

Heaven or Havoc? The End of *Hamlet*

ANDREW FOLEY

Introduction

Ever since A.C. Bradley sought to explain “what actually happens in the play” (93), there has been widespread disagreement among Shakespearean scholars about what does actually happen in *Hamlet*, and about what meaning to attach to the events of the play. In the broadest terms the critical debate divides into two lines of tradition. The first, which can be traced through C.S. Lewis, Maynard Mack, H.D.F. Kitto, G.B. Harrison, John Holloway, Kenneth Muir, Diana Devlin and others, interprets the play as the working out of divine purpose, or at least as justice finally being served and peace and order being restored. The second line, which includes G. Wilson Knight, L.C. Knights, Sydney Bolt, Eleanor Prosser and Graham Holderness, regards the play as presenting a rather darker and more problematic worldview. In this article, I offer a contribution to this debate by arguing that critics belonging to the second line do not go far enough – that in fact *Hamlet* represents the blackest of all Shakespeare’s tragedies and expresses a vision of life which is unrelentingly bleak and pessimistic.

To do so, I concentrate specifically on the end of *Hamlet/Hamlet*. Fittingly, perhaps, for the habitually punning Prince, the phrase which forms part of the title of this article contains deliberately multiple meanings. Referring both to the eponymous protagonist and to the play as a whole, I consider the end that Hamlet is striving for, the nature and meaning of Hamlet’s final days and death, as well as the overall significance of the ending of the play. My contention is that the conclusion of a work of literature is crucial to its meaning. The choices that a writer makes in bringing a story to its close must of necessity have a disproportionate bearing on the ideas which are being conveyed.

Part of the problem in *Hamlet* is that, because of the dominating presence of the main character, his words are often taken to be determinant of the intended meaning of the play. Thus, many critics have assumed that the play confirms the concepts of “heaven” being “ordinant” (5.2.48), of there being “a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10) and “a special Providence” (5.2.207) that ensures order and direction in human life. In this article, I focus more on the events of the play, and particularly on what happens in the final act. I argue that, when looked at from this perspective, it becomes clear that the ending of the play really suggests a world of chaos and disorder, of mere “havoc” (5.2.369), a meaningless existence where nothing ultimately is of any “matter” (5.2.209). I begin by passing briefly over Act 5 Scene 1 before proceeding to a more detailed reading of Act 5 Scene 2, and especially of the very final moments of the play.

Act 5 Scene 1

Many of the critics who attempt to see a positive meaning in the conclusion to the play argue that the Hamlet who returns to Denmark in the final act is a changed man. They maintain that he has come to terms with his self-identity, with his mortality and with his destiny. The claim is that being away from the toxic and suffocating atmosphere of the Danish court has restored Hamlet to his best self, and that this is revealed in his cunning exchange of the letters in the possession of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; in his decisiveness in boarding the pirate ship; and in his successful negotiation with the pirates for a safe return to Denmark.

Yet there is little evidence of any significant change in Hamlet in the penultimate scene of the play. Far from having become reconciled to either his own mortality or the idea of death in general, he is still haunted and horrified by the prospect of death. When the gravedigger shows him Yorick's skull, Hamlet remembers the court jester with affection but is nauseated and appalled by the physical fact of death:

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it.

(5.1.175-179)

A little later on, he notes, with a shudder, "To what base uses we may return" (5.1.193). And in imagining the fate of Alexander's and Caesar's remains, Hamlet concludes that in death all human life is reduced to meaningless dust. Far from evincing an acceptance of death or a belief in its religious purpose, Hamlet continues instead to view life and death as sickening and pointless.

