

interpretation

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interpretation

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Hamlet: The Cosmopolitan Prince

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But all of us have, unconsciously, involuntarily in our bodies values, words, formulas, moralities of *opposite* descent. . . .—*A diagnosis of the modern soul*—where would it begin? With a resolute incision into this instinctive contradiction, with the isolation of its opposite values, with the vivisection of the *most instructive* case.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*

I

Few critics have troubled themselves over the question: Would Prince Hamlet have made a good King of Denmark? Preoccupied with the problem of why Hamlet fails to act for much of the play, critics have understandably been reluctant to speculate about how he might have acted had he come to the throne. And yet Shakespeare raises the issue at the end of the play, when Fortinbras concludes by predicting what Hamlet's political future might have been: "he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal" (v.ii.397–98).¹ Sympathetic as we are to Hamlet, we would like to think that Fortinbras correctly assessed the prince's potential as a king. But Fortinbras has an ulterior motive—one might even say a *political* motive—in being so generous to the dead Hamlet. Ever one to seize an opportunity, Fortinbras is already thinking ahead to how he might exploit the situation he has stumbled upon: "I have some rights, of memory in this kingdom, / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me" (v.ii.389–90). By speaking well of Hamlet, Fortinbras may be seeking to win the hearts of the dead prince's partisans and thus to advance his own cause in Denmark.

What Fortinbras presumably does not yet know is how deeply indebted he actually is to Hamlet. For in his last words, Hamlet proposes Fortinbras as the next King of Denmark: "I do prophesy th' election lights / On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice" (v.ii.355–56). As a political judgment, this endorsement is truly extraordinary, and as the most clearly political action Hamlet takes in the play, it casts doubt on Fortinbras' prediction of how successful Hamlet would have been as king. If one political theme runs throughout *Hamlet*, it is the struggle of the Danes to maintain their ascendancy over the Norwegians. As the play opens, we hear how Denmark is arming itself against a possible invasion from Norway. We soon learn that the elder Hamlet's greatest triumph was

1. My text for *Hamlet* is from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), ed. by G. Blakemore Evans.

to defeat the elder Fortinbras in single combat, a victory which apparently brought some Norwegian territory under Danish control. We later learn that the younger Fortinbras is trying through force of arms to undo the elder Hamlet's achievement. Claudius cannot equal the martial exploits of his heroic predecessor, but as we see him in Act II, he has successfully pursued a policy of peaceful diplomacy to get the present King of Norway to rein in Fortinbras and divert his aggressive impulses against Poland. Whether on the battlefield or in the council chamber, the cornerstone of Danish foreign policy seems to be to keep Norway in check.

With his dying breath, Hamlet seems willing to throw this policy to the winds. He wants to hand the Danish throne over to a Norwegian, specifically to the son of his own father's greatest antagonist. There is no precedent for this action in any of the sources we have for *Hamlet*.² The only parallel is to be found in the peculiar analogue to *Hamlet*, the German play *Der bestrafte Brudermord* ("Fratricide Punished"), which concludes with Hamlet saying: "Gentle Horatio, take the crown to my cousin, Duke Fortinbras of Norway, so that the Kingdom may not fall into other hands."³ In keeping with the way this much truncated version simplifies the story and tries to clear up its mysteries,⁴ Hamlet is here given a simple and comprehensible motive for naming Fortinbras to the throne, a motive which even sounds patriotic. But in Shakespeare's version, there is not the slightest hint of any kinship between Hamlet and Fortinbras. The clarity of Hamlet's motivation for endorsing Fortinbras in the German play only highlights the mysteriousness of his action in Shakespeare's play.

