In the history of Hamlet criticism, it has become almost obligatory to point out that Hamlet’s reference to the “special Providence in the fall of a sparrow” just before he engages in the fencing match with Laertes (5.2.208–9) is a scriptural allusion to Matthew 10:29. However, once critics have given this nod to the allusion, they tend to disagree with each other about what the allusion signifies, or, for that matter, whether it signifies anything. One article devoted entirely to tracing all the Matthew 10 allusions in the play finally says, almost helplessly, that “the way [the play] deploys these allusions denies us the means of resolving our several responses and perspectives on Hamlet and its characters into a single, final view.” Another critic, in examining the “Christian settings in Shakespeare’s tragedies,” finally concludes that the “fall of a sparrow” passage is not Christian at all, but at best ambiguous and at worst fatalistic. And even where critics see more unambiguously positive—or negative—applications of the passage to the state of Hamlet’s mind, the body of criticism as a whole seems unable to decide what that state of mind may be, variously describing Hamlet as consistently religious, consistently secular in his humanism, consistently rational, consistently mad and thus not responsible for anything he says by the end of the play, or so consistently inconsistent as to be a protopostmodernist in his own right. Almost the only consistency in the critics themselves is to see Hamlet’s actions at the end of the play as acts of revenge, whether for good or for ill, and also to see his

1. All references to Shakespeare’s works are to the Complete Pelican Shakespeare, gen. ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Penguin, 1969).

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mind as either remaining static throughout the play or following a linear progression toward some conclusion.

One problem with all the conflicting analyses lies in precisely this assumption of either stasis or linearity in Hamlet’s mind; that is, Hamlet either must have the same underlying frame of mind throughout the play, must progress from point A at the beginning to a contradictory point B at the end, or must start at point A, move to point B, and return to point A, in a cycle that in itself follows a linear path. What I propose to show is a more complex pattern in Hamlet’s thought, one that might be called helical rather than linear or cyclical. An instinctively religious man at the beginning, Hamlet returns to religious convictions at the end, but for different reasons, from a different perspective, and only after experimenting with, at times succumbing to, and never entirely escaping from some very different ideas. As a Christian, he is never quite free of pagan or secular reactions, but as a classical revenger, a role to which he is drawn and to which he seems to succumb in acts 3 and 4, he is never quite free of Christianity. However, in continually testing and reshaping the balance of his parts throughout the play, Hamlet does finally answer many of the questions he has been asking and finally does reject—consciously, at least—not just the act of revenge but the whole mental landscape of the revenge play.

From the very beginning, Hamlet appears to have internalized a Christian view of life. In his first soliloquy, for example (“Oh, that this too sullied flesh” [1.2.129–59]), he may wish that “the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (131–32), but his wish is framed as a contrary-to-fact conditional and is based on an unquestioned assumption that God has fixed certain canons, and that suicide, as a violation of such a canon, is therefore not an option for him or for any other Christian. And although Hamlet is upset about the situation at Elsinore, he is not thinking of taking any action. His final words in the soliloquy are “But break my heart for I must hold my tongue” (159)—a stricture to himself about speech, not action. Later, when the Ghost first appears to him in act 1, scene 4, Hamlet’s immediate response is to cry out, “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” (1.4.39)—an invocation of heavenly powers against what might be an evil visitation. And although he seems at first to acquiesce in the Ghost’s call for revenge (“Haste me to know ‘t, that I . . . may sweep to my revenge” [1.5.26–29]), the message that he carries away from his encounter with the Ghost is not “revenge” but rather “remember” (110). Furthermore, he again calls upon “all you host of heaven” when the Ghost leaves, adding a reminder to himself that the Ghost may be from hell (92–93); he tells Horatio, “Look you, I’ll go pray” (132) before deciding what to tell his friends about what he has seen. He is still reacting as a Christian, in however an instinctive way.
It might be objected here, as Anthony Low argues in “Hamlet and the Ghost of Purgatory,” that “Hamlet takes his oath to ‘remember’ with reference only to vengeance. He never remarks that to remember the dead in Purgatory means chiefly to pray for them, especially by offering masses for their souls”; and that Hamlet’s “I’ll go pray,” in this context, has nothing to do with his father’s soul. But Low, like most of the other scholars who have recently done such interesting work on the implications of Shakespeare’s insertion of purgatory into the milieu of the Protestant English stage, assume that the Ghost is in fact from purgatory and is in fact Hamlet’s father. Hamlet, however, makes no such assumption other than in his initial shocked reaction to the Ghost’s discourse in act 1, scene 5, and in his attempt to convince Gertrude that there is a ghost in the room in act 3, scene 4. Even directly after the Ghost’s speech in act 1, scene 5, Hamlet has begun to suspect it: “O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? / And shall I couple hell?” (92–93). And by the end of the scene, when the Ghost is crying “Swear!” from under the stage, Hamlet’s language to and about it is anything but filial: “Art thou there, truepenny?” (150); “You hear this fellow in the cellgarage” (151); and “Well said, old mole! Canst work i’ th’ earth so fast?” (162). After Hamlet hears about the Ghost, and especially after he sees it, he spends his time trying to decide not whether he ought to pray for his father, but what the Ghost is and what he should do about it.

In this regard, the most important thing Hamlet says during his first encounter with the Ghost is his response to the efforts of Horatio and Marcellus to keep him from following the Ghost in the first place:

Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin’s fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?

(1.4.64–67)

Hamlet’s statement—or rhetorical question—is a spontaneous outburst that must also be seen as instinctive, based on the same unquestioned assumptions that prompted his lament about God’s canons. The situation is one of great stress: he has just seen a mysterious (and mysteriously silent) Ghost that looks like his father in arms, appearing at a time when all hell seems literally to have broken loose in the usurped and incestuous court of Elsinore; his best friend, whose mind he respects, is seemingly terrified of what they have all seen; there is physical danger in the situation and a physical struggle going on as Hamlet’s

friends attempt to restrain him; and there is little time to think. But
Hamlet’s immediate response is as theological as it is practical; he is
concerned more about his soul than about his physical life. To be sure,
the theology may at first seem ambiguous: Does Hamlet believe that
he is invulnerable because he is elect, or because he has no intention
of doing anything to forfeit his soul, or because he has a Platonic idea
of the soul as naturally rather than supernaturally immortal?