Nor does Hamlet seem to have overcome the flaws in temperament which have beset him since the beginning of the play. In particular, he remains prone to the violent swings of mood which have seen him oscillating between deep depression and manic outbursts. As he is being taken to England, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army on their way to Poland, having been granted passage through Denmark by Claudius. The thought of a war being fought over a ludicrously trivial cause provokes Hamlet into a fury at his own inaction and he cries out at the end of his soliloquy, "O from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!" (4.4.65-66) The point, however, is that at this moment he is being exiled from Denmark under armed escort and is thus completely powerless to put any such thoughts of vengeance into direct action. It is yet one more instance of Hamlet working himself up into a futile, thoughtless rage. It continues a pattern of ineffectual passion which Hamlet has exhibited throughout the play: following his initial encounter with the Ghost; in the nunnery scene with Ophelia; after the play-within-a-play; in the closet scene with Gertrude. Now, on his return to Denmark, the same characteristic pattern is perpetuated when Hamlet, outraged by Laertes' histrionic display of grief at Ophelia's funeral, leaps into the grave to grapple with him, literally ranting (5.1.277) and raving so wildly that Gertrude is compelled to describe his behaviour as

mere madness:
And thus a while the fit will work on him.
Anon as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.

(5.1.277-281)

Moreover, Hamlet's frenzied claim to the throne – "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.249-250) – and his scarcely veiled threats against Claudius seem as empty as ever since Hamlet is as incapable of taking action against Claudius as he was before. Indeed, it could be argued that he is even less capable since Claudius now knows for certain what Hamlet's intentions are and will be even more on his guard. Rather than having come to terms with himself, the Hamlet of Act 5 Scene 1 seems no different from the Hamlet of the first four acts.

Act 5 Scene 2

A common notion in the critical literature is that in spite of what Hamlet does or does not achieve in the play, and in spite of whatever personal flaws he may at times display, he remains an essentially noble character. Bradley set the tone in 1904, averring that Hamlet "is not left in utter defeat. Not only is his task at last accomplished but Shakespeare seems to have determined that his hero should exhibit in his latest hour all the glorious power and all the nobility and sweetness of his nature" (117).

Even a critic such as A.P. Rossiter, who generally views Hamlet as “an utter failure” (181), nevertheless claims that readers retain an unshakeable belief in Hamlet’s nobility. Yet this is not necessarily the case. Early in Act 5 Scene 2, Hamlet tells Horatio the story of how he discovered the contents of Claudius’ letter to the king of England and then replaced it with one of his own. Hamlet no doubt intends to demonstrate how clever he was, but there is something rather distasteful in the quasi-sexual imagery he uses to describe how he obtained the letter from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Up from my cabin,
My sea gown scarfed about me, in the dark
Groped I to find out them; had my desire,
Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew
To mine own room again.

(5.2.12-16)

Even more disturbing is Hamlet’s revelation that he rewrote the letter so that the command is now for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be put “to sudden death,/Not shriving time allowed” (5.2.46-47). It is bad enough that Hamlet should have arranged the execution of his former friends, who are, after all, merely carrying out the direct orders of a king, but wilfully to deny them salvation seems villainous. Previously, he had spared Claudius only because he thought he was praying, and planned instead to murder him when he was “about some act/That has no relish of salvation in’t” (3.3.91-92). As Rebecca West points out, Hamlet shows traces of “a perverse determination to kill the soul as well as the body” (30); West goes on to argue that “there would be no question at all in the minds of an Elizabethan audience that a murderer who could cheat his victims of their chance of salvation was a very bad man indeed”.¹ It is clear from his terse response – “So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to’t” (5.2.56) – that Horatio is shocked by what he hears, and Hamlet is forced to try to justify his actions:

Why man, they did make love to their employment,
They are not near my conscience, their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

(5.2.57-62)

This sounds more like a rationalisation than a justification, however, and Horatio tactfully changes the subject to Claudius, about whom it is less morally dubious for Hamlet to believe it is “perfect conscience/To quit him with this arm” (5.2.67-68). Given what this passage reveals about Hamlet’s character, it is difficult to shake the feeling that Hamlet was right to include himself when he told Ophelia that “we are arrant knaves all” (3.1.128).