How then could Hamlet possibly justify his dying bequest to his people of a Norwegian enemy as their king? It is of course notoriously difficult to discover what is going on in Hamlet's mind. But his defense of his choice of Fortinbras would probably be: "Fortinbras should be king because he is the best man for the job." When Hamlet witnessed Fortinbras preparing to invade Poland, he compared himself unfavorably to the Norwegian prince. Observing Fortinbras' political resoluteness in marching into battle for an essentially trivial cause, Hamlet felt weak and irresolute by comparison and praised Fortinbras' spirited-

2. For the sources of *Hamlet*, see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), Vol. VII, pp. 3-189. The greatest difficulty for any source-study of *Hamlet* is that we lack what was presumably Shakespeare's principal source, an earlier Elizabethan *Hamlet* play, probably by Thomas Kyd and conventionally referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*. See Bullough, pp. 15-20. In the absence of this play, we cannot know with certainty whether Shakespeare introduced Hamlet's endorsement of Fortinbras into the story. All we can say is that no such action appears in either Saxo Grammaticus or Belleforest, the ultimate sources of the *Hamlet* legend.

3. Bullough, p. 158. For a discussion of the complicated relation of this play to *Hamlet*, see Bullough, pp. 20-24.

4. For example, in *Fratricide Punished*, the complicated question of why Hamlet delays his revenge receives a very simple answer: "Now am I back here once more, and cannot yet attain to my revenge, because this fratricide is at all times surrounded by many people" (v.i.).

ness, nobility, and courage (iv.iv.32–66). When thinking of the Danish succession, Hamlet evidently recalls the kingliness he observed in Fortinbras, and decides to be governed by nature rather than convention. In his most political act, Hamlet shows himself completely indifferent to the most basic of political considerations, the distinction between *us* and *them*. To find a king for the Danes, he feels that he must go beyond the narrow bounds of Denmark to locate the best man available, even if he happens to be a Norwegian.

Hamlet's unwillingness to settle for anything less than the best is in some respects an admirable trait, even in a ruler. But one must wonder how Denmark would have fared under a monarch who is at heart indifferent to the distinction between Danes and Norwegians. And Hamlet's dying words are no momentary whim or last-minute aberration. Proposing Fortinbras as king is entirely in keeping with the character he displays throughout the play. Hamlet's final speech simply reveals with stark clarity the problem he has been struggling with all along. A cosmopolitan by temperament, Hamlet is placed in circumstances which demand that he take the narrow politics of Denmark seriously, and his soul balks at that prospect: "The time is out of joint—O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.188–89). One way of getting at the heart of Hamlet's tragedy is to view him as a cosmopolitan in the etymological meaning of the term. Hamlet is a man who wishes to take the *cosmos* as his *polis*. He refuses to allow his horizons to be limited by any one community just because he happened to be born in it, and instead lets his vision roam freely over all the world.

Hamlet defines himself with precision when he rejects Rosencrantz's claim that he is politically ambitious: "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.254–56). Hamlet does not take his bearings from the ordinary political horizon. He could in fact be content with the little private world of his own mind because within that mind his thoughts can range over the whole universe. The private and the universal are the two poles between which Hamlet's mind moves. What tends to drop out from his view is the middle term, the public, the medium through which most men relate their private concerns to something larger and more universal. For Hamlet, the public is merely a realm of "bad dreams," the political demands which prevent him from remaining safely within the bounds of his own mind and savoring the freedom of a citizen of the world.

II

Hamlet's cosmopolitanism is in part a reaction to the provinciality of the country in which he lives. Shakespeare seems to have gone out of his way to portray Hamlet's Denmark as mired in the cultural backwaters of Europe. Nothing characterizes the Denmark of the play so strikingly as the fact

But Hamlet's contempt is not confined to his native land. When he is probing the motives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he reveals how widespread his disgust really is:

HAMLET What have you, my good friends, deserv'd at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?

GUILDENSTERN Prison, my lord?

HAMLET Denmark's a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ Then is the world one.

HAMLET A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons. Denmark being one o' th' worst (II.ii.239–47).