Interestingly enough, a similar set of distinctions about the soul is
part of the action of Barnabe Barnes’s The Divils Charter (1607), in
which Pope Alexander VI tries to escape from his contract with the
devil by claiming that “My soul is substance of the living God, / Stamped with the seal of heaven,” and that God must have created
the human soul for salvation, since he has given it a “mind intelli-
gent,” which other creatures lack.5 The devil—who, in the convention
of the deathbed “undeceiving” scene, must be considered to be telling
the truth as the playwright sees it—replys, “I do confess thy soul
was first ordained / To good, but by free will to sin, thou, slave, / Hast
sold that soul from happiness to hell” (L4v); the “mind intelligent,” if
frittered away on trivial or sinful thoughts, can debase man to the
level of an animal (M1v). Barnes has already shown us the deathbed
repentance of Lucrezia Borgia, one so sincere that it inspires her
handmaid, Moticilla, to repent as well (H2v). Considering how many
times Hamlet, like Barnes’s devil, stresses the importance of using one’s
reason in the process of avoiding the devil; considering that Hamlet
has first called on “angels and ministers of grace” to defend him before
his “what should be the fear” passage (1.4.39); and also considering
that Horatio is afraid that the Ghost will cause Hamlet to go mad and
throw away his immortal soul by throwing himself off a cliff (1.4.69–
74), it would seem that Shakespeare means us to see Hamlet’s refer-
ence to his soul in a Christian context, however vaguely defined. And
Hamlet’s reference to his soul takes on even more importance when
it is recognized as an allusion to the verse directly preceding the “fall
of the Sparrow” passage in Matthew 10.

Because these two passages are so significant to our examination of
Hamlet’s thought, I think it important to establish that Shakespeare
almost certainly used the Geneva Bible as his source, rather than the
Great Bible of 1540 or the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, both of which trans-
late the verse from Matthew with the sparrow “lighting” on the ground
rather than “falling”:

5. Barnabe Barnes, The Divils Charter (1607), Tudor Facsimile Texts (1913; reprint,
New York: AMS, 1970), L4v, M1r. All further references to the play are cited in the text
and are to the leaf numbers in this edition.
Geneva Bible: Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your father?

Great Bible: Are not two lytle sparowes sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not light on the grounde without your father.

Bishops’ Bible: Are not two little sparowes solde for a farthing? And one of them shall not light on the grounde, without your father. 6

Here is the Geneva version of Matthew 10, from verse 28, where Jesus introduces the idea of what one should and should not fear, through verse 29 on the sparrows, through verse 31, the final “fear not”:

28. And feare ye not them which kill the bodie, but are not able to kill the soule: but rather feare him, which is able to destroy both soule and bodie in hell. 29. Are not two sparrowes sold for a farthing, and one of them shal not fal on the ground without your Father? 30. Yea, and all the heares of your head are nombred. 31. Feare ye not therefore, yee are of more value then many sparrowes.

Here are the beginning and ending points of Hamlet’s journey: adjacent verses from Matthew 10. Hamlet returns in act 5 to where he began in act 1. But much has happened in between. Significantly, a Geneva gloss to verse 16 of this same chapter in Matthew may have some bearing on Hamlet’s journey. Jesus says to his disciples: “Behold, I send you as sheepe in the middes of wolues: be yee therefore wise as serpents, and innocent as doues.” The gloss to the clause about the serpents and doves is: “You shall not so much as reuenge an iniurie: and by the mixing of these beastes natures together, he will not haue our wisedome to bee malicious, nor our simplicities mad, but a certeine forme of good nature as exquisitely framed of both them, as may be” (emphasis added). 7 Hamlet’s mixture will at times not be quite exquisitely framed, but the question about revenge—to do it, as the Ghost demands, or not to do it, as the Bible demands—will never be settled until the final act.

Having now placed the Ghost and the Bible in textual opposition, we may well ask what a Bible-reading audience at Shakespeare’s theater might have thought about the reliability of the Ghost’s text. To be sure,
the ghost in a revenge play was a stage convention to be taken on its own terms, like pagan gods and other improbabilities; Hymen, after all, shows up in contemporary Arden in *As You Like It* (ca. 1598–99), and the inhabitants of Thomas Kyd’s Christian Spain and Portugal in *The Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1582–92) somehow arrive in pagan Hades at the beginning and end of the play. But even in terms of the stage ghost, *Hamlet’s* is a bit unusual; in terms of other kinds of ghosts, it seems downright bizarre.

Actually, there were not many revengeful ghosts on the stage prior to *Hamlet*, at least in the surviving texts. In Thomas Hughes’s *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587), Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, and the anonymous *Locrine* (ca. 1595), the last of which was once thought to be part of the Shakespeare canon, a ghost shows up on stage, bellows for revenge without any particular onstage audience, and returns at the end to applaud the fact that revenge has been taken. None of these ghosts has actually taken part in the revenge, even by giving information. Another ghost in *Locrine*, the ghost of Albanact, does take an active part in the revenge, but not by giving information to a revenger. Rather, this ghost pursues the target of his revenge, slapping food out of his hands in order to starve him to death. Of ghosts who do urge central figures to revenge, we have only the suggestion in Thomas Lodge’s *Wits Miserie* (1596) that the ghost in the *ur-Hamlet* “cried so miserally at the Theator like an oister wife, *Hamlet, revenge.*”

Moreover, the ghost in John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* (ca. 1600) not only urges his son to revenge but also urges his own widow to join in, and then he cheers all the revengers lustily from the wings as they kill their victim.

Since Marston’s play is so close in date to *Hamlet* and has so many echoes of its plot, it is hard to tell whether Marston has reacted to Shakespeare or both are reacting to the *ur-Hamlet*. In any case, the revenge ghost has by 1600–1601 established its own conventions on the stage and created certain audience expectations. One of these expectations is that the ghost announces its desire immediately, which *Hamlet’s Ghost* does not do. Instead, it remains silent until act 1, scene 5, and meanwhile the characters discuss it in terms of other kinds of ghosts, thereby signaling to the audience that this may not be a revenge ghost at all, but rather one of the many different kinds described in the religious, scientific, and folkloric literature of the day.