It is important here to distinguish between questions surrounding Hamlet’s moral character and the undoubted fact of his intellect. As Harold Bloom asserts, “even if Hamlet is a hero-villain, he remains the Western hero of consciousness” (Bloom [A] 409; see also Bloom [B] 1). And yet, while it is possible, for the most part, to admire the acuity and sensitivity of his insights into human life, and the sheer sweep of his vision of existence, it must also be conceded that there are times when Hamlet displays an alarming inability to see what is right in front of him and a tendency to make universalistic truth claims which are hardly supported by the events of the play. In his conversation with Horatio, for example, he asserts that he acted “rashly” (5.2.6) in appropriating the king’s letter, and he feels that there is a positive lesson to be learned from this:

And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
 Rough-hew them how we will.
 (5.2.7-11)

In saying this, Hamlet seems to have forgotten that it was precisely his rashness in killing Polonius that led him to be sent to England and to his potential destruction. If had not acted rashly then, he would not have had to act rashly on board ship. Moreover, it is precisely his rashness in accepting the duel with Laertes that will lead to his death. It is hard to understand how a man of Hamlet's intelligence could not perceive that the fencing match is a trap, especially when it is being arranged by Claudius, and it is being fought against Laertes, the very man who most in the world want him dead.

In addition, Hamlet's contrasting of "rashness" with "deep plots" is evidence once more of his disconcerting tendency to think only in terms of extremes and to exclude any middle ground. Earlier he admired and sought to emulate Horatio as the kind of man

Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please.
 (3.2.64-66)

In several of the soliloquies he resolves to use both reason and passion to achieve his purpose. Yet here he is again, at the end of the play, seeming to think that he is compelled to choose only between the extremes of thoughtless indiscretion and debilitatingly complicated plotting.

More generally, he concludes that there is a "divinity" that is guiding our lives. Rossiter asks in exasperation, "What right has a man of his keen wit to find a shaping divinity in rotten Denmark?" (181) But even taking a more measured view, it is difficult to get a clear sense of Hamlet's tone in these lines. Is he asserting a belief that God's purpose will finally be worked out through him, showing that he is confident he will be able to fulfil his task; or is he once again appearing to abrogate his responsibility to act for himself, passively relying on some other force to bring matters to a head? One recalls Horatio in the first act, after Hamlet has gone off alone with the Ghost, perhaps to his destruction, exclaiming in powerless desperation, "Heaven will direct it" (1.4.91). Is Hamlet experiencing a feeling of similar disempowerment in being unable to shape his own ends? After all, he felt earlier, after mistakenly killing Polonius, that he was less an independent agent than an instrument of a higher power, and that the aims of that power were not necessarily going to be to his benefit:

But heaven hath pleased it so,
 To punish me with this, and this with me,
 That I must be their scourge and minister.
 (3.4.174-176)

It is possible that because Hamlet's feelings continue to be deeply ambivalent, his expressed thoughts, as at various other moments in the play, remain irreducibly ambiguous.

In fact, at a number of points in this final scene Hamlet says things which conflict with and even contradict each other, so that no straightforward picture of his thoughts and feelings emerges. For instance, when Horatio points out that Claudius will soon learn about the events in England, Hamlet replies, "It will be short, the interim is mine, / And a man's life's no more than to say 'one'" (5.2.73-74). It is not obvious from the text whether Hamlet, in claiming the interim as his own, is asserting his determination to use the time to put a plan of action into place, or whether he is gloomily musing on the brevity and pointlessness of life. Similarly, when Claudius, through the nameless lord, wishes to confirm whether Hamlet will be coming to the fencing match, Hamlet asserts that he is able and prepared for the duel and perhaps for larger matters also: "I am constant to my purposes, they follow the king's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready: now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now" (5.2.189-191). And yet, no sooner has the lord withdrawn than Hamlet confides his strange foreboding to Horatio: "but thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2.200). And then, when Horatio

proposes that the duel be postponed, Hamlet utters what L.C. Knights described as “quiet, memorable but puzzling words” (86):

Not a whit, we defy augury; there’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.

(5.2.207-212)

The meaning of these lines certainly puzzled critics throughout the twentieth century. C.S. Lewis had this to say about them: “the world of *Hamlet* is a world where one has lost one’s way. The Prince also has no doubt lost his, and we can tell the precise moment at which he finds it again” (12). In response, Knights asked: “But is it really so?” (86) And he went on to argue that

Hamlet’s utterance can in no sense be regarded as indicating the goal towards which his consciousness, the central consciousness of the play, has been directed. What it represents rather is the paradoxical recognition of a truth glimpsed in defeat ... All that Hamlet is now ready for is to meet his death.

