

[Working Paper. A subsequent version has been accepted for publication in *Shakespeare Quarterly*]

“Religious Doubt” or the question of original sin, in *Hamlet*

John Gillies

That original sin is both present in *Hamlet* and heavy with moral and aesthetic meaning for the play, is a thought that we have been gradually prepared for almost as a by-product of intersecting critical projects. In 1980, Alan Sinfield crucially drew attention to the Calvinist turning point (Hamlet’s “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” 5.2.165-6), which “we are slow to recognise because we have been taught a more amiable conception of the Christian God”.¹ Some few years later Philip Edwards asserted “the religious element” of the play by way of rebalancing it in the wake of the moral disenchantment of the “anti-Hamlet” school of the mid-century.² Though the critics in question – G. Wilson Knight, L.C. Knights, Harold Goddard, Maynard Mack, Nigel Alexander, Eleanor Prosser, and others – did not grasp the pertinence of original sin to their argument, in retrospect their levelling of the moral distinctions between Hamlet and his adversaries is (as we shall see) clearly in step with the tenor of more recent original sin readings, not to mention a now longstanding “counter-enlightenment” project to rehabilitate original sin as a philosophical category.³ What Edwards and Sinfield reluctantly acknowledge is the virtually scandalous thought welcomed by Kierkegaard: that the conclusion of *Hamlet* is deliberately framed in religious categories and is incomprehensible without them (Kierkegaard imagines Hamlet shrinking back from his revenge in “religious doubt”, which is to say a religious horror at the depravity of human nature).⁴ Where Edwards and Sinfield differ from Kierkegaard and the anti-Hamlet school, is in reading (or wanting to read) Hamlet’s *metanoia* in terms of Calvinist “resistance theory”. (More richly contextualised and full-blooded versions of this argument have been made more recently by Andrew Hadfield and Linda Woodbridge).⁵ These arguments lose touch however with the possibility envisioned by Kierkegaard, that the religious imagination is as resistant to revenge (as an excitation of primal sinfulness) as it is to tyranny. Independently almost of its becoming an object of critical discussion, we might say that the *meaning* of original sin in *Hamlet* has been in question.

Two years after Edwards's article, the theme of original sin was explicitly recognized in Donald V. Stump's demonstration of how the motifs of the Fall (*Genesis*, 3) and Cain's murder of Abel (*Genesis* 4) join in a coherent thematic symbolism.⁶ The result is a levelling reading: Hamlet's disastrous impatience with providence shows that he, "is doomed to become like Cain".⁷ Other dedicated studies have followed. Catherine Belsey teases out further links between Cain's story of *Genesis* 4 and the Fall story of *Genesis* 3 in the context of Elizabethan funerary iconography.⁸ Heather Hirschfeld reads the Fall architecture in terms of the logic of trauma: "it is this type of deferred or belated recognition that underwrites the sustained allusions throughout *Hamlet* to the early chapters of *Genesis*".⁹ The play presents us with "a narrative of repeated and deferred recognitions" (426), the effect of which is to capture Hamlet's project within a compulsive rehearsal of sin's traumatic origin. This logic extends to the supposed *metanoia* of Act 5, which is thus no "providential sea change" (442). Hirschfeld's is most comprehensive original sin reading of *Hamlet* that we have, and to my mind the most thoughtful. In so far as it sees Hamlet's awareness of original sin condemning him to repetition, it is a levelling reading too. Two further studies (both levelling) are worthy of mention. John Alvis comes at the play from the republican angle of Machiavelli's commentary on Livy, wanting to know why Hamlet can't dispose of the tyrant cleanly: the answer – to Alvis's chagrin – is that he is disabled by his original sin fixation.¹⁰ Finally, Vladimir Brljak adds a feature to the Cain symbolism unfolded by Stump. Returning to a now fifty year old suggestion by J.A. Bryant Jr., Brljak reads Hamlet's excuse to Laertes in Act 5 for killing Polonius ("That I have shot an arrow o'er the house / And hurt my brother", 5.2.189-90) as referencing a late medieval Lamech legend derived from an obscure utterance in *Genesis* 4 by Lamech (an impious descendant of Cain whose inadvertent killing of Cain brings God's curse upon him).¹¹ Again, the consequence for Hamlet – whose traditional name "Amleth" is an anagram of "Lameth", a common form of "Lamech" – is a levelling of moral distinction. Of all these original sin focussed studies, only Belsey's is not a levelling reading.

To my mind, the presence of original sin in the play provokes more fundamental questions than have been asked of it so far: Why, given the resultant problem of tragic imbalance, is it there at all? Where, precisely, does it come from? Is it a mental illness or an ideology? Must it be understood primarily in a mythic-symbolic register or in a

doctrinal one? One of my suggestions will be that where the narrative in *Genesis* is a constant, its interpretation is not: and particularly not in the Reformation. This prompts another question: to what extent is this doctrinal element of the radically reformed kind? And if it is, then what do we make of that aesthetically? Does it mandate a levelling reading? What is its essential meaning? In what follows, I address these questions via four related propositions.

First, I point to the intuitiveness of original sin as an idea as distinct from a doctrine in its early modern context. Radical doubt of human goodness has classical as well as scriptural contexts. However deranging it might be for the holder, it is at base neither irrational nor even necessarily religious. This is to say that it has a conceptual shape, religious and philosophical forms of which are present in two Shakespeare plays closely contemporary with *Hamlet*.

Second I insist on the sheer deliberateness of the theme. It is no part of the surviving sources (Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest) but introduced entirely at Shakespeare's discretion.¹² This might seem a superfluous claim to make, but my point is to demonstrate full Shakespearean ownership. The existing criticism has a tendency to treat original sin as an emblematic monad which somehow takes over the meaning of the play. This said, the theme does betray an extra-Shakespearean origin. This, I argue, comprises not just the narrative of *Genesis* 3 and 4 but the Reformed theological commentary upon it.

In the third place, I argue that the theme is fully absorbed into the aesthetic DNA of imagery, language and character. The whole personal and interpersonal world said to be under sin in the play is imagined with a depth and mystery without precedent in Shakespeare. It is not just the character of Hamlet that is affected, but Claudius, Gertrude, and effectively the whole society that Michael Long refers to as "Elsinore"¹³, right down to the seedy occupants of Hamlet's graveyard, those word-twisting avatars of "Cain's jawbone". Here I suggest that the distinctiveness of the writing in *Hamlet* owes quite as much to the original sin theme as it does to revenge.

My fourth and final proposition is in respect of Hamlet's own persistent intuition of original sin, and about its politics. Given that Hamlet is hobbled by "religious doubt" in Kierkegaard's sense, what must he do? Can he kill Claudius without corrupting himself? Here I will suggest that Hamlet's attempt to conscript

conscience to revenge is certainly ambiguous and possibly futile, leading to a conclusion heavy with “religious doubt”, but equally touched by the promise of salvation.

1.