Of the writers on ghosts in religious terms, Ludwig Lavater and James VI of Scotland are perhaps the most interesting, partly because

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Lavater purports to be describing what “papists” believe about revenants from the purgatory from which Hamlet’s Ghost claims to have come, while King James, although denying the existence of purgatory, still speaks of ghosts in much the same terms that Lavater attributes to Catholics. Both Lavater and James agree with Hamlet and Matthew 10:28 about the inability of evil spirits to harm true believers:

**Lavater.** We ought to be of good courage without fear, being assured & constant in true faith. For if they be good Angels which shew themselves unto vs, then are they sent unto vs from God, to a good end and purpose. But if they be wicked and evil, they can do us no harm being they so desirous, except God give them leave thereto. (190–91)

**James:** And that the Devil is permitted at some times to put himself in the likeness of the Saints, it is plain in the Scriptures, where it is said that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light... It is most certain, that God will not permit him so to deceive his own: but only such, as first willfully deceive themselves by running unto him, whom God then suffers to fall in their own snares, and justly permits them to be illused with great efficacy of deceit, because they would not believe the truth (as Paul sayeth). (4)9

James reluctantly agrees with Hamlet’s later assertion that “the devil hath power / T’ assume a pleasing shape” (2.2.584–89). Spirits, according to both Catholics and Protestants, were more likely to be evil spirits than the purgatorial or heavenly beings they claimed to be. It was necessary to have a way to tell the difference. According to Lavater, a purgatorial ghost would fulfill several conditions. First, “if he be a good spirit, he will at the beginning, somewhat terrify men, but again soon return and comfort them” (108). Second, the spirit will answer questions and respond with reverence to invocations of God and his angels. Third, the spirit will not teach or require anything contrary to the teachings of the Church. And finally, “We must take diligent heed whether in his words, deeds, and gestures, he do show forth any humility, acknowledging or confessing of his sins & punishments, or whether we hear of him any groaning, weeping, complaint, boasting, threatening, slander or blasphemy” (108–9). These criteria immediately raise a number of problems for the claim of the Ghost in *Hamlet* to be from purgatory: it refuses to answer questions until act 1, scene 5; it stalks away offended when Horatio charges it “by heaven” to speak (1.1.49); it continues to act in an unsettling rather than a comforting

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9. All subsequent references to Lavater and James are to *Of Ghostes and Spirits, Walking by Night* (London, 1596) and *Daemonologie: In Forme of a Dialogue* (London, 1597), respectively, by page numbers, and are cited in the text.
way through all its appearances, even to its cries from under the stage in act 1, scene 5, and its last appearance in Gertrude’s closet in act 3, scene 4; it complains and boasts all through its speech to Hamlet in act 1, scene 5; and, above all, it tells Hamlet to take revenge—not to see justice done, but to take revenge, an offense against the laws of God and man. This Ghost, as Lily B. Campbell and Eleanor Prosser have long since pointed out, does not pass the tests of a purgatorial spirit. Prosser in particular points out that not “one instance has ever been noted of a Purgatorial spirit’s commanding revenge, either his own or God’s,” and the “function of a Purgatory soul is not to find fault with another, not to complain of another’s cruelty, but to lament its own sin, rehearse its own deserved misery, and pray for relief.”

Given these problems with the Ghost’s bona fides, we can understand why Hamlet so quickly becomes hesitant to accept the Ghost’s word. But what of the fact that the Ghost appears to have told the truth about the murder of Hamlet Senior? Both Lavater and James agree that evil spirits may tell a person one or two truths in order to lure him into trusting the spirits, who will then use that trust to persuade the person toward evil. As Lavater says, “Sathan doth imitate craftie gamesters, who suffer a plaine and simple young man to winne a while of them, that afterwards being greedie to play, they may lurche him of all his golde and siluer” (172). Or as Shakespeare’s own Banquo says,

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s
In deepest consequence.

(Macbeth, 1.3.123–26)

Again, the question is not whether Shakespeare believed in purgatory, or whether his audience believed in purgatory. Nor is it a question of whether Shakespeare’s audience would have approved of a ghost claiming to come from a papist purgatory. As we noted earlier about the pagan gods who show up in modern Arden, Spain, and Portugal, audiences tend to take the premises handed to them as “givens.” Hamlet takes as a given within the play the fact that there really is a purgatory where the souls of the saved go for purgation before entering into heaven and that such souls may return to the land of the living to make certain requests. The question Hamlet continues to ask—and the audience should be asking but normally does not—is whether the

Ghost is what it claims to be and is telling the truth about having come from purgatory. According to all the religious treatises on the subject, these questions must be asked.

But not all writing on the subject was religious in the sense of assuming that “ghostly” apparitions were actually visitations by spirits. There was also a body of literature that set out to debunk reports of apparitions: two of the most interesting were Reginald Scot’s *A Discourse upon Devils and Spirits* and *The Discovery of Witchcraft.* Scot attributes all apparitions to human error, human hoax, or a diseased imagination or drunkenness on the part of the viewer. The only kind of apparition Scot cannot explain this way is the omen or portent apparition seen by many before a war, assassination, or other catastrophic event. Often this type of apparition is exactly the kind of thing seen by the bemused soldiers in the opening scenes of *Hamlet:* an armed figure or an army of armed figures, sometimes riding across the sky or sometimes marching across the landscape. Since many seem to have seen the same thing without having traded information with each other, and since the portents seem to have preceded important events, Scot cannot find any natural causes to explain away the apparitions. However, he does say that natural causes may one day be found. The writers who believe in ghosts sometimes seek natural causes for supposed apparitions; the difference is that when Lavater and his fellows have eliminated natural causes, they are left with spirits; when Scot and his fellow debunkers have eliminated natural causes, there is nothing left.

But even this debunking literature does not exhaust the varieties of ghost literature available to Shakespeare and his audience. Marcellus’s folk legend about Christmas Eve, when “the bird of dawning singeth all night long” and no evil spirits can go abroad (1.1.158–64), should remind us of the ghostly revenant of the folktale and ballad. Among these ghosts are those whose motive in returning is to chide the living for their excessive grief for the dead, a motive perhaps suggested by Hamlet’s first appearance in mourning and Claudius’s lecture to him about excessive grief (of course, we then find out that the full period of mourning has not yet elapsed). Folkloric ghosts also return to help siblings, children, or other loved ones. These ghosts have nothing to do with revenge; the help they offer is usually in the form of


12. Although the types of folkloric ghosts are almost too numerous to list here, Lowry Charles Wimberly gives a list of eight basic motives for the return of the dead in ballads, a list that, with some modification, may apply to the tale-ghost as well (Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads [University of Chicago Press, 1928], 256–69). See also Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, 6 vols. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1932).
advice, money, or magical objects. Among the most common folkloric ghosts are penitent felons who advise against the crime that led to their deaths, murder victims who urge their murderers to repent, and the spurned or betrayed lovers who return to punish their lovers’ pride or infidelity. This last type of ghost, in fact, is often a revenger himself, one who may lead the lady to a perilous place to die by falling from a height, drowning, or freezing to death—and in some versions, the lady sees a cloven hoof on her killer as she dies. This type of ghost most resembles the evil spirit described by King James in his *Daemonologie* and suspected by Horatio as Hamlet leaves to follow the Ghost:

Horatio: What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form  
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason  
And draw you into madness?