(Knights 86)

Bradley had previously maintained that the lines “express that kind of religious resignation which ... really deserves the name of fatalism rather than that of faith in Providence, because it is not united to any determination to do what is believed to be the will of Providence” (116). Kenneth Muir, on the other hand, asserted that “this is not stoical fatalism” but rather “a trust in providence” (50), and to substantiate his point he referred to Edgar’s affined speech in *King Lear*:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.

(5.2.9-11)

It is a strange point to make, however, since Edgar is speaking to the blinded Gloucester immediately after Lear’s defeat in battle and the capture of both Lear and Cordelia, so that the lines really can only be read as grim fatalism. One could argue, furthermore, that Hamlet *does* know what he will be leaving behind since he has been formally proclaimed by Claudius as “the most immediate” (1.2.109) to the throne. And, lastly, it is hard to read the phrase “Let be” as anything other than passive surrender to fate compared to Hamlet’s earlier use of the verb – when he had so intensely contemplated the question of whether he ought “To be, or not to be” (3.1.56).

At any rate, Graham Holderness is probably right to accept that Hamlet’s words can be read in very different ways and that “the text will not tell us” (97) which one is univocally correct. For this very reason it becomes vital to examine carefully not just what is said, but what actually happens at the end of the play, and this is what I intend primarily to do in the rest of this article.

The main action is quite clear but its meaning requires some rigorous exploration. Hamlet, bewilderingly, accepts the duel without for a moment suspecting the possibility of foul play. During the bout, he lets his guard down for a moment and is wounded by the pointed and envenomed rapier of Laertes. In the ensuing scuffle, the rapiers are exchanged and Hamlet similarly wounds Laertes. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. Laertes, aware of his imminent death, tells Hamlet of the plot and blames the king. In fury, Hamlet stabs the king and forces him to drink the remainder of the poison. Before he dies, Laertes exchanges forgiveness with Hamlet. Soon, Hamlet also dies, beseeching Horatio to tell his story. Shortly after that, Fortinbras arrives from Poland and takes over the kingdom. On the basis of these events, many critics have attempted to see the play as affirming the inevitability of justice prevailing and of the re-establishment of peace and order. G. Wilson Knight, in his essay “*Hamlet Reconsidered*”, expresses the belief that in these final moments “everything falls into place” for Hamlet and that

“by a pretty irony the king’s plot has been developed to make Hamlet’s action easy and inevitable” (Wilson Knight [A] 323).² Likewise, John Holloway attempts to see a pattern in the culminating imagery of the play which bestows meaning on the action, so that “chance turns into a larger design” (111). More recently, a similar approach has been taken by Diana Devlin, William Kerrigan, John Lee and Robert Shaughnessy, who all maintain in different ways that in this final scene Hamlet finds himself, fulfils his destiny and achieves some sort of transcendence.

A more careful examination of the evidence suggests that such positive readings of the end of *Hamlet* are both reductive and inaccurate. Firstly, the idea that Hamlet is finally in a position to take his revenge on Claudius needs rethinking. In fact, Hamlet goes into the fencing match still with no plan whatsoever as to how he is going to carry out the Ghost’s command. When he does kill the king, he does so in a completely unplanned and unpremeditated way. This is a point which Samuel Johnson noted in 1765:

Hamlet is, through the whole play, rather an instrument than an agent. After he has, by the stratagem of the play, convicted the king, he makes no attempt to punish him, and his death is at last effected by an incident which Hamlet has no part in producing.

(in Hoy 147)

When it happens, Claudius’ death, rather than being the culminating act of victory for Hamlet, is really experienced as just one incident in a chaotic jumble of events. It is Hamlet’s destruction, not the killing of Claudius, which takes prominence, and it is on Hamlet’s dying and death rather than the success of his mission that the focus falls. More than that, Hamlet is only able to act after he learns that he is about to die himself and in the bitter knowledge that his “hopes” (5.2.65) to take over as king and restore Denmark to health are now dashed. As Sydney Bolt remarks, “the disappearance of the prince represents nothing but loss” (101).