It is important to register the intellectual intuitiveness of original sin in late Elizabethan England. That the timber of humanity is crooked – the heart desperately wicked – is never thought to be in need of demonstration. Luther’s *Lectures on Romans* simply observe that scripture “calls this viciousness by the name most proper to it...iniquity, depravity or crookedness”.¹⁴ For Calvin, it is obvious that, “there is no sounde or whole parte in us...that our minde is stricken with blindness...that all the affections of our heart are full of rebellion and wickedness”; or that, “man’s heart is...inclosed with...lurking corners and by-turninges”.¹⁵ When the religious tone is subtracted, the moral doubt remains: virtue is not the full story of success, one flourishes because of one’s cunning not despite it, or because of the ability to disguise one’s own intentions while second-guessing those of others. Bacon warns against suspicion not because it is unwarranted (“What would men have? Do they think those they employ and deal with are saints? Do they not think, they will have their own ends, and be truer to themselves, than to them?”) but because it is more likely to derange us than serve our interest: “Therefore there is no better way, to moderate suspicions, than to account upon such suspicions as true, and yet to bridle them as false”.¹⁶ One reason for the intuitiveness of original sin in the early modern period is that “self interest” had yet to be categorized – as it would be by Shaftesbury in 1699 – as a “naturally” occurring human endowment, an ontological predisposition without moral meaning as such.¹⁷

The bicameral view of self-knowledge implicit in *Of Suspicion* was explicitly held by the Reformers. Calvin thought of self-knowledge on two levels. At the human level, a man, “seems to know himself very well when, confident in his understanding and uprightness, he becomes bold and urges himself to the duties of virtue, and, declaring war on vices, endeavors to exert himself with all his ardor towards the excellent and the honorable”.¹⁸ It is from this *piano nobile* level of the self that good deeds proceed, which is precisely why they were held to be spiritually insignificant by

the Reformers. At the base level – that of “the ground of the heart” – a man, “finds nothing to lift his heart to self-confidence”.¹⁹ He finds indeed, “Hydra, a many-headed and most tenacious monster, with which we struggle in the Learnean swamp of this life till the very day of our death”.²⁰

The bicameral model of the self is not exclusive to the Reformers. Socrates entertains a philosophical version of religious doubt in a passage of the *Phaedrus* which is cited by both Joseph de Maistre & Soren Kierkegaard as evidence that the ancients knew about original sin:

I can't as yet 'know myself' ...[or]...discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature.²¹

Like Hydra, Typhon is a serpentine monster. Such symbolism is recapitulated in Reformed art, in figures such as Spenser's “Error”, the many-headed beast bestridden by the whore of Babylon in *Apocalypse*, or the “Hydra-headed wilfulness” of *Henry V* (1.1.36). A version of serpentine dualism is also behind Plato's anti-parable of Gyges in Book 2 of *The Republic*.²² Where Book 1 had ended in a paean to justice, Book 2 begins with a scandalously minimalistic account. Justice, argues Glaucon, is “not...a real good, but...a thing honored in the lack of vigor to do injustice”.²³ Justice exists only because human beings are less confident of prevailing unjustly than they are afraid of the injustice of others. Fear aside, injustice is the default setting of the human psyche even in the just man:

if we grant to both the just and the unjust license and power to do whatever they please, and then accompany them in imagination...we should then catch the just man in the very act of resorting to the same conduct as the unjust man because of the self-advantage which every creature pursues as a good.²⁴

The parable follows: upon discovering a magic ring that makes him invisible, Gyges, a humble Lydian shepherd, infiltrates the king's palace, “seduced the king's wife and with her aid set upon the king and slew him and possessed his kingdom”.²⁵ Whether or not he was directly familiar with this parable, Shakespeare descants on its underlying proposition. Thus on hearing that his father has been declared a “traitor”, young Macduff inquires into the definition of a traitor and decides that society is

packed with them (*Macbeth*, 4.2.45-60). As we shall see, the parable is equally suggestive of *Hamlet*, both for Claudius (a previously inconspicuous man whose road to success so resembles that of Gyges) and for Hamlet himself, the just man who restrains his inner violence only because of a watchful conscience that makes “cowards of us all” (3.1.85).

Moral doubt of this profound kind seems to me the doorway through which the *idea* of original sin enters *Hamlet*. Seeing himself in the mirror of Gertrude whose marriage to Claudius shocks him with its suggestion of inner monstrosity, Q2’s Hamlet is stricken by disgust at his own “sullied” or “sallied” flesh. A similar moral pessimism, along with an explicit theme of self-contradiction, is also at the heart of closely contemporary plays. Though its idiom is entirely classical, *Troilus and Cressida* asks a version of the skeptical question posed by original sin. In a scene strongly suggestive of *Hamlet*, Ulysses is discovered reading a book on the theme that identity is a mere artefact. Self-knowledge is no more than an accurate sense of what others think of us:

Nor doth the eye itself,
That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
Not going from itself; but eye to eye opposed
Salutes each other with each other’s form.
For speculation turns not to itself
Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
Where it may see itself. (3.3.100-06)

Though this approach to the question of the self is from the upper of the self’s two chambers, rather than the Lutheran “ground of the heart”, the conclusion is still devastating. Self-knowledge is limited to the little that others behold of us. The self is fatally beholden to a given peer group or social world. Thus Cressida breaks her deepest vows as soon as she finds herself in a social world with different claims on her. Hector abandons what he rightly takes to be the true course of returning Helen to the Greeks simply to bask in the approval of his own heroic cult. With the mirrors of esteem clouded, Achilles finds no self-image at all: “My mind is troubled like a fountain stirred, / And I myself see not the bottom of it” (3.3.298-99).

Transposed to the Christian idiom of *Measure for Measure*, the mirror metaphor and the ontological skepticism of *Troilus* are restated in a theological key:

But man, proud man,
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As makes the angels weep, who, with our spleens,
 Would all themselves laugh mortal. (2.2.120-26)

The identity or “essence” of the magistrate, argues Isabella, is “glassy” in two senses: first in retorting a vacuous social esteem but secondly in the intoxicating effects of that esteem (here Angelo is the ape driven mad by its own reflection in a mirror). In keeping with the Christian character of its host play, this mirror metaphor is explicitly framed in terms of original sin: we are all wrong in the core of our being, Isabella reminds Angelo (2.2.75-81) and earthly judges do well to bear that in mind. The ape and its mirror (*speculum*) is also a cosmic spectacle or theatre. The ontological skepticism of the *theatrum mundi* helps explain why it was one of Calvin’s favorite commonplaces.²⁶

2.

