a masterpiece of English prose, the translation enjoyed frequent reprints and wide influence. In all, \textit{The Imitation} received four English translations during the sixteenth century, in 1503–04, 1530, 1567, and 1580, and the Short Title Catalogue records more than thirty issues and editions of these various translations during the sixteenth century. Twelve editions of the 1580 Rogers translation had appeared by 1609.

\textit{The Imitation} lost none of its gloss when England broke with Rome perhaps because the work's stress on piety matched the moral premises of English humanism and its interest in morals was not integrated inextricably with
religious doctrine. Harold C. Gardiner observes, "The little book is not the whole of the Catholic faith; it represents a very small section of it, and that section is not dogmatic; it is not even notably intellectual." Anglicanism, especially the Elizabethan compromise worked out under the leadership of the Queen's first Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, continued the English humanist emphasis of piety over doctrinal purity, an emphasis which Thomas More most memorably set forth in Utopia. Florence Higham writes of Parker, "He saw the Anglican Church as part of the Church Universal, tracing its proud heritage back to the first centuries after Christ, and the Reformation was not for him a denial of that heritage but a rooting out of the corruptions that had adhered to it during the passage of the years." In spirit and motive, then, The Imitation was congenial to sixteenth-century Anglicanism. Speaking more to the heart than to the mind, in language free of theological and exegetical sophistication, it kept alive in England during the humanist period the medieval notion of what conduct was proper and advisable to one seeking salvation. Like the humanist school and unlike Continental Reformation doctrine, The Imitation acknowledged that one's learning could have a bearing on one's salvation, only it saw education to be more likely a hindrance than an aid.

The likely effect of learning, the contemptus mundi argument contends, is pride. Thomas, in the work's opening sections titled "... Despising of All Vanities of the World" and "Against Vain, Secular Learning ...," questions whether there is any connection between knowledge and virtue: "If you know all the books of the Bible merely by rote and all the sayings of the philosophers by heart, what will it profit you without grace and charity? ... A humble farm laborer who serves God is more acceptable to Him than an inquisitive philosopher who ... willfully forgets himself" (p. 32). Thomas does not consider the case of the humble philosopher who couples grace and charity with learning, but he strongly suggests that virtues are not derived through learning, and, moreover, that learning is more likely to encourage pride than to encourage humility: "Those who have great learning desire generally to seem to be accounted wise in the world" (p. 33). Marlowe's Doctor Faustus would seem to support Thomas's contention. Doubt about the moral efficacy of knowledge is likewise voiced by Thomas Nashe in his 1592 pageant, Summer's Last Will and Testament. A rich source in its own right of contempt-for-the-world diatribe, the pageant is Nashe's bittersweet farewell to the humanist ideal, its passing marked by the imminent death of the pageant's protagonist, Summer. Its most striking piece is a lengthy harangue against learning, voiced by the character Winter. A portion of it reads:
... there is no vice,
Which learning and wild knowledge brought not in,

In brief, all books, divinity except,
Are nought but tables of the devil's laws,
Poison wrapt up in sugared words,
Man's pride, damnation's props, the world's abuse.23

The character, Summer, recoils at Winter's harsh indictment of learning, but it is Summer himself who, feeling a growing disillusionment with the world as he seeks in vain for a worthy heir, concludes: "Knowledge breeds pride, pride breedeth discontent. / Black discontent, thou urgest to revenge" (p. 182).

Whereas humanism encourages the notion of salvation by self-fulfillment through education, the pessimistic school argues, from its assumption of human depravity, for salvation through self-denial, repentance, and grace. Thomas declares, "If you would learn anything and know it profitably to the health of your soul, learn to be unknown and be glad to be considered despicable and as nothing" (p. 33); and Nashe's Winter again echoes Thomas's sentiments when he cites the example of Themistocles, who,

... having spent all his time
In study of philosophy and arts,
And noting well the vanity of them,
Wish'd, with repentance for his folly past,
Some would teach him th' art of oblivion,
How to forget the arts that he had learn'd.