(1.4.69–74)

Epistemon. [In response to Philomathes’s question of why the Devil torments men]: It is to obtaine one of two thinges thereby, if he may:  
The one is the tinsell [i.e., loss or damnation] of their life, by inducing them to such perilous places at such time as he either followes or possesses them, which may procure the same. (*Daemonologie*, 63)¹³

In another resemblance to this type of ghost, the Ghost’s speech to Hamlet in act 1, scene 5, is replete with accusations against a false lover, including the kind of complaining and boasting that a folkloric returned-lover ghost does constantly, but that a purgatorial ghost is not supposed to do at all:

Ghost. O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there,  
From me, whose love was of that dignity  
That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
To those of mine!

(1.5.47–52)

By the time Hamlet meets the Ghost, or even hears about it, Shakespeare has repeatedly raised the possibility that the Elsinore Ghost may be any of these types of ghosts; in fact, the only ghost that is not suggested in the first four scenes is a typical revenge ghost. The play opens with soldiers who are anxious about preparations for a war and a ghost in arms who looks like the recently deceased King but refuses

¹³. The second reason given by Epistemon is to obtain the souls of men.
to speak. This brings to mind the portent ghost, especially after Horatio’s comparison of its appearance to the portents before Julius Caesar’s assassination. The Ghost refuses to answer questions and leaves when Horatio says, “By heaven I charge thee, speak” (1.1.49), as evil spirits might do; after its second appearance in the first scene, it hurries out at the crowing of a cock, or, as Horatio says, “it started like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful summons” (148–49), again suggesting that it might be one of those evil spirits that cannot bear light, an idea reinforced by Marcellus’s folkloric ghost story about the Christmas Eve all-night crowing of the cock: “And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad, / . . . then no planets strike, / No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to harm” (1.1.161–63). Most of these references are to evils: omens, portents, and evil spirits. There is even a hint in Horatio’s “Stay, illusion” (127) that the Ghost may be a hoax or hallucination. Horatio’s questions have nothing to do with revenge but ask in turn whether the Ghost is a purgatorial ghost who needs prayers, a portent or helper ghost who has come to warn the living, or a folklore ghost who wants to tell where some ill-gotten goods are stored (1.1.130–38). When Horatio and the soldiers tell Hamlet about the apparition in act 1, scene 2, Hamlet’s cross-examination of them not only renews all the clues of the previous scene but further suggests that the Ghost may be a human hoax. Hamlet’s final words in scene 2 (“My father’s spirit in arms? All is not well. / I doubt some foul play” [255–56]), by repeating the fact that the ghost is in arms, point to a portent ghost more than a revenge ghost.

Of course, an audience that had seen the ur-Hamlet or heard about a previous performance of this Hamlet would have known beforehand that this would be a revenge play, but Shakespeare creates patterns suggesting otherwise, and even if the audience is prepared to ignore all the other clues as soon as the Ghost speaks the word “Revenge,” Hamlet continues to examine the evidence—not just about the murder, but also about the nature of the Ghost.

From the very beginning, Hamlet has insisted on distinguishing between “seems” and “is,” between “actions that a man might play” (1.2.90) and the genuine actions of a genuine person. From the beginning, too, Hamlet has spoken of “reason” in conjunction with these genuine actions, criticizing his mother for doing things from which even “a beast that wants discourse of reason” would abstain (1.2.150). This reminder of man as (ideally) a creature of reason is associated a number of times with the tension between real life and the life represented in plays—that is, what a real Christian prince should do and what revengers in plays do. Hamlet recognizes how much of a mixture man is, and how easily he may let himself become a character in a revenge play: “What a piece of work is a man, 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: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me” (2.2.300–305). Hamlet is here associating reason, the first and most important quality in his list of man’s attributes, with virtue: angels, God, and the stewardship of creation. The “quintessence of dust” may refer to the collapse of the body, like Hamlet’s later reference to man as part of the food chain (4.3.19–31), but it also suggests that man may abuse his faculties and turn himself into less than a man; it looks back at the “What should be the fear” passage about the soul’s superiority to the crumbling body, and it looks ahead to the memento mori meditation, a religious exercise that Hamlet will later do in the graveyard (5.1.71–203). In addition, the subjective turn at the end of the passage (“to me,” “delights not me”) is a further distinction between seems and is, between individual mood and objective reality. And notably, Shakespeare gives Hamlet this speech just before the entrance of the players who will present to the audience at Elsinore and the audience in the Globe a series of scenes from revenge plays, scenes in which Hamlet will take various parts: as playwright, actor, and critic. From now on, Hamlet will struggle increasingly with the impulse to become a character in one of these plays. At first, whenever he finds himself sounding like a revenge-play character, he will call himself to order in no uncertain terms, but the more he associates with the world of the players, and the more he allows himself to trust the Ghost in the terms of their world, the more like the stage revenger he becomes.

The most notable instance of Hamlet’s self-criticism for staginess is his soliloquy in act 2, scene 2, after the players have gone off to prepare the evening’s play. Beginning with “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I” (534), and specifically comparing his own situation with that of a character in a revenge play, Hamlet whips himself into a frenzy of anger that culminates in the kind of shouted expostulation that he later cautions the players against:

Who calls me coward? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i’ th’ throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this? . . .
. . . Bloody bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O vengeance!

(2.2.557–60; 565–67)\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} The line “O vengeance!” appears in the Second Quarto but is omitted from the Folio.
The answer to the questions in the first part of this passage is, of course, “no one.” Hamlet is mouthing like a bad player. But in the midst of his rant, he stops and rebukes himself in the same syntax with which he began: “Why, what an ass am I” (568). And, determining to use reason rather than emotion (“About, my brains” [573]), he describes how he will use the evening’s play to gain evidence of Claudius’s guilt.

So far, so good: Hamlet is mostly a rational man. But is he still a religious man? The answer remains “yes.” He is castigating himself not just because he has been irrational but because he may be falling into sin:

The spirit I have seen  
May be a devil, 1 and the devil hath power  
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me.  

(2.2.584–89)

This speculation is fully compatible with those in the treatises by Lavater and King James that we have already reviewed; Thomas Nashe, too, speculated about the ways in which the devil catches hold of souls: “Those that catch birds imitate their voices; so will he [the devil] imitate the voices of God’s vengeance to bring us like birds, into the net of eternal damnation.”

In Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy, however, his religious instincts seem to be slipping, or at least to have been put on hold. Although we need not take his “to be or not to be” question as personal suicidal musing—in act 1, he rejected suicide as being against God’s will and therefore not to be considered—he does now speak in an oddly agnostic way about the afterlife; it is not now an acknowledgment of God’s fixed canons that deters one from suicide but “the dread of something after

15. This type of comedic rant, in which the character drives himself into a fury of resentment over escalated imaginary slights, appears frequently in the plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, even in tragedy and tragicomedy. See, e.g., Calianax in The Maid’s Tragedy (1612–13) and Bessus in A King and No King (ca. 1618). Unfortunately, Beaumont and Fletcher sometimes blur the lines between these comic ranters and the more serious characters (Amintor and Melantius in The Maid’s Tragedy, and Arbaces in King and No King).

16. Thomas Nashe, The Terrors of the Night, or, A Discourse of Apparitions (1594), in Thomas Nashe: Selected Writings, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 148. Nashe also proposes that the devil often appears “in the likeness of ones father or mother, or kinsfolks” because “in those shapes which hee supposeth most familiar unto us, and that wee are inclined to with a naturall kind of love, we will sooner harken to him than otherwise” (148).
death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns” (3.1.78–80). This is a curious statement. Not only has Hamlet just seen what purports to be a traveler returned from that bourn, but a Christian would surely remember that the whole point of Christianity is that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead and has given human-kind some fairly explicit instruction about what comes after death and on what conditions. The “to be or not to be” soliloquy, then, is questionable on grounds other than being a suicide note.

However, from Hamlet’s partial listing of the “thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” (3.1.62–63) it becomes apparent that he is not speaking entirely of his own frame of mind, but rather of universal human questions that he has been studying at school. A prince of the blood royal would hardly have to contend with “the proud man’s contumely” (71) or “the insolence of office” (73), and perhaps not even “the oppressor’s wrong” (71)—unless we stretch a point about Claudius’s treatment of him—although he certainly is contending with “the pangs of despised love” (72). Rather than simply a reflection on his own case, then, the speech expands to become a review of his philosophy studies at the University of Wittenberg, those debates about on kai me on (being and not being) among the Greek philosophers whom Doctor Faustus, Hamlet’s fellow alumnus of Wittenberg, so blithely and so prematurely discarded as unworthy of study.17 In fact, we might even speculate that this reminder of the on kai me on passage in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus was meant to differentiate Hamlet from someone who did finally fall into the devil’s clutches.

Still, it cannot be denied that Hamlet’s pattern of thought is decidedly agnostic in this speech, taking the debates of the pagan philosophers as its starting place. We cannot tell how Hamlet might have concluded his philosophical exercise if he had not been interrupted by Ophelia. However, it is noteworthy that his instincts are still at least residually Christian in that he immediately asks for her prayers: “Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered” (3.1.89–90). Hamlet, like Faustus, is going through a reexamination of all he has learned, but, unlike Faustus, he still assumes that God will help him find answers. So, as mixed as this soliloquy may seem, the rational and religious elements in Hamlet’s character are still of greater proportion in the mix than are the emotional and diabolic. The mixture will change drastically by the end of the next scene.

17. See Doctor Faustus’s opening soliloquy in Marlowe’s play, the soliloquy in which Faustus sequentially discards philosophy, medicine, law, and theology as too limited in scope for his own brilliant mind. See also my essay, “The Dilettante’s Lie in Doctor Faustus,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 24 (1982): 243–54.
At the beginning of act 3, scene 2, Hamlet is almost at the peak of his rational side. His instruction to the players is a rejection of dramatic rant such as he has criticized in himself and will later mock in Laertes (5.1.261–71), as well as a demand that drama both reflect reality and teach virtue. His speech to Horatio just before the *Mousetrap* summarizes the kind of man he truly admires and wishes to be:

> Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
> And could of men distinguish her election,
> S’ hath sealed thee for herself, for thou hast been
> As one in suff’ring all that suffers nothing,
> A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
> Hast ta’en with equal thanks; and blest are those
> Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled
> That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
> To sound what stop she pleases. Give me that man
> That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
> In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart,
> As I do thee. Something too much of this—

(3.2.60–71)

Hamlet’s “Something too much of this” at the end suggests that he has been so thoroughly sincere about what he admires that he has embarrassed himself and must change the subject. I believe this momentary embarrassment to be very important in evaluating the state of Hamlet’s mind later, since he so often vacillates in his admiration of stoic calm and in his attitudes toward the expression of passion. His considered and genuine goal is to be like Horatio, no matter how much he “seems” to have taken on the nature of Fortinbras (4.4), Laertes (5.1), or a character in a revenge play. Furthermore, Shakespeare does not call into question Hamlet’s praise of Horatio in the way that Hamlet’s praise of the other two is undercut by incongruous imagery (see below on Fortinbras and the “quarrel with a straw”) or by our knowledge that the praised character is up to no good.

This passage in praise of Horatio contains a number of important motifs. Hamlet is still linking reason with faith and both with true friendship. Not just Hamlet’s mind or his heart has chosen Horatio as a friend, but Hamlet’s soul—referred to in the feminine gender, as it was in many devotional handbooks and sermons of the time—of which the faculties are the intellect, the emotions, and the will. Furthermore, his reference to Horatio as someone who cannot be played like a musical instrument (68–69) will be echoed in his bitter observation after the play that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are attempting to play him like a recorder (3.2.348–57). Ominously, however, the pagan element has insinuated itself into Hamlet’s imagery again; he speaks of Fortune
rather than of heaven or Providence as the causative agent in human lives. From the beginning of the play within the play, Hamlet seems to be getting more and more out of control, his mix of elements tending more and more toward the irrational and evil.

Before the play within the play begins, Hamlet still both doubts the Ghost and worries about his own soul; as he says to Horatio,

If his [Claudius's] occulted guilt
   Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
   It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
   And my imaginations are as foul
   As Vulcan’s stithy.

(3.2.77–81)

But as soon as Claudius’s behavior during the play convinces Hamlet that he can “take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (3.2.276–77), something goes wrong. Although Hamlet still sees and deplores the pretense in the behavior of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius, his will appears to be giving way to his emotions as he declares in soliloquy what he proposes to do next, sounding once again like a revenger in a play—or like a vampire or ghoul:

’Tis now the very witching time of night,
   When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
   Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
   And do such bitter business as the day
   Would quake to look on.

(3.2.373–77)

He is echoing here imagery used earlier about the Ghost: Horatio’s reference to the strange “eruption” in the state, Marcellus’s folktale about the Christmas Eve restraint of evil spirits in their churchyards (1.1), and Hamlet’s own Senecan speech to the Ghost about the “ponderous and marble jaws” of the grave having opened to let it “revisit thus the glimpses of the moon” (1.4.47–56). He is in some ways becoming the evil spirit against which he has heretofore been guarding his soul.