My second proposition concerns the deliberateness of original sin in *Hamlet*, its centrality, its patently Reformed quality, and its origins in Reformed commentary of *Genesis*. The symbolism of original sin is global in a way that is still not quite acknowledged. It saturates the dominant motif of hidden corruption described by Carolyn Spurgeon. In her most sustained analysis of this strain, Spurgeon all but puts her finger on the concept:

To Shakespeare’s pictorial imagination...the problem in *Hamlet* is not predominantly that of will and reason, of a mind too philosophic or a nature temperamentally unfitted; he sees it pictorially not as the problem of an individual at all, but as something greater and even more mysterious, as a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless...impartially and relentlessly, annihilates him and

others innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of Hamlet, as it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life.²⁷

Examples are the “vicious mole of nature” passage in Q2 (1.4.7-22)²⁸, the “something...rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.5.67), and what – in F1 only – Hamlet describes as “this canker of our nature” (5.2.70). Spurgeon finds this theme so potent as to suggest that: “when the play opens Hamlet has already begun to die, to die internally...infected by the disease of the spirit which is – unknown to him – killing him” (318). Her intuition here is close to the idea of a modern as distinct from ancient tragedy that Kierkegaard entertains in the theorem of a modern Antigone, whose “life is...essentially over”, at the start of her play: “her life does not unfold like the Greek Antigone; it is not turned outward but inward”.²⁹ Unlike the Greek Antigone, whose tragedy Kierkegaard takes to consist in the acting out of her defiance, the tragedy of his modern Antigone consists in the reflective “anxiety” that she brings to her play. Kierkegaard’s model for the anxious Antigone is patently Hamlet: “anxiety is essential to the tragic. Hence Hamlet is deeply tragic”.³⁰ What in Kierkegaard takes the form of a concept (anxiety) corresponds to what Spurgeon perceives as a “pictorial imagination” (infection) in *Hamlet*. Schopenhauer too might almost be taken as providing a conceptual gloss on what Spurgeon sees in merely pictorial terms:

The true sense of the tragedy is the deeper insight that what the hero atones for is not his own particular sins, but original sin, in other words, the guilt of existence itself.³¹

Much as for Kierkegaard, tragedy for Schopenhauer is about original sin. To gloss Spurgeon’s reading of *Hamlet* in this way is not too much of a liberty. The motif of “infection” might equally be taken as glancing backwards, recapitulating a Senecan symbolism of *tumor* that Sidney sees as essential to tragedy as a genre: “tragedy showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue.”³² Seneca’s symbol of the tumor and Sidney’s symbol of the ulcer resonate in turn with the Reformed symbolism of original sin. *Fomes*, or “the tinder of concupiscence”, is regularly imagined by Luther as a chronic disease which can be controlled at best, but then, “break[s] forth...even as an evil scab or a pock cannot always be kept in with violence of medicine.”³³

While global in the way just rehearsed, the imagery of original sin in *Hamlet* can also strike us as incongruous in the sense savouring too strongly of Reformed theology. Consider Polonius's instruction to Reynaldo to spread rumours of Laertes's wildness. Reynaldo must not impute positive dishonour to Laertes, but merely:

...the taints of liberty,
The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind,
A savageness in unreclaimèd blood,
Of general assault. (2.1.32-35)

The impression Polonius wants is of burgeoning vitality, or “wanton, wild, and usual slips” (2.1.22). Among these slips however should be “none so rank as may dishonour him”. The word “rank” links this garden image with the “unweeded garden / That grows to seed”; the postlapsarian garden possessed of, “things rank and gross in nature” (1.2.135-37). There is a curiously insistent theological suggestion in Polonius's words: this savage blood is “unreclaimèd”. As there is no possibility that Laertes is unbaptised, this can only mean that he is not redeemed from sin, that he is not of the elect (unlike, presumably, Polonius himself). Fortinbras is similarly described as: “of unimproved mettle hot and full”, one who, “Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there / Sharked up a list of landless resolute” (1.1.95-7). “Unimproved”, according to G.R. Hibberd is a Shakespeare coinage, simply meaning “untried”.³⁴ Yet in conjunction with the associated picture of gross rebellion, it takes on a Reformed tint: as of the old Adam rather than the new man.

Such incongruities might remind us that original sin is no part of the traditional Hamlet narrative: neither in Saxo Grammaticus nor Belleforest. Like the episode of Lucius Junius Brutus in Livy which it loosely resembles, the Amleth story is all about decisive action.³⁵ There is no hint of “religious doubt” in Amleth or in Brutus. Shakespeare introduces it against the grain of the material. In the sources, madness is necessary to protect Amleth from the raw violence of his adversary Fengo. In Shakespeare a disguise is not strictly necessary because Claudius is not openly violent and poses no immediate danger. Hence the very different character of madness in *Hamlet*: as a window onto the hero's theological demoralization. The distance between source and play is too manifold to be shown here, but it can be suggested by what Shakespeare makes of a single narrative detail. In the sources, the Ophelia figure

is sent by Fengo as bait to entice Amleth's secret, but she remains loyal either from friendship or love. In Shakespeare Ophelia loves Hamlet but sides with her father's attempt to penetrate him.

What Shakespeare principally makes of this narrative stub is the nunnery scene (3.1); the most glaring instance of the original sin complex in the play, and also a scene in which the doctrinal as distinct from the narrative-symbolic aspect of the theme is to the fore. Here perhaps more than anywhere, we sense the theme in its strongly Reformed character. Consider a line like: "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.119-21). Only in Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine is "virtue" no part whatever of our natural competence. If moral strength is ours at all, then it is only by divine imputation. It is ours in a secondary sense by virtue of the Atonement rather than in the primary sense of Natural Law. To the extent that we have it then, virtue is grafted to our nature, as in the gardening metaphor of the word "inoculate". Yet the "old stock", the crooked timber of our humanity, persists regardless of how well the grafting takes.³⁶ Brilliantly as it is assimilated to the aesthetic structure, the doctrinal element visibly imprints itself upon the scene. To Shakespeare's contemporaries, the word "inoculate" alone might have recalled the wholesale use of "grafting" imagery in the marginal commentary to Paul's Epistle to the Romans in the *Geneva Bible*. The summary to *Romans* 8, for example, speaks of "them who are grafted in Christ through his spirit"; a marginal gloss to 8:2 explains that: "The fruites of the Spirit, or effects of sanctification which is begun in us, do not ingraft us into Christ but doe declare that wee are grafted into him".³⁷ Though the sense of Hamlet's remark is technically close to this, its tone is skeptical and pessimistic.

The two dimensions of the original sin theme that we have so far noticed – the symbolism derived from the Fall narrative in *Genesis* 3 and 4, and the doctrine of totalized taint echoed by Hamlet in the nunnery scene – are powerfully fused in the commentaries of Luther and Calvin on *Genesis*. We don't need to suppose that Shakespeare had read the commentaries. The Calvinist reading of *Genesis* was commonplace in late Elizabethan England, and Shakespeare would have known of it in the form of the Calvinist marginalia to *Genesis* and *Romans* in his copy of *The Geneva Bible*. He could also have known of it through Joshua Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas's highly Calvinistic recounting of *Genesis* 3 and 4 in *The Second Weeke*

Or Childhood of the World, (London, 1598).³⁸ Indeed, I shall argue that *Hamlet* bears distinct traces of Du Bartas, as well as an overall imaginative and theological coloration.