( pp. 190–91)

Disavowal of learning and self-denial mark as well the strident verse satires of John Marston that appear in 1598–99. He closes his Scourge of Villanie with a prayer to "everlasting Oblivion":

Let others pray
For ever their faire Poems flourish may.
But as for mee, hungry Oblivion
Devoure me quick, accept my orison.24

In Hamlet the protagonist's rejection of learning is a gradual process. Passion and honor contribute frontal attacks on conscience in Hamlet's three major self-castigating soliloquies (II.ii.550–605, III.i.55–87, IV.iv.32–66). But
in addition there are two passages in particular which accentuate how Hamlet’s sensitivity to sin and the worthlessness in the human condition is calling into question the point and value of learning. We see Hamlet warding off the inquiries of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by expounding his humanist vision of man and then challenging it with feelings of contempt. He marvels with formal, rhetorical precision on what a piece of work man is (‘how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god!’) only to conclude this learned vision with the deeply felt response, ‘and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?’ (II.ii.303–08). Self-contempt, built jointly upon awareness of personal sin and a sense of human depravity in general (we are all inescapably breeders of sinners), provokes Hamlet’s warning to Ophelia not to seek his company: ‘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, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, believe none of us’ (III.i.121–28). The sins which Hamlet confesses here are not the token gesture of false modesty, although they are as yet contained impulses unrealized in action. By Act V, however, these acknowledged propensities surface unashamedly, as the natural guilt (‘conscience’) which had previously repressed them is itself repressed. Hamlet’s pride will redefine what had been perceived as a spiritual mission as now an heroic enterprise. His revenge becomes a contest between ‘mighty opposites,’ in which ‘baser natures’ who get in the way can be casually dispatched, and pleasure can be taken in the device that eliminates them. In this heroic posture Hamlet will deny to Horatio that he feels any pangs of conscience over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, although the zeal with which he defends his attitude betrays an uneasiness with his newly assumed identity.

Ambition finds expression in Hamlet when he includes among the reasons that he feels he may kill Claudius in ‘perfect conscience,’ his uncle’s having ‘popp’d in between th’ election and [his] hopes’ (V.ii.65). Herein he adds to the ghost’s given reasons one of his own. Thwarted ambition is at first no more than a tertiary aggravation to Hamlet behind those of his father’s murder and his mother’s disgrace, and we need not question Hamlet’s disclaimer when Rosencrantz early in the play suggests that ambition has made him melancholy. Nevertheless, its presence is felt and acknowledged to Ophelia; and by the time of Hamlet’s departure for England under guard, ambition has risen along with pride to unhealthy proportions as evidenced in his peculiar praise of Fortinbras for being puffed with ‘divine ambition.’ Ven-
gence, the third vice Hamlet confesses to Ophelia, will assert itself beyond the bounds of reason when in the prayer scene he presumes the right not only to kill Claudius but also to damn him—only God has disposition over the souls of men—and when, in similar fashion, he orders the English to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "not shriving time allow'd." In sum, Hamlet's bleak assessment of man as a sinner who breeds sinners is not a flippant or casual iteration of Augustinian Christian commonplaces, exercised here to keep Ophelia at a distance, but it is a keenly felt condition based on his awareness of vices within him, ones which he can feel the pressures of his situation coaxing into reality. The solution then which he gives to Ophelia is the one Thomas gives to those seeking salvation: religious seclusion from the world, "Go thy ways to a nunner'ry" (III.i.129).

At those periods before the Mousetrap play where a sense of fallen nature dominates Hamlet's vision, his words signal his emotional inclination to reject the humanist faith in man and his reason; but they are not the actual rejection. In a more optimistic mood, when the promising prospects of the mousetrap strategy are buoying Hamlet's hopes for advancing his cause, he declares his continuing affection for and allegiance to the Christian humanist ideal, one which he feels Horatio embodies:

... blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-meddled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.

(III.ii.68–71)

Moreover, in acknowledging that his "dear soul was mistress of her choice. / And could of men distinguish her election" (II. 62–63), Hamlet admits a humanistic vision of himself that counters his earlier assessment of himself as an "arrant knave." But Hamlet's early expressions of contemptus mundi are significant because they mark the role which such thought is playing in undermining his faith that he can set the world right without tainting himself. Without this faith, there will be nothing preventing Hamlet from subordinating his mental energies to the dehumanizing dictates of passion and honor.