18. Interestingly, Horatio himself begins as specifically Christian in his response to events but becomes less so as Hamlet returns to his own faith. In act 1, scene 4, Horatio’s response to Marcellus’s “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” was “Heaven will direct it” (90–91). But after Hamlet has agreed with Horatio’s statement in his “sparrow” speech, Horatio is rebuked by Hamlet for attempting to violate God’s canons by committing suicide like an “antique Roman” (5.2.330ff.).
He does, of course, pull himself back a bit even here, reminding his heart to “lose not thy nature; let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom” as he approaches his mother: “Let me be cruel, not unnatural” (3.2.378–80). He has not entirely changed his “nature,” but neither has he repudiated his impulse to “drink hot blood” as he did earlier. And when he finds himself standing behind the praying Claudius, whom he now believes he knows to be the murderer of his father, his reaction is even more questionable. Yes, he refuses to kill Claudius, to stab an unarmed man in the back; but his reason for not doing so is bad. He does not want Claudius to go to heaven and, instead, will wait until Claudius is in the middle of his usual sins and “then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven, / And that his soul may be as damned and black / As hell whereto it goes” (3.3.93–95). If this is Hamlet’s real reason for not killing Claudius, he is doing exactly what he declared evil in act 1 based on the warning in Matthew 10:28: “And feare ye not them which kill the bodie, but are not able to kill the soule: but rather feare him, which is able to destroy both soule and bodie in hell.” In this scene, there is no pulling back from the evil.

Hamlet’s explosion of temper in Gertrude’s closet and his killing of Polonius follow this scene. We may still see a residuum of Christianity: Hamlet’s sermon to his mother is modeled on the best sermons of the sixteenth century, and it does begin to bring her to repentance. Furthermore, after he has killed Polonius, he says that he “repents” of doing it. From a legal point of view, his action could be defended as self-defense. After all, he has been talking (as he thinks) in a normal, if argumentative, way with his mother, when suddenly she cries out, “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? / Help, ho!” and from behind the arras comes the voice of one whom he takes to be Claudius: “What ho! Help!” (3.4.22–23). Hamlet has just caught the conscience of the King and has also discovered, even before the play within the play, that Claudius is no longer going along with the old word games or Hamlet’s newer “insanity” game. (Claudius: “I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet. These words are not mine” [3.2.92–93].) Claudius knows that Hamlet knows about the murder, and Hamlet knows that Claudius knows. What is now happening, then, may seem like a setup: an attempt to do away with Hamlet by framing him for a supposed attack on the Queen. In response, Hamlet swings back into

19. I am inclined to think that it is not his real reason. I believe that he is simply revolted at the idea of stabbing an unarmed man in the back (see his hedging at the beginning of the speech) but has worked himself up into such a blood-drinking frenzy that he needs an excuse to back away.
his pretended madness, cries out something about a rat, and stabs the arras—with a remarkably lucky thrust.

All of this has been a nearly instantaneous reaction to a perceived threat. Still, Hamlet has lost control of his emotions without arguing himself into a better or more Christian frame of mind; he has killed a man, whether justifiably or not; and he may “repent” of the killing, but that does not stop him from insulting the dead body, either in this scene or later on. The only remnants in this scene of his attachment to reason are his plea to Gertrude to give him a sanity test and his plan to watch his companions on the trip to England as he would “adders fanged” (3.4.143–45, 204). Other than these rational moments, his sermon to his mother, and his calling on “heavenly guards” for help when the Ghost appears, he has acted like an unthinking character in a revenge play.

The Ghost itself is a puzzle in this scene. It is no longer place-bound like a folkloric ghost, as it seemed to be in act 1; it is wearing a dressing gown instead of its portent-ghost armor of act 1; it appears only to Hamlet instead of to everyone present as it did in act 1; and the manner of its appearance contradicts everything it has demanded of Hamlet. If it truly wanted to “whet [Hamlet’s] almost blunted purpose” (3.4.112) in terms of revenge, it should have appeared in the previous scene. If it wanted to protect Hamlet from harm, it should have intervened before he killed Polonius. If it wanted Hamlet to persuade Gertrude to stop committing incest with Claudius (one of the Ghost’s original charges to Hamlet in act 1), it should not have interrupted Hamlet’s sermon, which had begun to work, and it should definitely not have made Gertrude think Hamlet is hallucinating and thus cause her to stop paying attention to his sermon. Hamlet seems unusually desperate about the appearance of the Ghost at this point. For the first time in the play, he refers to it as “he” rather than “it,” and for the first and last time in the play, he insists that it is indeed his father. This desperation becomes a turning point in Hamlet’s journey. When the Ghost will not be pinned down and seems to contradict the categories it has created, at a time when Hamlet most wants it to be real, Hamlet gives up on the ghost as a factor in the equation about life-and-death reality that he must solve. From this point on, he will never mention the Ghost again. And in rejecting the Ghost as a guide, he begins to reject the world of revenge plays and to return to his original frame of mind.

20. Although Hamlet has said to Horatio, “I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” after Claudius’s reaction to The Mousetrap (3.2.276–77), he still refers to it as “the ghost” rather than “my father.”
The change is not an immediate one, however; in the Second Quarto, if not in the Folio, Hamlet still has one revenge speech left before he sails to England, the speech beginning, “How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge,” and most famously ending “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (4.4.32–66). But he has begun to speak of reason again in the way that he used to do: “Surely he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused” (36–39). The linking here of reason with religion is similar to that in his “What a piece of work is a man” speech, given before the players arrived and before Hamlet himself began his metamorphosis into a character in a revenge play. Although Hamlet seems to be modeling himself on Fortinbras, the man of action who has always been presented to us as a hothead, we have previously heard Hamlet’s more unqualified admiration of Horatio. Fortinbras is yet another role Hamlet is trying on, and Shakespeare gives us a signal in this scene that we should not accept it as an ideal one. Twice Hamlet refers to Fortinbras’s mission as a “straw”: “Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats / Will not debate the question of this straw” (25–26); and “Rightly to be great / Is not to stir without great argument, / But greatly to find quarrel in a straw / When honor’s at the stake” (53–56). A few minutes later, in act 4, scene 5, we hear that Ophelia has gone mad and that one of the indications of her madness is that she “Spurns enviously at straws” (4.5.6). This is the same kind of echo Shakespeare used in act 1, when Claudius’s concern with firing cannons to celebrate his drinking was followed directly by Hamlet’s concern with more important canons, those of God. Hamlet must come to reject the straws of madness altogether and return to normal.