The notion that the ending of the play represents the uncomplicated accomplishment of justice must also be questioned. It is certainly true that Claudius is “justly served” (5.2.317) and it is certainly fitting that he dies by means of his own poison. It might similarly be argued that Laertes, as he himself admits, “is justly killed by [his] own treachery” (5.2.297). It might even further be argued that in some way Polonius’ death is apposite as he is killed in his habitual act of spying, and because there is evidence that he was guilty of collusion in helping Claudius to usurp the throne. As Claudius tells Laertes,

The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.

(1.2.47-49)

It is far more difficult, however, to see any purposeful justice being served in the death of the “wretched queen” (5.2.323), Gertrude. She might be a rather unthinking and carnal woman, she might well have committed adultery, and she might have been insensitive in marrying Claudius so soon after her husband’s passing, but such actions can hardly be said to warrant her destruction. In the same way, all that Ophelia has done is obey her father in trying to find out the cause of Hamlet’s madness.³ Earlier, it was evident that Horatio was shocked and even horrified not only at the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but at the manner in which it was to be carried out. However much they might have sided with Claudius and been disloyal to Hamlet (though it is not clear how they could have acted otherwise), their deeds scarcely call for such a cruel death. And what, indeed, about Hamlet himself? Much critical energy has been expended in attempting to explain how the death of the prince somehow completes an overarching pattern of justice and meaning in the play. But, in human terms at least, it is not finally persuasive. As Graham Holderness contends,

It would seem that the kind of justice operative here is not even the old revenge code, but a force more interested in symmetrical patterns than in fairness and equity: a poetic justice

which has all the attractive shapeliness and perfection of art, but which can offer little assistance in the complex problems of assigning due punishment to human weakness and criminality.

(Holderness 98)

Even if the play does not support the idea of justice as ethical fairness (as opposed to artistic patterning), it is still frequently maintained that Hamlet has come to terms with his mortality, is ready to die and accepts death when it comes. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth. As his death rapidly approaches, Hamlet is manifestly *not* 'ready' for it. He notices those around him "that look pale and tremble at this chance/That are but mutes or audience to this act" (5.2.324-325). The diction echoes Barnado's description of Horatio's terrified reaction after he had first seen the Ghost: "How now Horatio, you tremble and look pale" (1.1.53) and so emphasises that the audience (both on the stage and in the theatre) are not experiencing a moment of triumphant fulfilment on the part of Hamlet but are responding in silent horror to the scene of slaughter in which the prince has been caught up. Now Hamlet turns to this group of people, and, far from serenely bidding them farewell, tries to tell them something: "Had I but time (as this fell sergeant Death/Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you –" (5.2.326-328). There is still something Hamlet wants to do, there is still something he wants to say, but he never gets the chance to do so because he realises that he has not time and once again, in resignation, he utters the weary phrase, "But let it be" (5.2.328). Instead, fearing that he will be misunderstood and that his reputation will remain tarnished, he asks Horatio to "report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied" (5.2.329-330). When Horatio rather tries to commit suicide by drinking the poison, Hamlet in desperation has to wrest the cup from him and beg him to do what he asks because he is profoundly afraid of what people will think of him:

O God Horatio, what a wounded name
 (Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
 To tell my story.

(5.2.334-339)

These are hardly the words of a man who is ready to die or who has accepted his fate. Instead, they are the words of someone still passionately concerned about the world he is being forced to leave behind. Moreover, far from sounding like someone who has become convinced that a divinity is shaping human affairs and that life is under the control of a benevolent deity, he continues to view the world as a place of cruelty and suffering, just as he had in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. Death is felicity only in comparison to the agony of existence.

It is clear that, hearing the sound of Fortinbras' cannon fire, Hamlet is still wanting and trying to organise matters in this world.⁴ He wants to ensure order in the Danish court, though he makes the strange decision to give Fortinbras his "dying voice" (5.2.346) – about which more later – and then tries to ask Horatio to give Fortinbras some information, but is unable even to finish the sentence before he dies:

So tell him, with th'occurrences more and less
 Which have solicited – the rest is silence.