Besides doubt in reason's power to master passions, the other force undermining Elizabethans' trust in the Christian humanist program was the feeling that society was irremediably decadent. Even assuming that one could through education so refine one's reason that it could recognize and overrule evil—or, as the ghost so neatly puts it, that "virtue... never will be moved / Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven" (I.v.53–54)—would that
virtue have any power in society? The Augustinian vision of the two irreconcilable worlds, the city of man and the city of God, argues that to attain the latter one must eschew the former: "by despising the world to draw daily nearer and nearer to the kingdom of heaven" (p. 32), to quote Thomas again. The humanists, however, found the avoidance of taint to the soul by a cloistered avoidance of knowledge and life repugnant, and their commitment to the active life is effectively sounded by the Duke in Measure for Measure, when he instructs Angelo:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not.

(I.i.32–35)

Humanists like More and Erasmus believed in working through education to make the city of man a mirror of the city of God, though even More mocked lightly the notion of perfectibility in his term "Utopia," which means at once the good place (eutopia) and no place. If, however, we deny not only its perfectibility, but also its improvability—the thrust of contemptus thought is that society is impervious to virtue—then we are forced to view the humanist commitment to social reform through education as futile and the consequences of pursuing it, spiritually hazardous.

One raised with the expectation of leading society by the force of his pious wisdom will suffer frustration at his ineffectualness and will also stand exposed to the corroding influences of the world he planned to lead. By Shakespeare's day many scholars were suffering demeaning employment or none at all; and although historians might say that the humanist educational system had simply produced more leaders than there were positions to claim them, for the victims the fault in society was one of morals, not economics. Poets' railings against poor patronage and dramatists' presentations of neglected scholars place the blame for their idleness on the insensitivity, the indifference, or the antipathy of court society toward men trained in values. As a result of the world's indifference, the virtues theoretically acquired by the scholar through learning were severely tested by unwanted idleness and seldom a match for its demoralizing effects. Men who, because of their training, were supposedly all the more responsible for their actions found that very education to be a fosterer of unfulfillable expectations, seeding their minds with pride and resentment. Nashe describes the process in the section of Pierce Penniless headed "What it is to Make Men Labour Without Hope":
You all know that man, insomuch as he is the image of God, delighteth in honour and worship, and all Holy Writ warrants that delight, so it be not derogatory to any part of God’s own worship; now take away that delight, a discontented idleness overtakes him.  

And as the homilist notes, “Where idleness is once received, there the devil is ready to set his foot, and to plant all kind of wickedness. . . . When one doth nothing, he learneth to do evil.”

Hamlet’s idleness is not, in the usual sense at least, due to lack of patronage; but Hamlet draws an analogy between his situation and that of the unfavored scholar when, in typically sardonic and teasing fashion, he puts off Rosencrantz’s second prying into the causes for his madness with, “I lack advancement” (III.ii.340). If Hamlet’s cause for unwanted idleness is far more complex than that of Nashe’s Pierce Penniless, social decadence, nevertheless, underlies both. Hamlet’s moral training makes him unable to accept the court on its terms while, at the same time, the court will only respond to Hamlet’s troubling presence by labeling him insane and by seeking to “cure” him of his maladjustment. An educated conscience, as much as the ghost’s visitation, creates the gap between Hamlet and the Elsinore community; and as Hamlet’s sense of isolation, and its attendant idleness, increases with the proved untrustworthiness of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia, any sense the society, to the extent that the microcosm of the court defines it, welcomes guidance from the scholar prince appears a naive ideal.

Given a morally intractable society, the humanist educational program is subject not only to charges of faulty philosophical premises but also to spiritually hazardous consequences because it encourages its students to expect, and, hence, to desire power in this world. Several plays of the period, of which Hamlet is the first, create the situation of a disillusioned, high-minded scholar who, having despaired of virtue’s power and resigned himself to the divorce between the cities of men and God, chooses to surrender his scholar’s conscience in order to engage in the affairs of the world. In The White Devil, Flamino, after seven years of penury as a scholar at Padua, finds that subsequent court service provides no opportunity for the exercise of his intellectual training or advancement because of it. The court, he says, has made him “more courteous, more lecherous by far, / But not a suit the richer” (I.ii.326–28). Disillusioned with the notion that an educated sensibility has marketable value and seeing hopes for his own advancement to lie in pandering his sister, Vittoria, for Duke Brachiano, Flamino denounces all dictates of conscience: “This face of mine / I’ll arm and fortify with lusty wine / ‘Gainst shame and blushing” (I.ii.330–32). By surrendering virtue in favor of Machiavellian real politique, Flamino hopes at least to gain some personal ac-
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authority and freedom to act. Although Flameneo's speech does not explicitly link conscience ("shame and blushing") with his scholarly training, an earlier model, Vindice, in The Revenger's Tragedy does enforce this tie. Having determined that "to be honest is not to be i' th' world" (I.i.95), Vindice invokes Impudence:

Thou goddess of the palace . . .

. . . .
Strike thou my forehead into dauntless marble,
. . . .
And if I must needs glow, let me blush inward,
That this immodest season may not spy
That scholar in my cheeks, fool-bashfulness.

(I.iii.5–12)²⁹

Hamlet, too, renounces his learning; what Vindice calls "that scholar in my cheeks, fool-bashfulness," Hamlet calls "conscience." After his murder of Polonius has destroyed his attempts at judicious plotting, and after the corroding idleness enforced on him by the restraints of conscience has exhausted his moral defenses, Hamlet castigates reason:

Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To lust in us unus'd.

(IV.iv.36–39)

And envious of the freedom of action enjoyed by the thoughtless Fortinbras, he casts off the burden of knowledge by calling it "some craven scruple / . . . which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward" and pledges "from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV.iv.36–66).

In comparing Hamlet here with these later malcontent figures, it is important to note that Shakespeare differs from his contemporary playwrights in holding off this abdication of conscience for four acts. In the others, the surrender comes in the first act enabling a plot of intrigue to follow. In Hamlet Shakespeare focusses our attention at length on the scholar prince's efforts to obey the spiritual guidance of his conscience while still addressing worldly responsibilities. By making Hamlet's conflict with the dual demands of his philosophy for salvation and action central to the play, Shakespeare dramatizes not only the doubts about the validity of Christian humanist assumptions concerning man but also the special burden of accountability which Scripture
imposes as the price of scholarship, a burden which had weighed heavily on the minds of Christian humanist proponents from the outset. According to Saint Luke, Christ gave the following warning:

And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.

(King James Version, 12:47–48)

Thomas in *The Imitation of Christ* paraphrases this passage for part of his argument against secular learning:

The more knowledge you have, the more grievously will you be judged for its misuse, if you do not live according to it. Therefore, do not lift yourself up into pride, because of any skill or knowledge that is given you, but have the more fear and dread in your heart—for it is certain that, hereafter, you must yield a stricter accounting.

(p. 33)

The English humanists were not insensitive to this risk. In John Redford’s dramatic allegory on the way to knowledge titled *Wit and Science* (ca. 1539), the protagonist, the youthful Wit, has overcome the thwarts of idleness and tediousness and won the hand of Lady Science only to find that his trials have just begun. Lady Science (that is, knowledge) greets Wit with a warning about how he is to use her:

My presence bringh’th you a clogg, no naye,  
Not in the kepinge of me onelye,  
But in the use of Science cheeflye.  
. . . . .  
. . . if ye use me not well, then dowt me,  
For sure ye were better then without me.

(1033–41)

And Lady Science assures Wit that he will use her properly if he remains ever mindful of his ending: “Th’end of our lives wold be in rememb’ring; / Which remembrance, Wit, shall sure defend ye / From the misuse of Science” (1089–91).
Under these pressures, melancholy became the characteristic mood of the Christian humanist scholar, as Erwin Panofsky has shown in his studies of Dürer and Ficino. Panofsky describes the strain between Christianity and humanism that engendered this melancholy as follows:

In so far as the mental sovereignty desired by humanism sought to fulfill itself within the framework of a Christian culture, it meant danger as much as freedom . . . in his new dignity man appeared in an ambiguous light . . . For in the measure in which human reason insisted on its “god-like” power, it was bound also to become aware of its natural limits. . . . The birth of this new humanist awareness took place, therefore, in an atmosphere of intellectual contradiction.