One might think that Hamlet’s quarrel with Laertes in act 5, scene 1, is just such a quarrel with a straw and a continuation of Hamlet’s tendency to rant. The quarrel is indeed an emotional outburst on Hamlet’s part, one reminiscent of his outburst in Gertrude’s closet prior to his killing of Polonius. In fact, R. A. Foakes has claimed that once Hamlet has killed Polonius, “his attitude to the idea of killing and death changes rapidly, the biblical commandments are forgotten. . . . Hamlet increasingly displays a sardonic acceptance of the idea of death, and learns to distance himself from what he has done by claiming he is an agent of providence and that his conscience is untroubled.”21 But as I have already argued, Hamlet’s acceptance of death in act 5 is not sardonic but rather biblical; we have seen Hamlet’s

conscience very troubled and will see it so again, although not about what Foakes has in mind. As I will argue in a moment, Horatio’s agreement with Hamlet’s claims about Providence seems to indicate that Shakespeare is affirming those claims. As for the scene in the graveyard, Hamlet’s outburst is not merely emotional, nor is it, as Paul Cefalu has claimed, an identification with Laertes on the part of Hamlet; rather, it is a protest against Laertes and his ranting, a mimicry of Laertes’ demand that Ophelia’s gravediggers “pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T’o’er-top old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus” (5.1.238–41). Hamlet’s “rant” in this scene is a mirror held up to Laertes’ nature and is a rejection of it along with Hamlet’s previous rants, especially the one in act 2, scene 2 (“Who calls me villain? . . .”):

Woo’t weep? woo’t fight? woo’t fast? woo’t tear thyself?
Woo’t drink up esil? eat a crocodile?
I’ll do’t . . .
And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou’lt mouth,
I’ll rant as well as thou.

(5.1.262–71)

Ironically, of course, this parody of Laertes’ emotional rant is itself overly emotional; it has followed, we must remember, Hamlet’s leaping into Ophelia’s grave after Laertes and wrestling with him until the two are forcibly separated. Indeed, Hamlet will later acknowledge to Horatio that he has lost control of himself (5.2.75–76). Hamlet is still impulsive, still prone to the “wild and whirling words” for which Horatio has chided him and for which he has chided himself throughout the play. What is important about Hamlet in act 5, however, is not only what he does say after his return from the abortive trip to England,

22. “Given Laertes’s obedience to custom and Hamlet’s abhorrence of it, it is fitting that the moment at which Laertes most inspires Hamlet, and Hamlet most identifies with Laertes, occurs during the graveyard scene when Laertes uncharacteristically overthrows custom and leaps into Ophelia’s grave” (Paul Cefalu, “‘Damned Custom . . . Habits Devil’: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Anti-Dualism, and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind,” *ELH* 67 [2000]: 416). I believe this to be a misreading of the scene. Hamlet is upset at Laertes’ overacting and is mocking him. Also, Laertes may be overthrowing the decorum of a funeral, but he is being consistent in his own habit of behavior. He has just attempted to overthrow not just custom but the whole government.
but also what he does not say. In addition to not mentioning the Ghost, not once in act 5 does Hamlet use the word “revenge.”

This is no small matter. In the entire body of revenge drama of the period, there is no other supposed revenger who suddenly stops speaking of revenge toward the end of the play; rather, the threats and bloody planning come thicker and faster. But the only reference Hamlet makes in act 5 to retribution against Claudius is presented in such a way that Horatio’s assent appears to validate it not as revenge but as lawful justice. When Horatio says ruefully, “So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to ’t,” Hamlet responds, “They are not near my conscience” and gives a brief defense of his action, to which Horatio replies, “Why, what a King is this,” thereby laying the blame for their death squarely on Claudius, not on Hamlet (5.2.56–62). Immediately afterward, Hamlet does speak of “quit[ting Claudius] with this arm,” but as an arbiter of justice, if not a defender of the crown, since the charges he then presents against Claudius would convict Claudius of having gained the throne by murder and therefore of not being the rightful King:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th’ election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz’nage—is’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is’t not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(5.2.63–70)

Hamlet is pleading more than one case here: not only his entitlement to exact justice on a regicidal, incestuous, usurping, and murderous man, but, under Christian just war theory, his duty to do so in order to stop the perpetuation and spread of evil. If Shakespeare had considered this claim unwarranted, he would have had Horatio protest, as Horatio has done on other occasions, but all Horatio does here is remind Hamlet that word will soon be coming back from England and implicitly ask how Hamlet is going to exact the justice that he has just proposed. When a traditional revenger is asked what he is going to do with the time he has in which to kill, he normally responds with an elaborate plan, involving not just the demise of the victim but also ingenious devices to bring it about, devices that are meant to inflict pain as well as death. But the only specific plan Hamlet has ready is to apologize for being unkind to the son of an enemy.
It will be short; the interim is mine,
And a man's life's no more than to say 'one.'
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself.

(5.2.73–76)

Aside from the fact that a prince of the blood royal does not have to apologize to anyone if he does not want to, and that Hamlet’s reason for apology is an ethical, empathetic one rather than a pragmatic one (“For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his” [5.2.76–77]), revengers in plays positively revel in doing harm to relatives of their enemies. Hieronimo kills Lorenzo’s father in Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, Hoffman kills the Duke of Luningberg’s son Otho in Chettle’s The Tragedy of Hoffman, and Antonio butchers and fricassee Piero’s small son in Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge. But Hamlet is no longer speaking like a revenger.

In the actual killing of Claudius, there is another significant silence on Hamlet’s part: not once does this supposed avenger of his father make any reference to his father. Instead, Hamlet refers only to himself and to his mother—who has just been murdered before his very eyes. Considering the circumstances in this final scene, Hamlet’s action may not even be legally accountable. He has just been fatally wounded, while technically unarmed, by a conspiracy of which one conspirator has confessed and given evidence against the other; his mother has been poisoned and is dying before his eyes after giving evidence that her drink was poisoned; to this crime, too, Laertes has confessed and implicated Claudius; at least two witnesses (Osric and Horatio) and perhaps other nearby courtiers have heard all these confessions and accusations; and Horatio still holds Claudius’s orders for Hamlet’s death, written evidence that this is not Claudius’s first attempt on Hamlet’s life. Hamlet has acted in the heat of the moment, with the weapon placed in his hand by someone else, in direct response to an attack on his own life and that of his mother. Furthermore, as Hamlet lies dying, his last acts are to save the life of his friend Horatio, to name his own successor, and to remind Horatio of his duty in giving evidence against Claudius. Shakespeare seems to have taken special pains in this bloody scene to clear Hamlet of legal accountability—although, again, we may suspect a moral taint in the frenzied nature of Hamlet’s actions. There is great confusion in the scene; everything has happened quickly; the courtiers who have not yet heard all the evidence cry out “Treason! Treason!” as Hamlet stabs Claudius (5.2.312). But Shakespeare insists on having Laertes refer to Hamlet’s actions as just: “I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (296); “He [Claudius] is justly served. / It is a poison tempered by himself” (316–17). And
Horatio’s famous prayer perhaps also signals the audience about what we should think of Hamlet’s state of mind and soul: “Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (348–49).