(5.2.347-348)

Hamlet seems very unlike a man who has accepted his death. He dies not in peace but in the middle of attempted action. He does not utter some composed final words but is still trying to say something about the living world as he dies, breaking off the sentence unfinished. For a man as articulate as Hamlet, it is a cruel irony that his last utterances sound so halting and incomplete. And his four final words are hardly those of a man who feels content with his life's work and

who is anticipating his reward in heaven. They express only the prospect of annihilation. It is Horatio who tries to mitigate the effect of his last sentence by using the word “rest” in its other sense: “good night sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (5.2.349-350). But it is Hamlet’s final word which remains with us: “silence”, signifying oblivion and the obliteration of meaning.

At least Hamlet dies in the expectation that Horatio will report him and his cause “aright”. But is this in fact what happens? Presumably, Hamlet would have wanted Horatio to report that he had obeyed his father’s spirit by attempting to “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25); that after much struggling he had at last accomplished it by killing Claudius; that by so doing he had helped to purge Denmark of its rottenness; and that in a larger sense he had set right the time that was “out of joint” (1.5.188-189). If his statements earlier in the scene are to be believed, Hamlet would also have wanted Horatio to explain how divine purpose could be seen behind everything, and how the outcome of events had taken place in necessary accordance with Providence. Horatio’s actual report, however, will contain none of this. This, instead, is what he intends to recount:

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on the inventors’ heads. All this can I
Truly deliver.

(5.2.369-376)

Horatio’s narrative will be one of chaos and confusion, of random savagery and twisted ironies. Neither does it seem that Horatio’s tale is going to clear Hamlet’s name or endorse his actions, for almost every one of the crimes which Horatio lists can just as well be attributed to Hamlet as to his enemies. It will be a story not of the heroic carrying out of divine justice, but rather of mere anarchy being loosed upon the world.⁵

It has traditionally been claimed that after all the murder and misrule, normality and calm are at last restored by the arrival of Fortinbras. G. Wilson Knight, for instance, baldly asserted that “Fortinbras brings peace and order to Denmark” (Wilson Knight [B] 124). Once again, such a conclusion seems quite unwarranted. It is worth considering how the character of Fortinbras is presented in the play. At the outset, Horatio explains to Barnado and Marcellus why Denmark is urgently preparing for war and why it has been necessary to increase the watch. (Some time previously, old Fortinbras had challenged old Hamlet to combat over some disputed lands between Norway and Denmark. Old Hamlet had defeated and slain old Fortinbras and so by heraldic law had claimed the lands. Old Fortinbras’ brother had succeeded him as king and had evidently accepted the compact. Now, however, Fortinbras’ son, young Fortinbras, has without his uncle’s knowledge rounded up an army of mercenaries and intends by force to seize the lands his father had forfeited.) It is instructive that the etymology of the name Fortinbras indicates *strong arm*, for Horatio states that Fortinbras intends to recover the lands by “strong hand” (1.1.102) and further describes him being of “unimproved mettle hot and full” (1.1.96). As it turns out, Claudius is able to negotiate with the Norwegian king to prevent Fortinbras’ progress. Instead, Fortinbras agrees to invade Poland rather than Denmark, and Claudius grants him “quiet pass” (2.2.77) through Denmark to do so. Hamlet then encounters the Norwegian army while he is being escorted to England, and is appalled that they should be fighting a war over such a small and worthless patch of ground. When Hamlet refers to Fortinbras as “a delicate and tender prince” (4.4.48), he is not praising him but is instead emphasising his callow immaturity and lack of military experience, someone who is prepared to sacrifice thousands of men for his ambition of personal fame. In short, Fortinbras emerges as a ruthless soldier of fortune, a violent bully who is willing to use lawless force to get what he wants.