Traditional commentary of *Genesis* was largely typological, a strategy driven in part by the embarrassment of the church fathers in the face of the glaringly unchristian character of the Old Testament corpus.³⁹ This was not the attitude of Luther and Calvin. Far from being embarrassed by the Old Testament, they took it as an invitation to dramatize themes of faith, election, predestination and reprobation, with a vividness lacking in their New Testament commentaries. In its very understatement, the Old Testament offered opportunities for subtext – for imaginative surmise or proactive reading – that the New did not. Undergirding Reformed enthusiasm for the Old Testament was a conviction that it was in essence a *Christian* document to which the radical propositions of Reformed theology could apply with a freedom and intensity not permitted by the New Testament. Of Luther, Heinrich Bornkamm observes:

The incessant translation of Old Testament ideas into the Christian thought world – as into a foreign language – involves not so much a shift in concepts which can be precisely specified as a change in atmosphere which often can only be sensed. Such a translation is not a matter of conscious and intentional change, but rather a natural process of recasting, which involves every part... when Luther interpreted and translated the Old Testament he injected the gospel into its bloodstream so that it spread to the smallest capillaries almost by itself.⁴⁰

Calvin too saw the two Testaments as essentially one, systematically reading the Old through the New: “Thus the two Covenants become one, the two Churches one, the two sets of writings, one book”.⁴¹ Whereas the Old Testament had been read as explicitly opposing the New as a covenant of the law as opposed to a covenant of grace, for the Reformers it was substantially a covenant of grace in the sense that its true exemplars were taken to have accessed grace by spiritual intuition. Only its false exemplars were taken as exemplifying the law. The Reformers detected a primitive version of the Reformed church as far back as the Fall itself. Its membership was a “remnant”. The majority church of the Old Testament was a church of the law, which means a pharasaical church of “hypocrisy”.

Both Reformers bring this new immediacy to their reading of *Genesis* 3 and 4. It is no exaggeration to say that they treat the main figures (Adam, Eve, Cain) in the way that Jan Kott treats Shakespeare's characters: as "contemporaries", which is to say exemplars of Reformed theological psychology.⁴² Two key notions bridge the gap between the "thereness" of *Genesis* and the "hereness" of early modernity: faith and "hypocrisy". The two terms are defined reciprocally. Hypocrisy is everything human that resists the radical demand of faith. Adam, Eve, and Cain, are hypocrites of a type that the Reformers know intimately from their everyday experience. As a social vice hypocrisy would seem to be out of place in Eden. But the first couple are hypocritical in the existential (and for Calvin, primary) sense of refusing to know themselves before God. Thus Calvin reads their covering of themselves with fig leaves as a squeamish evasion: "they were led to repentaunce, neither with true shame, nor with serious feare...the feeling of their evill was onely confused, and ioyned with dullnesse, much like unto a dreame in unquiet sleepe".⁴³ Yet, we should not be too quick to judge them, says Calvin, because, "we all are sicke of the same disease: for even at the first prick of conscience, we tremble, are ashamed: by and by there creepeth in a favourable iudgement of our selves, which leaveth us to vaine toyes".⁴⁴

Calvin and Luther see hypocrisy less as a particular vice, than a way of being: ordinary and monstrous at the same time. So (following Calvin) does Du Bartas. The following passage on the ingrained moral evasiveness of the intellect is taken from a reflective chapter on the *contemporary human meaning* of the Fall titled "The Furies", which is sandwiched between two narrative chapters recounting *Genesis* 3 and 4 respectively:

But, for these illls raigne in our intellect
 (Which onlie, them both can and ought to detect)
 They rest unknown; rather selfe-concealed;
 And soule-sicke Patients care not to be healed...
 Whereas our fond self-soothing Soule, thus sick,
 Rubs her owne soare; with glozing Rhetorike
 Cloaking her vice: and makes the blinded blaine.⁴⁵

"Hypocrites" are to Calvin and Du Bartas alike much what "ordinary men" are to Christopher Browning in his book of that name.⁴⁶ Browning's subject is the dutiful

massacre by the non-military age men of “Reserve Police Battalion 101” of a Jewish village in Poland, 1942. The men were given the option of withdrawal; they were driven by nothing more imperative than group solidarity. Hence Browning’s choice of the adjective “ordinary”. This same adjective features in Judith Shklar’s notion of “ordinary vices”; namely, “the sort of conduct we all expect, nothing spectacular or unusual”.⁴⁷ Such vices – “cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, treachery, misanthropy” – do not track with “the seven deadly sins of traditional Christianity”, and are rarely brought to book in liberal societies, either “as a matter of principle or prudence”.⁴⁸ They are moreover, structurally *necessary* for the normal functioning of society; even misanthropy, which may “afflict us if we think too much about ordinary vices and take them too much to heart”.⁴⁹ This of course is the vice of Hamlet, in Hazlit’s oxymoron that “most amiable of misanthropes”.⁵⁰

A distinction is to be drawn between Luther and Calvin in respect of the ordinary. Luther saw the split between the Adamite group and the Cainite group in terms of the two churches: Reformed and Roman. It was the Cainites who were the hypocrites and the Adamites who were Reformed. Calvin preferred to follow St. Augustine in viewing the Cainites as the founders of the “city of the world”, which is to say political economy (Augustine interprets the name “Cain” to mean “Possession”) or – in the view of Carl Schmitt – politics *per se*.⁵¹ Of the two approaches, that of Augustine and Calvin is the more “modern”. In the words of Patrick Downey:

Cain founds the first city...Politics is revealed for what it is, a pack of hidden murderers and thieves who appear to be law-abiding citizens out of fear rather than desire. Inside the heart of every citizen is a fugitive and wanderer who has no place to lay his head because he has exiled himself from his fellow man and creation. Outside, that same fugitive is a solid citizen who farms, plays well with others and obeys the law.⁵²

It is this kind of thought that underlies *Hamlet*.

3.

My third proposition is that the insistently Reformed language of original sin is

transformed in the course of its aesthetic assimilation to character. Shakespeare's version of Calvin's "hypocrite" and Browning's "ordinary man" is Claudius, but there is an "ordinary woman" too. Gertrude is a remarkably delicate blend of "ordinary" pathos, and utter inscrutability. Her response to the accusation implicit in the player queen's vows of undying love – "the lady protests too much, methinks" (3.2.219) – is superbly evasive. In her elusiveness, her fundamental impenetrability, Gertrude speaks to the *Pravum est cor omnium et inscrutabile* in the Vulgate Jerome 17:9 ("the heart is more deceitful than every other thing, and it is malicious").⁵³ At the same time, she suggests the modern and entirely *normal* problem of "other minds". A comparison of Q1 and Q2/F is instructive. In Q1, this elusiveness is not found. The queen is a known quantity. On being clearly informed in the closet scene that her former husband has been murdered, she protests, "I never knew of this most horrid murder" (1583). Thereafter she clearly sides with Hamlet against Claudius. Evidently the redactor of Q1 is unable to tolerate a constitutive ambiguity in so important a character. The queen must declare herself for one side or the other.