Events conspire to thrust Hamlet into just such a state of mind. Can his “god-like reason” really penetrate the inscrutability of the ghost, master the passions that blur his judgment, decipher the false presences of those around him, and set right the broken time? Hamlet couples these doubts with the awareness that in assuming reason’s efficacy and the responsibility to exercise it, he has committed himself to a task which courts damnation at every turn.

It is, I think, likely that the biblical warning to the learned was in Shakespeare’s mind as one of the pressures that would lead his scholar prince into his state of melancholy. The scriptural passage occurs in the same twelfth chapter of Saint Luke as the references to God’s care for the sparrow to which Hamlet alludes in Act V. There is also a possible echo of the biblical phrase “beaten with many stripes” in Hamlet’s urging Polonius to use the players better than their deserving: “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?” (II.ii.529–30). The biblical warning to the learned, in any case, is common knowledge; and Hamlet, up to the prayer scene, shows himself constantly alert to Lady Science’s instruction that memento mori is the necessary condition for the right use of learning. Memento mori governs Hamlet’s resistance to suicide. It lies behind the response he gives—“So be it!”—to Horatio’s offstage cry “Heavens secure him!” which immediately follows the ghost’s visit (I.v.113–14); and behind his begging Marcellus and Horatio to leave him so that he may go pray (II.126–32). It underlies also his first remark to Ophelia in their famous scene: “Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins rememb’red” (III.i.87–88). Even in the greatest heat of passion Hamlet couches his vow to revenge in spiritually sensitive terms that submit to heavenly authority: “With wings as swift / As meditation, or the thoughts of love” (I.v.29–30, italics mine); and the phrase is all the more impressive when contrasted with Laertes’ spiritually mindless rant:
To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation.

(IV.v.132–34)

Though brief, the phrases by Hamlet cited here are substantive, not formal, uttered by one who has seen a ghost and, as a scholar, is acutely aware of his spiritual burden. Hamlet bases upon sound theological judgment his decision to test the honesty of the ghost because it might be a devil. He knows, and there are many contemporary tracts to support him, that his melancholy makes him particularly vulnerable to demonic suggestion and, hence, a likely target. Hamlet shows the same sensitivity before going to see Gertrude in her chamber when, in soliloquy, he calls to mind the demonic forces of the witching hour that heighten his potential for evil and must be guarded against (“Now could I drink hot blood,” italics mine), and he prays that the soul of Nero not enter his bosom (III.ii.388–99).

Hamlet’s stature as a tragic hero is manifest in its fullest degree up to and including this last cautionary self-instruction. During this long period of trial Hamlet has maintained the dignity of his sense of self, based on the primacy of conscience and reason against enormous undermining pressures which would reduce him to a mere man of action. Hamlet’s achievement in resisting precipitous action seems appropriately glossed by Oscar Wilde’s remark: “The one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action. He, indeed, knows neither the origin of his deeds nor their results.” Accordingly, when in Act V Hamlet drifts in nature away from his soul’s dear choice, Horatio, toward that “very noble youth” (V.i.224) Laertes, one senses a diminishment in his character. Heretofore Hamlet had coupled the vital energy of the man of action with the circumspect wisdom of the scholar, “blood and judgment . . . co-meddled,” but now the nobler member of the pairing has been forfeited.

Approaches to the play which do not stress, as the present one does, the centrality to Hamlet’s dilemma of Christian humanist knowledge and values, usually conclude that Hamlet has grown into a tranquil maturity in Act V. If, however, the tragic suffering which Hamlet takes upon himself by allegiance to conscience is seen as the measure of his greatness, then the calm that comes when he removes conscience from its counselor role in the decision-making process is appalling, not consoling. Tragic awareness (anagnorisis) exists for Hamlet, as it does for Macbeth, before sinful thoughts and actions have suppressed his conscience and hardened his heart. Whereas Oedipus and Lear are plagued at the end by awareness of their responsibility for the havoc brought on by their unnatural acts, Hamlet and Macbeth are plagued
by awareness of the terrifying spiritual consequences they face if they yield to corrupting influences. After their falls their pangs of conscience gradually lessen because their wills suppress rather than confront the too painful truths.