Hamlet's contempt focuses on Denmark, but only as the worst example of what is generally wrong with the world. For Hamlet all regimes are prisons: they arbitrarily limit man's horizons by imposing one set of customs on him. In this exchange, Hamlet's contempt for Denmark quickly expands into a contempt for the world as such, an attitude which has a distinctly Christian ring to it. One begins to suspect a link between Hamlet's cosmopolitanism and his Christianity. As opposed to the civic religions of the ancient world, Christianity is transpolitical. Aspiring to be a catholic church, Christianity refuses to be limited by the boundaries of any particular regime. Hamlet shares this transpolitical perspective. He can never become fully absorbed in political life because he tends to view all the things of this world from the perspective of eternity. In that light all worldly goods seem transitory and ultimately insignificant. For Hamlet, to be a great lord is only to be "spacious in the possession of dirt" (v.ii.87–88).

One reason for the breadth of Hamlet's horizons is that he is a student of history, especially classical history. He likes to measure his contemporaries by the standard of classical models, according to which he usually finds them wanting. But in Hamlet's eyes, even the superior greatness of the ancient world has with time dissolved into nothingness. Seeing the skull of poor Yorick, Hamlet immediately makes the mental leap to wonder whether Alexander the Great looked the same way in the grave. Alexander's fate teaches Hamlet a lesson in the vainglory of all earthly achievement and political greatness in particular:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw! (v.i.213–16)

Horatio instinctively recognizes the danger in Hamlet's thinking this way: "'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider / so" (v.i.205–6). A prince, not to mention a king, cannot afford to be too acutely aware of the hollowness of political glory, for that awareness would undermine his ability to pursue his political goals with singlemindedness and zeal.

But Hamlet cannot close his eyes to the skull beneath the skin, and his study of both ancient and modern history has convinced him that political reputations are like the momentary fads of fashion. Speaking of how the players have suddenly fallen out of the public's favor, Hamlet cannot resist drawing a political parallel for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

It is not very strange, for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived, give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out (II.ii.363–68).

Faced with the mutability of this world, Hamlet turns from politics to philosophy, from public life to a private quest for a universal and stable truth. Notice, however, that despite his admiration for the ancient world, Hamlet does not turn to classical philosophy. Hamlet is concerned, not as Plato and Aristotle were with the natural, but with the "more than natural." Hamlet's is a Christian philosophy, directed toward what lies beyond the borders of this world. In his one other mention of philosophy, Hamlet feels compelled to correct what he sees as the limited horizons of Horatio's world-view: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I.v.166–67). Horatio, who claims he is "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (v.ii.341), displays a classical skepticism about all things supernatural, as Marcellus observes in Horatio's reaction to the report of the ghost: "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him" (I.i.23–24).⁵ Hamlet, by contrast, believes in the ghost before he ever sees it and is in general fascinated by supernatural phenomena, thus leaving himself wide open to "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (I.iv.56).

III

From an examination of the implications of Hamlet's dying endorsement of Fortinbras, a consistent profile emerges, of a man who prefers other countries to his own, who prefers private to public life, and who is in many respects less concerned about this world than the next. Together these attitudes work to unfit Hamlet for the role of avenger his father's ghost wishes to impose on him. Shakespeare portrays Hamlet as a cultivated and sophisticated product of modern Christian Europe, who is suddenly asked to step out of a university classroom and into the brutal world of Norse saga.⁶ Hamlet must become involved in the most primitive of social relationships, a blood feud, and subordinate all larger considerations to the sole task of exacting vengeance:

5. See also I.i.30, 56–58, 165.

6. Cf. Bullough, pp. 52–53. Hamlet's tragedy is thus the mirror image of Othello's. Othello reverses the movement Hamlet is called upon to perform: by entering Venetian society, he moves

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter (i.v.98–104).

Hamlet reveals more than he realizes when he recognizes that to pursue his role as an avenger, he would have to annihilate his entire education. Far from preparing him for the task of taking vengeance, Hamlet's upbringing has in fact made it impossible for him to pursue Claudius with the pagan fierceness his situation calls for.