In Q2 and F, by contrast, Gertrude is always a question mark. She does not clearly acknowledge Hamlet's allegation of murder, nor condemn Claudius as a result, nor side with Hamlet against Claudius. On the other hand she is not entirely of Claudius's party either. She sits on the fence and stays there right up until the moment of her death. The question of her constitutive ambiguity *ought* to turn on the question of what she does or does not know of the murder. Hamlet's slightly muddled allegation, "as kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.28) – which makes it sound as if Gertrude was the murderer – is found in all three texts. But only in Q1 does the allegation force Gertrude to declare herself.

In psychological terms it seems as if Gertrude's heart is *not* "made of penetrable stuffe" (3,4,35), if being penetrated by an imputation implies that the accuser has a true picture of the mind or conscience being penetrated. The difference is between being confident that one can know another mind, and admitting that one cannot. Q1 takes the first of these positions; Q2 and F the second. When Hamlet in Q1 says: "I'll make your eyes looke downe into your heart / And see how horride and blacke it shewes" (TLN 1514-15), the implication is that he has access to what is in Gertrude's heart. He knows what colour her heart is and why it has that colour. Q2 and F however strongly imply that he has no such access. The imagery of blackness and

taint that had been Hamlet's in Q1 now passes to Gertrude herself. Now it is only she who sees "black and grainèd spots" (3.4.80) in her heart, she who guards the secret of what they are and how they got there. So innovative and tactful a character sketch would seem at odds with the homiletic idiom of sin and hypocrisy. The latter however is linked with the idea of impenetrability in contemporary homiletic literature.⁵⁴ Hamlet moreover hangs the sign of "frailty" around Gertrude's neck in all three texts, perhaps echoing Sylvester's Du Bartas, who speaks of "Eve's frail brest", and her "simple frailty".⁵⁵ Gertrude is actually more Eve-like in Q2 and F: precisely in the way these texts foreground the issue of concupiscence and sideline the question of her complicity in murder. Gertrude's "black and grainèd spots" speak the language of sin, not crime; and indeed the primal sin, the sin of Eve.

For all this it is mainly in her son's language that we sense an *overtly* homiletic tone of pious horror. Hamlet's hysterical reaction to Gertrude (and to Ophelia in the nunnery scene) is typical of the Reformation's *anxiety* in respect of sin as distinct from the Reformation theology of sin evidenced in the commentaries on *Genesis*. It is the tone of spiritual crisis in Puritan autobiography: a burgeoning consciousness of sin coupled with a despair of salvation. By contrast with Hamlet himself, the play itself does not recoil from Gertrude nor condemn the love between Gertrude and Claudius. This is never less than love. Shakespeare, I think, wishes us to register Hamlet's account in the closet scene as both hysterical and reductive (in the manner of Iago's account of love as "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will", *Othello*, 1.3.333). The problem here is not exclusively with Hamlet so much as with the difficulty posed by an *ethical* perspective on original sin. Ethics, as Kierkegaard notes in a brilliant *aperçu* is driven to hysteria by original sin: "As soon as sin is actually posited, ethics is immediately on the spot, and now ethics follows every move sin makes".⁵⁶ Understanding is not the strong suit of ethics because "ethics is never observing but always accusing, judging and acting".⁵⁷ This results in formulations such as the *Smalcaldic Article* describing "hereditary sin", as, "so profound and detestable a corruption in human nature that it cannot be comprehended by human understanding, but must be known and believed from the revelation of the Scriptures".⁵⁸ The statement is confused, insists Kierkegaard for assuming, "the role of an accuser, who with an almost feminine passion...is now concerned only with making sinfulness and his own participation in it more and more detestable, in such a

manner that no word can be severe enough to describe the single individual's participation in it".⁵⁹ How apt as a comment on Hamlet's tone in the closet and nunnery scenes, in both of which (ironically) he is more often taxed with misogyny than with hysteria.

In Gertrude, I suggest that Shakespeare has taken the radically normalized category of "hypocrisy" in the Reformers seriously as a premise of characterization. By normalizing the agents of *Genesis*, the Reformers – but more especially Calvin – wanted to shock their readers into acknowledging the primal fallibility of normal lives. Du Bartas follows Calvin's lead closely in "The Furies", when reflecting on the fallen condition of ordinary humanity. Shakespeare too follows this Calvinist logic, but with a brilliant twist. Shakespeare builds his characters on an assumption of normal crookedness, but suspends judgement while inviting complicity. If Gertrude and Claudius are judged at all it is only by their fellow hypocrites, the audience.

This brings us Shakespeare's version of Cain, or Calvin's "ordinary man". Claudius is a conscientious and sympathetic villain, and thus unusual in a genre specializing in unconscionable Machiavels. He will do what is necessary to become king, and then do what is necessary to stay king. But far from gloating, he is tortured by wrong once he has done it. Two aspects of Calvin's portrait of Cain are suggestive of Claudius: "hypocrisy" and conscience. That Cain should be explained in terms of the same moral psychology as Adam and Eve is a striking feature of Reformed commentary in both Calvin and Luther. There is no sharp line between the murderer and the merely fallen; the former is an exacerbation of the latter. Cain's evil only *seems* to begin with his murderous jealousy of Abel. In fact it has begun already in the "uncleanness of his heart".⁶⁰ In Cain we have a version of the Eve paradox: primal wickedness is commonplace: "in the person of Caine we have an image of a wicked man painted forth unto us, who notwithstanding his wickednesse will be counted iust"; such men, "would be at peace with God after their owne will".⁶¹ Cain thinks well of himself or knows himself – by a human criterion, which is to say, "all imaginations, wherewith men doe dallie with God, and deceive themselves"; he pays lip service to God, but does not "yeelde and bende him selfe wholly unto him".⁶² Hypocrisy comes down to knowing oneself before men rather than before God. To all intents, it is the ethical signature of original sin; a perpetual veto of the natural law originally inscribed in the human heart. Calvin wants his portrait of Cain to shock: the

reader must feel her existential continuity with the first murderer. She is as it were a potential murderer by virtue of being a real hypocrite.