When Hamlet’s moral defenses fail him in the prayer scene and when his vicious determination not to kill Claudius unless he can damn him is then quickly followed by the irrevocable murder of Polonius, Hamlet’s hopes for remaining an untainted revenger are dashed. Once fallen, it seems that the floodgates holding back his passions are burst, and his actions after the slaying of Polonius are almost all reckless and conscienceless. He revels in the “sport” of hoisting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with their own petard—although the petard belongs to Claudius, not them. In the graveyard he meditates bemusedly upon the death of the body, avoiding all thought and mention of the soul’s progress after the body’s demise; the skull has replaced the ghost in his thoughts. To Horatio shortly thereafter Hamlet boasts of his use of politic language of state in forging the commission to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hypocrisy, which Hamlet had heretofore detested, he now delights in. With perhaps forced enthusiasm in recounting the shipboard events to Horatio, he elevates rashness and indiscretion to the status of virtues and credits Providence with guidance of his malicious elimination of his unwitting schoolmates, as if possession of the King’s signet somehow validated in spiritual terms the use he makes of it. Glibly reconciling conscience to murder, “Why, man, they did make love to this employment / They are not near my conscience” (V.ii.57–58), Hamlet holds true to his vow to keep his thoughts bloody and refuses to permit himself qualms over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern despite Horatio’s evident dismay. In similarly repressive fashion, when Hamlet’s right reason warns him against accepting Laertes’ challenge to a fencing match and Horatio cautions him to obey his mind, Hamlet rejects this new constraint to action by defying conscience, which he conveniently calls augury, and by glossing his impatience to act as surrender to Divine Will. “The readiness is all” is a fine sentiment, but one must wonder in the light of Hamlet’s recent unguarded acts, his evasive use of scripture to justify passionate impulse, and his repression of feeling, moral questions, and thoughts about spiritual consequences just how ready he actually is. We sympathize with his yearning for serenity after the enormous and seemingly fruitless moral and spiritual struggle he has waged, but we might also shudder at the loss of moral energy in one now overwhelmed, who earlier with humble awareness of his own frailty and the powers of evil had taken on the struggle against the world, flesh, and devil. The Christian humanist plan has for Hamlet’s situation proved a heavy and ultimately unbearable burden, and the vacuum created by its abandonment is filled only with devastation.

Hamlet is a tragedy of Christian humanism rather than a clash of a particular
personality with a situation which he was unfit to master. This is not to say that another in Hamlet’s situation would have failed as Hamlet did. Another would have failed pathetically, whereas Hamlet, as befits the stature of a tragic protagonist, fails heroically. He does not back off from the challenge which the situation poses to his human dignity, nor does he succumb easily to the pressures which would dehumanize him, but rather he takes the course of greatest risk and only hope, and in his striving, he probes for us the boundary limits of the human condition and the meaning of existence. To see Hamlet as fallen in Act Five is ultimately a tragic not a moral matter. We know we could not have fought half so well as Hamlet has, and his demise evokes, therefore, pity and fear, not condemnation. (In this respect the play’s kinship is with Oedipus, not Macbeth.)

Just as the tragic supercedes the moral in respect to our judgment of the protagonist so too it supercedes the polemic in respect to the philosophical system it tests, Christian humanism. Tragedy is an open forum; it questions and probes rather than declares and concludes. Certainly Hamlet delineates dramatically the age’s anguish over the seemingly contradictory obligations of worldly service and spiritual purity built into the Christian humanist ideal; but guiding Shakespeare in this exercise is neither personal philosophy nor fashionable pessimism. Just as in As You Like It Shakespeare looks at Christian humanism through comic lenses, in Hamlet he looks at it through a tragic glass. It is the nature of tragedy to hark back to the original unknowing, stripped of comforting frameworks of religion and philosophy, to ask the ultimate question, what does it mean to be?

Notes:

1 Citations from Shakespeare are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
is judged to be too ready to believe the ghost whose demonic traits, Prosser contends, are obvious and evident to the others. These references are intended, of course, to be indicative, not exhaustive.