Hamlet can of course respond emotionally to the appeal of his father's ghost, and part of him clearly wants to wreak vengeance on Claudius. There are even moments when Hamlet seems to embrace a heroic role and his Danish heritage, as, for example, in his appearance at Ophelia's grave: "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!" (v.i.257–58). But there is more than a hint of irony in the way Hamlet here announces himself. He seems to be deliberately over-acting the part, spurred into competition by Laertes' histrionic outbursts of grief over Ophelia. Even in his moments of passion, Hamlet maintains a critical detachment that prevents him from ever completely plunging into the role his circumstances dictate. He is governed in his life by the principle of acting which he articulates to the troop of players: "in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness" (III.ii.6–8). And even when Hamlet responds to a heroic ideal, he cannot close his eyes to what he sees as its underlying hollowness. Consider his praise of Fortinbras' expedition against Poland:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell (iv.iv.47–53).

from a primitive heroic world to a sophisticated civilized one. Hamlet is an established member of his society who craves the freedom of a cosmopolitan existence; Othello, who as a Mediterranean mercenary has known what it is to move from country to country, finally hopes to settle down and take his place through marriage in Venetian society. Hamlet is destroyed while attempting to assume an epic role; Othello is destroyed while attempting to leave one and become in effect domesticated in Venice. Each hero is tragically and, as it were, generically misplaced: Hamlet, the modern European, wanders into a Norse saga; Othello, the Homeric hero, blunders into an Italian bedroom farce and is in effect forced to kill his beloved and himself to avoid being laughed at. On the problem of cosmopolitanism in *Othello*, see Allan Bloom, "Cosmopolitan Man and the Political Community: *Othello*," *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), especially pp. 46–51.

Listening to this speech, one thinks one is hearing unequivocal praise of Fortinbras until one gets to the last line, in which Hamlet abruptly deflates what he himself had been inflating.⁷ Hamlet genuinely admires Fortinbras, and yet he cannot help seeing the ultimate worthlessness of what the Norwegian prince strives for. We can be sure that in stating his own position, Fortinbras would not admit that he was, to use Hamlet's phrase, finding "quarrel in a straw" (IV.iv.55). Political men take the pretexts for their heroic action very seriously because they view their ideals uncritically. One is tempted to say that their political resolve derives precisely from the fact that they are unaware of the illusory character of the goals they often pursue.

But the cosmopolitan stance which allows Hamlet to see beyond the conventional political horizon undermines his ability to take any heroic ideal seriously. His intellect is constantly leading him to deny meaning to the very acts he feels called upon to perform.⁸ He is supposed to right the wrongs in his native land, and yet he has nothing but contempt for the Denmark he lives in and ultimately reveals that he would just as soon see a Norwegian on its throne. He is supposed to uphold his father's honor, and yet his study of history has shown him that political reputations are arbitrarily won and seldom long maintained. Above all, he is supposed to take action in this world, and yet he is constantly haunted by visions of the next, which clearly complicate his response to his worldly tasks. When, for example, he finally has an opportunity to kill Claudius, he finds that vengeance is a far more complicated matter for a Christian than a pagan:

Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying;
 And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,
 And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:
 A villain kills my father, and for that
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.
 Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge (III.iii.73–79).

The presence of an afterlife in Hamlet's world-view introduces a new factor into his calculations as an avenger. A pagan merely has to kill the body of his enemy; as Hamlet reflects on his mission, he concludes that a Christian bent on vengeance must destroy the body in such a way that the eternal soul of his victim will not be saved:

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
 Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,
 At game a-swearing, or about some act

7. For a more detailed analysis of this speech, see G. K. Hunter, "The Heroism of Hamlet" in John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, eds., *Hamlet* (New York: Schocken, 1966), p. 95. See also James Wood, "The Pale Cast of Thought" (Harvard University Undergraduate Honors Thesis, 1973, unpublished), pp. 30–32.