“Hypocrisy” – in all of these senses – is the keynote of Claudius. It is not just that he is more fox than lion, that he may “smile and smile and be a villain” (1.5.109). This is to judge from the outside, something that the play – as distinct from Hamlet – never directly does. Claudius is less a villain than a slider between moral and emotional claims, a finder out of mirth in funeral and delight in dole. He emerges indirectly in a multitude of details, large and small. We can begin with a small (and traditionally puzzling) detail found in Q2 and F only: the care lavished by Claudius on his description (4.7.67-76) of the horsemanship of “Lamord” – the Norman whom he mentions for having praised Laertes’s skill with the rapier. Why should this detail be drawn out at superfluous length? Philip Edwards suggests that Claudius’s love of horsemanship can be taken as paralleling Hamlet’s love of theatre.⁶³ Michael Long explains it as a brief moment of Philistine escapism – indulged by both men – from the troubling business of murder.⁶⁴ Both suggestions are attractive, but they are more substantial if the passage is taken as echoing the *topos* of “Cain’s horse” in Du Bartas. A long passage in “The Handicrafts” (381-476) describes (in loving detail) Cain’s taming of a beautiful horse, partly in order to escape vengeance for the murder of Abel, and partly to distract himself from the agonies of a bad conscience. Shakespeare comes closest to echoing Du Bartas, it seems to me, in the detail whereby Lamord, “grew into his seat, / And to such wondrous doing brought his horse, / As had he been incorpsed and demi-natured / With the brave beast” (4.7.71-4). In Du Bartas, Cain is said to have “so done with time-grace-ordered skill, / As both had but one bodie and one will” (467-68). What is most interesting about this resonance is the moral status of horsemanship in Du Bartas. Mastery of the horse is bad in the sense of serving a bad conscience and a bad cause (the horse serves for conquest as well as flight); yet good in the sense of a necessary – and entirely normal – aspect of man’s conquest of nature. The ambiguity is directly spoken to by Simon Goulart, the Genevan Calvinist minister whose notes to Du Bartas form the backbone of learned commentary to this day. Against the line “Cain, as they say, by this deep feare disturbed”, Goulart observes:

The poet intending to shew that Cain and his race were a people addicted to the world (who had no thought but of the commodities of the earth) by a gentle

invention, attributed to Cain, a man stout and strong, a man that had opportunity and leisure, seeking after nought else, but that which might give him a truce to the warre, which was within his evill conscience, endeavored himself to back & tame Horses, this exercise being truly proper to dispost men, hardy and strong in hand, and whose hearts were thorowly settled on this world.⁶⁵

Acknowledging that horsemanship is undeniably a good however, Goulart goes on to allow:

If those that have holy thoughts, addict themselves to master such generous beasts...it is for necessity, and when as pleasure is united thereunto...yet so as they have that thing always in their memory, which is the principal.⁶⁶

A sidelight is thrown on this ambiguity in a sermon of 1618 which likens a good sermon to a good horse, one which is more effective than it is elegant:

you shall sometimes see an excellent horse of shape and colour, having many of those markes Du Bartas describes in Caine's supposed horse; which yet wanting mettle hath beene of little worth and lesse use".⁶⁷

The *topos* in other words is as morally ambiguous in the context of Du Bartas as it is in *Hamlet*: "talking sports" is an innocent diversion for Claudius and Laertes, and yet a salve to the evil scheme they are hatching. Nothing could be more "normal" for an aristocrat such as Claudius and a courtier such as Laertes, than a love of fine horsemanship. As the vaguely sinister name "Lamord" suggests however, the normality is ominous: the two men (who have been circling each-other warily up to this point) "connect" through this shared taste and seal their alliance.

A second and weightier example of Claudius's bad normality is his failure to stop Gertrude drinking from the poisoned cup. Gertrude is *not* expendable as far as Claudius is concerned (see, 4.7.11-16). But he is incapable of seizing the one moment that he clearly has to dash the cup from Gertrude's hands because that would mean exposure. The pain and confusion, the shame and futility of this moment are richly understated. We have but to fill in the dots, much as Luther says of the gnomonic verbal form of *Genesis* 4: Cain "rose up" against Abel:

Among historical accounts there is one about a painter who painted the story of Iphigenia at the moment she was about to be sacrificed. To each of the spectators he assigned his own particular demeanour, expressive of his sorrow or grief. But the head of the father, who was present at the scene, he covered up, because he held that the depth of the father's feeling could not be expressed in a painting.⁶⁸

The father of course is Agamemnon, and his emotion is beyond depiction because it is so deeply agonized. Luther goes on to say that, "Moses really did the same thing... he suggests by dots, as it were, situations that cannot be expressed in words".⁶⁹ One of Luther's great strengths as a commentator on the Old Testament relative to Calvin, is the aesthetic intelligence of his use of tragedy as a paratext. The fact that Cain is a hypocrite does not mean that he is less than fully human or less an object of human sympathy. Luther attributes the succinctness of Moses partly to artistic tact and partly to depth of feeling: there were moments in which Moses literally could not see the page for weeping.⁷⁰

The second feature linking Claudius to Calvin's Cain is his conscience. For Calvin, conscience is the psychological and spiritual complement to hypocrisy. Because of its unsearchableness, its capacity to hide in the law, hypocrisy will always outstrip human sanction. Conscience alone is capable of tracking the hypocrite through all the "lurking corners and by turnings" of his heart.⁷¹ Typically the hypocrite will resist his conscience, but for this very reason, he will be "feared and tormented with secret burning yrons".⁷² The pain of conscience, Calvin tells us, is a foretaste of the final judgement. It is the only way that hypocrisy is punished in this world. "Conscience" is a keyword for Hamlet as much as it is for Claudius, but of the two, only Claudius has a truly Calvinistic dread of it. Where Hamlet (as we shall see) disputes "cases of conscience" (where conscience might point either of two ways)⁷³, Claudius fears conscience as the infallible register of his depravity. "O how sharp a lash that speech doth give my conscience" (3.1.52), Claudius says of a commonplace sentence of Polonius's about hypocrisy. In the prayer scene, Claudius is excoriated by his conscience for the very reason that he is incapable of repenting of the sins that his conscience upbraids him with. Calvin, I think, would have found nothing to complain of in this speech: perhaps not even the empathy that Claudius's ordeal arouses in the audience. Before God, the murderer's plight is after all just a version of our own. On

the other hand of course, Claudius never lets conscience bar his way to new crime. When in response to Claudius's goading, Laertes boasts that he will cut Hamlet's throat in the church, Claudius answers: "No place indeed should murder sanctuarize. / Revenge should have no bounds" (4.7.100-01). What starts out as a "case of conscience" (if it is sacrilegious to take revenge in the church, is it legitimate to take it somewhere else?), ends in a brilliantly cynical conceit.

"Elsinore" is full of "ordinary" men and women. Reading this society through Schopenhauer's (sin soaked) idea of tragedy, Michael Long characterizes it as "philistine" in the sense of willing a low moral horizon upon itself.⁷⁴ "Ordinary" I think suits "Elsinore" better for being truer to Schopenhauer and closer to original sin in the reformed theological key; but also perhaps for being more of the twenty-first century than the later twentieth, when "philistinism" had the sense of a remediable vice, something that could be fixed with moral earnestness and education.⁷⁵ We have already considered four Elsinoreans. It is worth briefly considering several more: Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the fictional occupants of Elsinore's graveyard, the avatars of "Cain's jawbone".