Stephen Greenblatt has suggested that at this point in the play, the Ghost reappears in a way in Hamlet, whose “reiterated expression ‘I am dead’ has an odd resonance: these are words that are most appropriately spoken by a ghost. It is as if the spirit of Hamlet’s father has not disappeared; it has been incorporated by his son.”23 However, several other characters in this scene have also announced their deaths, and Hamlet’s manner of dying is very unlike that of his father, who was murdered in his sleep in a garden. In fact, as I have argued, Hamlet’s return to normal is predicated on his ceasing to have anything to do with the Ghost. But this is not to say that the Ghost does not reappear after Hamlet rejects it. On the contrary, it surfaces again in Claudius, whose goading of Laertes in act 4 sounds very much like the Ghost’s goading of Hamlet in act 1, complete with emotional blackmail: (GHOST. If thou didst ever thy dear father love ... [1.1.23]; CLAUDIUS. Laertes, was thy father dear to you? / Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart?” [4.7.106–8]). Furthermore, the exchange between Claudius and Laertes reenacts the scene the audience expected in act 3, when Hamlet had a chance to kill the praying Claudius:

CLAUDIUS. Hamlet comes back; what would you undertake
To show yourself your father’s son in deed
More than in words?
LAERTES. To cut his throat i’ th’ church.
CLAUDIUS. No place indeed should murder sanctuarize;
Revenge should have no bounds.

(4.7.123–27)

This is the true revenge play tradition, and Laertes becomes the revenge hero that Hamlet refuses to be.

It would seem that Shakespeare has created two plays within his play: the revenge play that begins in act 4, with Claudius and Laertes acting according to convention, and another kind of play involving Hamlet about which one might say that it is not so much opposed to revenge as opposed to basing one’s life on “actions that a man might play.” Most revenge plays of the time allotted at least a pro forma punishment to their revenger at the end; as Fredson Bowers has famously observed, “The audience is sympathetic to [the] revenger so long as

he does not become an Italianate intriguer and so long as he does not 
revenge.”24 At the end of *Hamlet*, the visual effect is that of a revenge 
play—the villain killed by the hero and the hero himself dying—but 
the message delivered by the traditional commentators at the end of 
the play is not on the evils of revenge or the deterioration of the re-
venger, as in other plays. Rather, it is a triple encomium on Hamlet’s 
character: by Hamlet’s enemy (or, after the dying reconciliation, his 
former enemy) Laertes, by his friend Horatio, and by his rival Fortin-
bras. Signals are being given here that Hamlet has not become a stan-
dard revenger.

What, then, has happened in Hamlet’s mind? He has cycled through 
several frames of mind, finally (although we will have to qualify this 
statement in a moment) returning to the religious framework he in-
habited at the beginning. Joan Larsen Klein posited this idea some 
years ago, but she sees Hamlet’s return as a matter of choosing be-
tween faith and reason, with Hamlet becoming a quietist who gives up 
on man’s “capacity to know truly anything here on earth,” and who 
has further “foregone the scholarly and philosophical uses of reason” 
and “willed himself instead to accept on faith the belief that provi-
dence will guide him to that final vengeance which is the Lord’s.”25 I 
believe the reverse to be true; what we have seen throughout the play 
is Hamlet’s return to faith being prompted by his reason. This is not to 
say that his reasoning always leads to a restatement of faith; we have 
also seen him use his reason to posit an unknowable universe in his 
third-act “to be or not to be” speech, and we have seen him rationalize 
his way to an evil desire in his later third-act determination to postpone 
killing Claudius in order to destroy his soul later. However, whenever 
Hamlet has had a return from the mentality of the revenge play hero 
to the mentality of a Christian prince, it has been through some kind 
of reasoning process. The “let be” that Klein sees as so quietistic and 
anti-intellectual at the end of Hamlet’s “fall of a sparrow speech” is a 
kind of “amen,” a QED to a proposition rather than a giving up of the 
question. It has followed, after all, a lengthy disquisition on justice, 
the proper behavior for a prince, and the meaning of life and death.

There is almost no scene in the play in which Hamlet’s Christianity 
is unalloyed, in which there is no overlay or undercurrent of agnosti-
cism, no drift toward an emotional outburst of some kind. Conversely, 
however, there is almost no scene in which Hamlet’s agnosticism or

Press, 1966), 95.
25. Joan Larsen Klein, “‘What Is’t to Leave Betimes?:’ Proverbs and Logic in 
revenge impulse is unalloyed. He asks for Ophelia’s prayers at the end of his “to be or not to be” speech, and he cries out for “heavenly guards” even at the moment after killing Polonius when he seems most bound to the Ghost as a revenge figure. He does seem to revert to the revenger image in his gusto in killing Claudius, complete with verbal goading (“Is thy union here? / Follow my mother” [5.2.315–16]), but immediately afterward, Shakespeare has Laertes defuse any hint of revenge taint by saying that Claudius is “justly served”; a few moments later, Hamlet prevents Horatio from the “self-slaughter” that Hamlet earlier rejected as against God’s canons (1.2.131–32). At this point, it is Horatio who is tempted by his emotions to be “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (330) and Hamlet who calls him back from an erroneous idea of “felicity” to doing his duty to his friend, his prince, and his country by remaining alive and bearing witness to the truth.

If Hamlet has come full circle, then, it has been a circle full of epicycles. He has not gone one way, reversed direction, and then reversed again; nor has he followed a perfectly linear path all the way around the circle, in a kind of intellectual wheel of fortune. Rather, he has struggled through the same question repeatedly under different stimuli; he has come to a conclusion, thought of a counterargument, and started all over again. He has tried out a solution, found that it does not work, tried another, and, finally, after discarding all that was wrong, discovered that he had been right in the first place. We may say, finally, that he has followed yet another scriptural passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Try all things, & keepe that which is good.”26 But like the “piece of work [that] is man” whom he describes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is always a mixture of the noble and the base, the rational and the emotional, the prince and the player. He has not so much changed direction as shifted the balance of his conflicting parts.

26. DR: “But prooue al things: hold that which is good.” BB: “Examine all thynges, holde fast that which is good.”