8. See Wood, p. 32.

That has no relish of salvation in't—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes (III.iii.89–95).

The issue of revenge reveals clearly how Hamlet's largeness, indeed comprehensiveness, of horizons works to produce a split in his soul, which in turn paralyzes him as an actor. One begins to understand why Shakespeare was attracted to the melodramatic genre of the revenge play and how he was able to create something profound out of the kind of material that had produced such potboilers as *The Spanish Tragedy* and (presumably) the *Ur-Hamlet*.⁹ By casting an intelligent and reflective man in the role of avenger, Shakespeare is able to use the revenge play to expose the inner contradictions of Renaissance ethics, the conflict between pagan and Christian principles. Vengeance is basically a pagan principle, in some ways the pagan principle *par excellence*. As we see, Hamlet feeds his vengeful impulses by drawing upon classical precedents, in particular, the *Iliad*-like tale of how Pyrrhus slew Priam. As a Christian, Hamlet ought to reject a call to vengeance, leaving the task to God. But, as we have seen, if Hamlet is to pursue vengeance as a Christian, he must find a more sophisticated form, and learn to kill not just the body but the soul. A simpler man than Hamlet would have either rejected the task of vengeance or embraced it wholeheartedly and in a more direct form. Laertes, for example, claims that he will not let religious scruples stand in the way of his avenging his father's death. When Claudius asks him what he is prepared to do to Hamlet to show himself his "father's son," Laertes replies bluntly: "To cut his throat i' th' church" (IV.vii.124–27).

But Hamlet does not have this kind of one-track mind. He shows himself to be a true child of the Renaissance in his need to look at all sides of a question, and to approach the issue of vengeance in light of the two ethical traditions available to him—the classical and the Christian. Intellectual historians tend to present the Renaissance as trying to reconcile these two traditions in one grand synthesis, usually referred to as Christian humanism. But Hamlet's tragedy reveals how precarious and deeply problematic this synthesis was. On the issue of revenge, the classical and Christian traditions recommend opposing courses of action, as a quick review of the *Iliad* and the New Testament will reveal. And if one tries to pursue vengeance in a Christian framework, one comes up with something far more sinister and difficult to accomplish than any Homeric Greek ever dreamed of.

One might attempt a formulation of Hamlet's tragedy this way: precisely because of his comprehensiveness of outlook, the way he follows the Renaissance ideal of trying to combine disparate ethics, he ends up exposing the profound

9. For a discussion of *Hamlet* in relation to the revenge play tradition, see Anne Barton's introduction to T. J. B. Spencer's edition of *Hamlet* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

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tensions between those ethics, thus leaving himself in a tragic situation in which his own principles make contradictory demands upon him and hence paralyze him. One can see the inner division in Hamlet when he goes to confront his mother after confirming Claudius' guilt with his staging of the mousetrap:

Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature! let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites—
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seals never my soul consent! (III.ii.390–99)

Alternating between pagan fierceness and Christian mildness, Hamlet proclaims a disharmony between his words and deeds which mirrors a more fundamental disharmony in his soul.¹⁰ Pulled in two directions at once, he cannot help being in some way a hypocrite to himself. Hamlet's final words in this speech seem to echo the ghost's original injunction to him:

But howsomever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught (I.v.84–86).

From the very beginning, Hamlet is faced with an impossible task: to exact a barbaric pagan vengeance with the tenderness of a civilized Christian. To accomplish this goal, Hamlet needed to be a kind of Nietzschean superman: "the Roman Caesar with Christ's soul."¹¹ If, then, Hamlet ultimately fails to achieve his revenge within the constraints laid down by his father's ghost, his failure results from a kind of overreaching, and as such is a tragic failure.