6 Harbison, pp. 43, 55–56.
8 An encyclopedic but somewhat indiscriminate listing of attacks on scholastic metaphysics and humanistic trust in reason is found in Chapter Two of The Counter-Renaissance: “The Vanity of Learning.” See esp. pp. 79–84.
9 Quoted by Harbison, pp. 88–89.
10 Harbison, p. 56.
11 See discussion which follows on Hamlet’s mindfulness of death for examples of the credence and attention he gives to prayer. Cf. also the expressions of faith and the invocations for divine assistance in I.i.157–59 and 256–57; I.v.39; and III.iv.103–04.
12 The quoted phrase on tragedy as “man at the limits of sovereignty” is Richard Sewall’s in The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 5.

The ghost’s third injunction, not to contrive against Gertrude, does not alter the nature of the conflict which the first two commands establish, but it focuses attention on another manifestation of it, particularly, on Hamlet’s need to sort out and evaluate his own animosities which are about as keen against Gertrude as they are against Claudius. His prayer before the closet scene that the soul of Nero not be his reveals both the murderous intensity of his disgust and the earnestness of his desire to follow reason’s dictates not to harm his mother.
13 See I.iv.73; II.ii.303-07; III.i.157; IV.iv.38; V.ii.217.
15 The Wars of Truth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 56–57. T. S. R. Boase in Death in the Middle Ages (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972) comments on the medieval and Roman Catholic focus, especially on matters of the afterlife, in Measure for Measure and Hamlet, and says of Protestantism, it “at first . . . weakened, with its denial of Purgatory, the certainties of the after-life, and its iconoclasm destroyed the visual exactitudes which had dismayed the Catholic world” (p. 125).
16 Calvin, himself, it should be noted, was closer both in time and mood to More, Colet, and Erasmus than to the late Elizabethans in regard to the value of learning. Harbison contends that although Calvin claims he lost interest in classical studies
when he chose loyalty to the gospel over the Roman Church, "the continuity with his humanistic interests was never really broken" (p. 145). Moreover, Calvin believed that his reading and writing were useful, "sensitive to human needs, relevant to social ills, productive of Christian piety" (p. 164). Roland Frye in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963) calls attention to Calvin's praise of the classical writers, whose works reflect the "many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of true goodness" (p. 86). Speaking generally, Harbison observes, "The prestige and influence of Christian scholars probably never stood higher in all of Western history than during the two generations which embraced the lifetimes of Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin. In no other period is there anything quite like the zest for learning, the respect for scholarship, the confidence in what scholarship might accomplish" (p. vi).


18 For a detailed discussion of Italian melancholy and the English traveler's fashionable imitation of it, see Zera Fink, "Jaques and the Malcontent Traveller," *Philological Quarterly*, 14 (1935), 273–82.


22 Catholic and Reformed (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1962), p. 7. Higham also observes how the language of the Anglican communion left open the question of transubstantiation, in effect allowing personal interpretation to decide whether communion was a sacramental event or commemorative service (p. 5).


25 See, for example, Nashe's tirades against patrons in *Pierce Penniless* in Steane, pp. 53–56 and 141–42, and John Marston's antic dedication of *The Metamorphosis of Pigmali<\textus> Image* to "Good Opinion" in Davenport, p. 49.

26 Steane, p. 76. See also p. 109.

29 *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966). George Chapman's Bussy in *Bussy D'Ambois*, ed. Maurice Evans (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966) is a slight variation on this pattern. By his own declaration a scholar, soldier, and poet (I.i.187–89), Bussy has been experiencing the common fate of one possessed of these qualities, impoverishment and discontent "with his neglected worth," but rather than abjure his values he decides to become a hermit. He reconsiders, though, when Monsieur lures him into court service, using as bait the humanists' premise for the active life:

... our lives
In acts exemplary not only win
Ourselves good names, but do to others give
Matter for virtuous deeds, by which we live.

(I.i.78–81)

Bussy accepts Monsieur's offer, hoping to introduce "a new fashion: And rise in Court with virtue" (I.i.129–30), a goal which events prove Bussy unable to realize.

31 See n. 17.
32 *Saturn and Melancholy*, pp. 245–47. Cf. also Madeleine Doran's observation that "for the greater artists, this variety [created by the confluence of revived classic philosophies, Christian asceticism, and Renaissance rationalism] became the complex mystery of a universe which hides its face from man, yet demands of him knowledge of good and evil," *Endeavors of Art* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 361.
35 Sewall, pp. 4–5.