Polonius has been a troubling figure since the 1930s. To the anti-Hamlet critic, Eleanor Prosser, he is a harmless dotard, whose killing is very much to Hamlet's discredit.⁷⁶ To Jan Kott he is head of the secret police, and his death is positively welcome.⁷⁷ If we consider Polonius as "ordinary", we can end this debate because the moral ambiguity is inbuilt. Notwithstanding her sentimentalization of Polonius, Prosser is probably closer to the mark than Kott who disambiguates Polonius too far in the direction of the spy-master. Deviousness may be second nature, indeed a kind of craze, but Polonius is capable of reproving himself for this very fault (3.1.48-51), and paining Claudius with his simple honesty (3.1.51-56). He is capable too of that famously pious admonition to a son (1.3.55-81). Yet we can imagine Plato referring to this speech in all but name when (in the *Gyges* section of *The Republic*) remarking the bad faith of the very genre of paternal advice:

Fathers, when they address exhortations to their sons...urge the necessity of being just, not by praising justice itself, but the good repute with mankind that accrues from it, the object that they hold before us being that by seeming to be just the man may get from the reputation office and alliances and all the good

things that Glaucon just now enumerated as coming to the unjust man from his good name.⁷⁸

To read Polonius's advice to Laertes with Plato's eye, is to sense the underlying note of calculation, the suspicion even or especially where friends are concerned.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would seem to present a sterner test of "ordinariness" in that we are virtually invited to applaud their demise. Hamlet's assertion, "They are not near my conscience" (5.2.59), is a challenge not just to Horatio but to the audience. Prosser blames Hamlet for ruthlessness because he could not be sure that his old friends had understood the full meaning of their visit to England.⁷⁹ Kott doesn't mention them specifically but we can guess what he might have said from his attitude to Ophelia, who has to be sacrificed as "part of the mechanism").⁸⁰ Again it seems to me that Prosser is closer to the mark. But again, she sentimentalizes. The ordinariness of this pair is sinister: somewhere between the crass opportunism of the "secret parts of Fortune" (2.2.236), and toadies who serve the king's interests with "holy and religious fear" (3.2.8). In the end "indifferent children of the earth" (2.2.229) sounds right: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the flawed progeny of Adam and citizens of the Cainite "city of the world". Like Gertrude, they are portrayed with tact. There are no signatures of evil, no villainous asides or confidences; they are simply on the make. Stoppard was within the bounds of plausibility to imagine them as victims rather than accomplices. Should the manner of their disposal trouble us then? I suppose so. If people like this are to be killed, then where does the killing stop?

Even the corpses of Elsinore seem incapable of resting quite straight in the ground. Why does the skull thrown to the earth by the sexton's shovel remind Hamlet of "Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder" (4.7.77)? In tradition, if not in *Genesis* 4, Cain wields the jawbone of an ass to murder Abel. Here however, the jawbone is Cain's own. But that too – the wordplay seems to insist – is an effective weapon. If Cain's hypocrisy is borne in mind, as well as his role as founding "the city of the world", then there is a real connection between the image of "Cain's jawbone" and the list of former Cains imagined by Hamlet. Each portrait in this rogue's gallery is linked by the idea of devious speech. Like Calvin's hypocrite, the politician was "one that would circumvent God" (4.7.79). The courtier praised a horse in order to beg it;

the lawyer had “his quiddits . . . , his quillits, / his cases, his tenures and his tricks” (4.7.96-97); the “great buyer of land” had “his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries”, and “conveyances of his lands” (4.7.102-08). Such purchasing might resonate with the inscrutable “election” by which Claudius acceded to the throne. In both cases the suggestion is of a shady normality – “the corrupted currents of this world” (3.2.57) – processes that are crooked but legal. It is just this image of evil that haunts Hamlet. The unworthy scorners of patient merit, the insolent office bearers of 3.1.75-76 anticipate the rogues gallery of the graveyard, down to the fine lady: whose “inch thick” (5.1.189) painting allies her with the “most painted word” (3.1.55) of Claudius. Whenever Hamlet generalizes from his immediate dilemma, his mind slips into the thought of normal injustice, oppressiveness, corruption. Revenge is no answer to this, unless in the witty touch whereby Cain’s skull is jowled to the earth by the gravedigger: one those who “hold up Adam’s profession” (4.7.31). This may be a joke on Calvin, whose commentary pointedly prefers the earthy occupations of the Adamites to the sophisticated occupations of the Cainites (a primitivism mocked in Luther’s commentary). Alternatively, the joke about Adam’s “arms” (“Why, he had none”, 4.7.34) gestures toward peasant egalitarianism (“when Adam delved and Eve span, / when was then the gentleman?”)

4.

Surprised by sin and dedicated to revenge, what must Hamlet do? My proposition here is that the Reformation is as much a part of the solution as it was of the problem. Linked by the Cain-Claudius symbolism, the themes of original sin and revenge mutually compound the catch-22 character native to each. Where a heightened consciousness of original sin provokes ethical horror, it also demoralizes because by definition one can do nothing to redress what one loathes in others given that one is loathsome oneself. Obsession with original sin is a trap from which Hamlet escapes only by the leap of faith. The revenge dilemma is equally trap-like: Hamlet must restore justice by destroying Claudius but do so in a way that does not taint his mind or involve his mother. Initially the ghost’s revelations seem to offer a way out of the oppressiveness of “sullied flesh”, because at last Hamlet has a coherent “myth of accusation” in Ricoeur’s term⁸¹: Claudius is now criminal as well as merely loathsome. Yet the respite is illusory. The only evidence against Claudius is the

testimony of the Ghost, and even Hamlet will not take the Ghost at his word.⁸² Finally, though Hamlet establishes Claudius's guilt to his own satisfaction, this still does not amount to proof. Claudius has covered his public tracks so well that he is vulnerable only to a secret revenge, which is to say the tactic of Gyges and the trap of original sin. Luther's gloss on God's warning to Cain – "Your sin lies at the door" – might apply equally to his fellow Wittenburgian:

What happened to Cain happens to everybody. Before Cain brought his sacrifice...sin was lying at the door and was keeping quiet; but it was lying at the door, that is, in a place that is not quiet. Through the door we go in and out, and the place is, therefore, poorly suited for sleep. This, too, is part of the nature of sin, that although it is quiet for a time, it is quiet in a place where it cannot be quiet for long.⁸³

Notwithstanding, Hamlet does pursue a mostly rational, moral and courageous course. He lapses to be sure, into moral hysteria, Senecan bloodthirstiness, and the signature mood of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy: momentarily taking up residence with Schopenhauer in what Lukacs called the "Grand Hotel Abyss".⁸⁴ But Hamlet is purposeful too, establishing Claudius's guilt to the point of certainty. The gains are rarely lasting. Thus the success of the "mousetrap" leads to one of Hamlet's worst moments (his vengeful gloating over the praying Claudius) and a catastrophic error (the stabbing of Polonius). For all this however, and within the limits of his mental, moral and physical strength, Hamlet pursues the challenge of what he must do. He never gives in to the enemy and does not give way to despair.