IV

In a sense, Hamlet's tragedy is that of a would-be Renaissance man. Shakespeare suggests the kind of ideal synthesis Hamlet aspired to in Ophelia's eulogy for his sanity: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! / The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword" (III.i.150–51).¹² Though Hamlet may not be quite the all-embracing human being Ophelia pictures, he does

10. For a fuller analysis of this speech, see Reuben A. Brower, *Hero and Saint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 297–98.

11. See Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans., *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), sect. 983, p. 513.

12. Cf. Brower, p. 314.

try to span opposing realms of value. He seems at times to wish to be all things to all men. Though a prince by birth, he prides himself on his practical knowledge of the theatre and the way he can talk to the players on familiar terms and in their own language. He is sufficiently envious of Laertes' reputation in court as a fencer to stay "in continual practice" so that he can at least hope to beat him "at the odds" when they come to fight (v.ii.210–12). Hamlet reveals his competitive desire to excel in all areas when he is confronted by his mirror image Laertes over Ophelia's grave:

'Swounds, show me what thou't do.
Woo't weep, woo't fight, woo't fast, woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I (v.i.274–79).

Hamlet vows to outdo Laertes in any part he chooses to play—mourner, fighter, ascetic—and indeed with his quick wit, verbal facility, and theatrical talent, Hamlet can shine in many different roles.¹³

But the inner richness which allows Hamlet to play such a wealth of parts works against him when he has to settle down to the singleminded task of pursuing revenge. If there is one theme that runs throughout Shakespeare's portrayal of public life, it is that politics requires a narrowing of a man's horizons if he is to be successful in his tasks. The positive side of Hamlet's cosmopolitanism is that he is open to all the diverse influences the modern world has to offer him. The negative side is that precisely that diversity of influences prevents Hamlet from ever playing a single role with utter conviction. What makes Hamlet the quintessential tragic figure of the Renaissance is that in him the inner contradictions of Renaissance culture come to consciousness. Hamlet is usually viewed as self-divided, but many critics treat his self-division as a kind of pathological state, as if the community Hamlet lives in were whole and only he fragmented.¹⁴ But Hamlet's self-division mirrors a more fundamental self-division in his culture. Indeed Hamlet is distinguished in the play precisely by the fact that only he is alert to the way his culture is self-divided.

One reason *Hamlet* has such resonance as a play is that in Shakespeare's hands the story comes to embody the complex layering of Renaissance culture. Shakespeare takes material from a primitive Norse saga and transposes it to a modern European court, a court clearly Christian in its beliefs and yet shad-

13. On Hamlet's "ventriloquism," see Barton, p. 44.

14. See, for example, G. Wilson Knight's "The Embassy of Death: An Essay on *Hamlet*," in *The Wheel of Fire* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), especially p. 32: "Except for the original murder of Hamlet's father, the *Hamlet* universe is one of healthy and robust life, good-nature, humour, romantic strength, and welfare: against this background is the figure of Hamlet pale with the consciousness of death. He is the ambassador of death walking amid life."

owed by memories of classical antiquity.¹⁵ What we think of as the Renaissance was the result of just this blend: an attempt to revive classical antiquity within a Christian culture that had been grafted on to the indigenous pagan civilizations of Europe. Everywhere one turns in *Hamlet*, one finds a rich Renaissance texture, in the many classical references and allusions, for example, or all the modernizing touches that make Claudius' court seem the contemporary of Queen Elizabeth's, and not the headquarters of some wandering Germanic tribe.