Any doubts about the nature of Fortinbras' character are settled by the manner of his arrival at the Danish court. Firstly, the dying Hamlet is startled by the "warlike noise" of the cannon Fortinbras fires to greet the English ambassadors, and then Horatio wonders in implicit protest why their approach is accompanied by marching drums. Before, Fortinbras, in deference to the Danish king, had ordered his troops to go "softly on" (4.4.8). Now, flushed with victory, he approaches the Danish court like a military conqueror, firing off cannon and marching unannounced into the castle with his attendants, drums and colours. He is, to be sure, momentarily taken aback by the scene of indiscriminate and undignified slaughter that he sees, including that of the whole royal family: "This quarry cries on havoc", he exclaims (5.2.354), using a hunting phrase which aptly describes the heap of bodies littering the stage.⁶ But within moments, he has taken charge, acting not like a foreign guest but as the rightful commander of the country. Even before he hears from Horatio that he has Hamlet's dying voice, he is ordering a council of nobles and laying claim to the throne. The basis of the claim is in fact dubious:

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.
(5.2.378-380)

There has been no word in the play of Fortinbras having any "rights of memory in this kingdom", and indeed the very fact that he was intending earlier to invade Denmark rather than lay legal claim to his rights suggests that he has none. Horatio informs him that he has Hamlet's vote, which will in turn influence others to vote for him, thus diplomatically reminding him that Denmark is an electoral monarchy and that the king must be appointed by a process of voting. But Fortinbras never acknowledges Horatio's point, continuing to act as if he were already Denmark's sovereign – so that, as Alexander Leggatt remarks, "we are left with a contrast of Danish legality and Norwegian force" (79).

The final words of the play belong to Fortinbras, the soldier king, who effectively reduces all the complexity and depth of Hamlet's character to a mere mirror image of himself. He certainly praises Hamlet for being "likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal", and he does order a solemn and dignified ceremony for Hamlet's "passage" (5.2.387-388). But it is the ceremony of a "soldier", consisting of "The soldier's music and the rite of war" (5.2.389). This might have been appropriate for someone like Fortinbras, but is not so for Hamlet, who was so much more than a soldier. We may recall Ophelia's description of Hamlet as the perfect example of a Renaissance man:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,
Th'observed of all observers.
(3.1.151-154)

All of this versatility and accomplishment is now forgotten, and Hamlet is merely seen in the one-dimensional role of a warrior. As John Bayley observes, "there is a touching contrast between the lack of identity of Hamlet with any role which the play offers, and the martial personality that is conferred on him after death ... The occasions that inform against Hamlet are the roles that are thrust upon him." (182-183) It is further ironic that Hamlet in life had striven to be much more than his father, seeking not just blood vengeance for murder but a wider purging of national corruption, a putting right of all that was wrong in his world; yet now, in death, he becomes reduced to a shadowy replication of what old Hamlet had been. He becomes, like the Ghost, "a figure like your father" (1.2.199). The peal of ordnance that is shot off as the final action of the play may symbolise many things, but not least it is an ironic reminder of how the end of Hamlet represents not the realisation of his intended ends, but quite the opposite, a sense that almost everything he had hoped and struggled for is being undermined and destroyed.

Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is worth considering not merely what the ending of *Hamlet* reveals about the meaning of the play, but also what it might suggest about Shakespeare's overall worldview in writing it. Eleanor Prosser makes an important point:

The critical commonplace that Shakespeare always re-establishes order at the end of his tragedies seems to me to merit reconsideration ... On the basis of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, too often, in my judgement, we have forced a positive meaning onto the closing lines of the tragedies.

(Prosser 240)

In evaluating the effect of the play's conclusion, it is necessary to ask what exactly Hamlet and his father have achieved by the end of the play. At the outset, the Ghost commands Hamlet to revenge his murder and not let "the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82-83). For Hamlet, who has up until this point been languishing in melancholic despair, this is the moment when his "fate cries out" (1.4.81). He interprets his duty in far wider and more significant terms than those laid down by the Ghost: "The time is out of joint! O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right." (1.5.188-189) And so Hamlet embarks on a mission of not only killing Claudius and putting an end to his incestuous lechery, but more generally of purging the state of Denmark of its rottenness and putting the world to rights. In the end, at last, Claudius is killed, but at what cost? Seven other lives, of which at least four are innocent, are lost. Two entire families, including the Danish royal family, are wiped out. And the Danish throne is abandoned to a foreign adventurer. Not just any foreigner either, but one representing the very power which old Hamlet had heroically defeated. It is surely a bitter and telling irony that old Hamlet had risked his life to defend some disputed Danish land against Norway. Now, through his thirst for revenge, both his son and his queen are destroyed, and the entire state of Denmark will fall into the hands of Norway and be ruled not by a wise and temperate figure but by a callous, self-serving 'Strong Man'.