Even the imaginative geography of *Hamlet* reflects the interplay of forces that went to make up the Renaissance. Shakespeare's Denmark is a kind of borderland, lying on the fringes of modern Europe, halfway between the old world of pagan heroism and the new world of Christian civility.¹⁶ To the north stands Norway, a yet untamed world of "lawless resolute" (I.i.98), a land where single combat between martial heroes can still take place, in short a kind of Homeric realm surviving on the frontiers of civilization. To the south of Denmark lies the heart of modern Europe, cultivated cities like Paris, an unheroic world in which men learn to fence, rather than to smite "the sledged Polacks on the ice" (I.i.63).¹⁷ And in the middle of this world stands Hamlet, able to look beyond the borders of his country and in effect to survey the history of Western culture, to see its competing models of human excellence embodied in the figures who surround him. There is Laertes, the model of a modern courtier, a young gallant trained in Paris. There is Hamlet's fellow student, Horatio, schooled at Wittenberg in Stoic ideals, and a model of rational control. And finally, there is Fortinbras, Hamlet's Norwegian model of the heroic soldier. Hamlet can find something to admire in all these models, but he can also see the limitations of each. Precisely because he is open to all of them, he can never become the captive of any single model. As a result, all the other characters in the play seem one-dimensional by comparison with Hamlet. Next to Hamlet, Laertes seems superficial and callow, Horatio cold and unfeeling, and Fortinbras rash and narrow-minded. Hamlet's is a peculiar form of heroism: rather than pursuing one heroic ideal to an extreme, Hamlet moves back and forth between a number of competing heroic ideals, subjecting them all in the process to a critique. What makes Hamlet stand out in his world is thus not any conventional greatness of soul, but the largeness of his horizons, his heightened awareness of all that his complex culture contains and the depth and genuineness of his response to its contradictory ethical demands.¹⁸ His soul becomes a kind of crossroads, a battleground on which pagan and Christian,

15. See, for example, I.i.113–16, I.ii.152–53, II.ii.390–91, and III.ii.98–106.

16. Shakespeare's Denmark is to the north of Europe what his Cyprus is to the south. In the imaginative geography of *Othello*, Cyprus stands midway between the Christian civilization of Venice and the pagan barbarism of the Turkish Empire, and thus is the appropriate setting for the tragedy of Othello, who is caught between these two worlds.

17. See Barton, p. 20.

18. Cf. Hunter, p. 104, and Brower, p. 310.

ancient and modern values meet and fight to a standstill, leaving Hamlet unable to remain true to any one set of values and thus unable to carry out the specific task his concrete situation demands of him.¹⁹

V

Hamlet's tragedy is ultimately that of a cosmopolitan or apolitical man placed in very political circumstances. Critics seldom discuss *Hamlet* in political terms,²⁰ even though the play's action hinges on a number of political issues, such as the succession in Denmark or the Danish–Norwegian conflict. The reason critics generally feel that they cannot be bothered with the petty politics of Denmark is that Hamlet feels that way himself. His viewpoint so completely dominates the play and colors our response to it that his apolitical perspective has inevitably influenced all commentators. *Hamlet* thus becomes a test-case of the relevance of political considerations to understanding Shakespeare's plays. In many respects Hamlet is the least political of Shakespeare's mature tragic heroes, and most analyses of his character take a purely psychological, if not psychoanalytic, approach. But we cannot understand Hamlet if we abstract him from the concrete political setting in which Shakespeare placed him. He is after all, as the subtitle of the play tells us, the Prince of Denmark, and that fact is intimately bound up with his tragedy.

Thus to understand Hamlet's tragedy, it is useful to begin by asking a few straightforward political questions, such as: what kind of king would Hamlet have made and why does he propose Fortinbras for the succession? Though these may seem at first to be narrow political questions, they ultimately lead to the larger issues in the play, and even help us to understand more fully the nature of Hamlet's apolitical stance. If we learn that Hamlet is unequal to the political demands his world makes upon him, we also learn that that world is unequal to satisfying the higher longings of Hamlet's more comprehensive soul. As always in Shakespeare, questions of politics lead to the more fundamental question of the limits of politics.

19. See Brower, p. 316.

20. For an exception to this rule, see E. A. J. Honigmann, "The Politics in *Hamlet* and 'The World of the Play,'" in Brown and Harris, pp. 129–47.