When Peter Hall directed *Hamlet*, this is how he summed up the meaning of the play to his cast:

At the end of the play, Shakespeare leaves no easy judgement or solution. We are left with an apprehension of the full tragedy of living, but life goes on. Shakespeare is asserting, as he always does, that the balanced government of oneself, or of one's family or of the State, is the defined responsibility of living. But the experience of living dirties and warps us, and makes us suffer. The play finally says revenge is wrong, yet Hamlet is wrong not to revenge.
(in Davis 250)

Hall went on to state that he did not find it a tragedy that left him "purged, ennobled and regenerated", but rather "a shattering play and a worrying play; and at the end of it you are left with Fortinbras, the perfect military ruler. I don't know about you, but I would not particularly like to live in a Denmark ruled by Fortinbras."

Hamlet is, with *King Lear*, the darkest of all Shakespeare's tragedies: "Tragedy wrought to its uttermost", as Yeats puts it in "Lapis Lazuli" (Yeats 338-339). Through a careful reading of the ending of *Hamlet*, and specifically of the ending of Hamlet himself, what emerges is not a sense of divine purpose being fulfilled or of human courage triumphing over disaster. No matter what Hamlet or Horatio may think and say, what happens at the end of the play is a ghastly mess. Hamlet may have killed Claudius, but he too is killed, along with his mother and Laertes. He dies not in satisfaction at having achieved his ends, but in agony, both physically from the poison which "o'ercrows" his spirit (5.2.343) and psychologically, blurting out unfinished sentences, giving confused orders, trying to hang on to life, but succumbing finally to the awful silence which is death. His country becomes the final victim in the play, deprived of its royal family and taken over by an implacable foreign power. In all of this, there is no evidence of heaven directing human affairs, or of a divinity shaping the ends of individuals, or of the

existence of any special Providence. There is only a sense of meaningless disorder, of the general havoc of human existence, and of the pain and suffering which is an inescapable part of life. With the end of *Hamlet*, and the end of Hamlet, there is only a weary feeling of loss, and a bleak sense of the almost inevitable futility of human action in an empty and uncaring universe.

NOTES

1. Hamlet's action seems all the more cruel in light of the Ghost's description of his suffering in Purgatory (1.5.76-80; and see 3.3.80-95), and especially if, as Peter Ackroyd argues, Shakespeare was a Catholic recusant (Ackroyd 34-36). For a detailed account of the Elizabethan understanding of the horrors of Purgatory, see Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002).

2. Wilson Knight's essays on *Hamlet* represent an instructive case of a writer displaying critical uncertainty about how to interpret the ending of the play. In his first essay, "The Embassy of Death", he regards Hamlet and the play's ending in almost wholly negative terms. In his next piece, "Rose of May: An Essay on Life-Themes in *Hamlet*", he finds some grounds for optimism. And in his later article, "*Hamlet* Reconsidered", he interprets the ending of the play in a far more positive fashion.

3. John Dover Wilson (101-108) argues rather unconvincingly that the nunnery scene could be staged to show Ophelia's deliberate complicity in her father's espionage, and that this provides some justification for her fate.

4. The fact that he regrets not being able to hear the news from England confirming Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths is another reminder of his savage side.

5. Yeats's lines from "The Second Coming" (Yeats 210) seem particularly pertinent here.

6. Antony's words, "Cry 'Havoc', and let slip the dogs of war", in *Julius Caesar* (3.1.273) refer to revenge being exacted for Caesar's murder, but it should be noted that there is no indication here that Fortinbras had been planning vengeance.

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