The most productive response to both dilemmas is Hamlet's dialogue with conscience: can he – in conscience – resist tyranny to the death? Can he rid himself of spies like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Should he address a wider spectrum of injustice (the scorning of "patient merit" and so on)? Can he just do away with himself? What exactly is conscience anyway? Must it be reactive or can it be proactive, must it be monitory or can it be muscular? It is in posing these questions that Hamlet engages most fully with Reformed – especially Calvinist – thinking, because it is here that the proactive dimension of conscience is most adventurously evolved.

Conscience is first met with in its cowardly form: “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1.85). The great soliloquy raises the options of taking up “arms against a sea of troubles” (3.1.61) or committing suicide, but it discourages both. The legitimate course is cowardly. Here Hamlet echoes the Elizabethan *Homilies* and Reformed commentary on *Romans*, among other contexts.⁸⁵ The homilies against *Disobedience and wilful Rebellion* make it clear that our sinfulness forfeits any expectation of just treatment in this world.⁸⁶ Unjust magistrates are to be borne with, just as spectacularly evil rulers such as Saul, Tiberius and Nero were complied with by David, Christ and St. Paul.⁸⁷ Speaking of Abel, Calvin enjoins us to “suffer iniuries” with “a quiet minde”, trusting to providence to vindicate innocence.⁸⁸ Against the verse in *Romans* 13, preaching obedience “not from fear of vengeance only: but also because of conscience”, Tyndale has the marginal comment: “Though thou were of power to resist the power, yet were thou damned in thy conscience if thou didest it, because it is against God’s commandment”.⁸⁹ The equivalent gloss in the *Geneva Bible* largely concurs: “We must obey the Magistrate, not onely for fear of punishment, but much more because that (although the Magistrate hath no power over the conscience of man, yet seeing he is Gods minister) he cannot be resisted by any good conscience”.⁹⁰ In the *Homilies* however, to bear from prudence rather than conscience is still preferable to the alternative. The titlepage of *An Homilie against disobedience and wylful rebellion*, published separately in 1570 juxtaposes “Iusticia” (whose right hand holds a sword) with “Prudencia” (holding a serpent writhed about her left arm).

Hamlet next invokes conscience in the Fortinbras soliloquy (of Q2 only). But the question of whether one should seek greatness honourably or rightly is left open. For all his reservations about Fortinbras’s recklessness and ruthlessness, Hamlet clearly envies him. The next invocation of conscience – Hamlet’s boast that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are “not near my conscience” – we have partly examined. What we can note here however is the surprising turn taken by the theme at this point. Whereas conscience has previously been deferred to (however reluctantly), it is here conscripted aggressively to the disposal of Hamlet’s old schoolfellows, and over Horatio’s implicit protest: “So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to’t” (5.2.57).

The final invocation of conscience is a true crux: crucial to our reading of the outcome and deeply ambiguous. Rehearsing a catalogue of Claudius’s villainies to

Horatio, Hamlet rhetorically if somewhat obscurely asks: “Does it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon?/ He that hath killed my King.../ is’t not perfect conscience?” (5.2.64-8) This is how the question reads in Q2. F1’s version of the suggestion is both sharper and lengthier:

...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? (5.2.69-71).

The difference, I suggest, is critical. Whereas in Q2, the rhetorical question is unambiguous for all its obscurity, in F the added precision entangles itself in an implicit refutation. Whereas Hamlet wants to say that it is damnable to let a criminal remain on the throne, his identification of the king with “this canker of our nature” that must not be allowed to “come in further evil” resonates powerfully with the whole “canker” motif in the play. This includes Claudius’s matching invocation of the same motif shortly earlier in respect of Hamlet himself (“But to the quick of th’ulcer- / Hamlet comes back”, 4.7.22-3). The parallel suggests that Hamlet’s invocation embraces – to an extent at least – his own canker or innate sin. Hence the proposition virtually disables itself. In this reading, it is suggestive that the “canker” passage appears in the normally terser F1, rather than Q2.⁹¹ It is thus the definitive form in which the question is put. It is possible that without the added passage in F1 – the disclaimer perhaps – the provocation of Hamlet’s question to Horatio was simply too great. Hamlet could easily be read as inciting Horatio (and thus the audience) to “willful rebellion”. Characteristically, Horatio answers non-committally (“Why, what a king is this!” 5.2.63).⁹² Neither toady nor conspirator, Horatio walks a fine line. His exemplary justice – as, “e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” (3.2.52-3) – demands no less. In her study of hearing in *Hamlet*, Alison Deutermann speaks of Horatio’s “skeptically ‘fortified’ ear”.⁹³ In F1 particularly, Horatio may be mindful of 2 *Timothy*, 2:16-17: “Stay prophane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. / And their word will eat as doth a canker”.⁹⁴

There is a further significance to the extraordinary liberty taken with “conscience” at this point. In claiming a “*perfect* conscience” (my italics), Hamlet gestures towards a specifically Reformed discussion both of the nature and the

discretion of conscience. If conscience were about keeping one's word, then is credit not partly due to Herod for presenting the head of John the Baptist to Salome in order to keep his oath? No, argues the *Geneva* gloss to *Matthew* 14.1: Herod is, "an example of tyrannous vanitie, pride and crueltie, and to bee short, of a courtly conscience".⁹⁵ Keeping an oath has much to do with the nature of the oath itself. Courtly oaths have no necessary moral or religious character. What then of conscientious observance of what is truly lawful? Even this is not what conscience really means. In *Romans* 14.20-23, Paul puts it this way:

Destroy not the work of God for a little meat's sake. All things are pure: but it is evil for that man, which eateth with hurt of his conscience... Hast thou faith? have it with thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. For he that maketh conscience, is damned if he eat: because he doth it not of faith.⁹⁶

Paul's point is that the law is not binding of itself but only if it is *taken* to be binding in the given case. The law binds not of itself but only "of faith". What this means is that though dietary observance is subjective, this does not alter the fact that to break a dietary rule is impious if done with an unquiet conscience. Simply to "do against conscience is damnable" as a marginal note has it: "and all that is not of faith is sin". "Making conscience" then (in Paul's phrase) is a perilous activity even when the law complied with is illusory.

How then can Hamlet claim a "perfect" conscience in the imponderable case of regicide? The answer may lie in the radicalism of grounding conscience in faith. The *Geneva* gloss to *Romans* 5:1 ("Then being iustified by faith...") reads: "'we are iustified with that, which truly appeaseth our conscience before God: but faith in Christ doeth appease our conscience and not the Law...by faith we are iustified and not by the law'.⁹⁷ This is exactly what "perfect" conscience means: a proactive conscience both founded on faith and guided by it. To the Reformers, the bible – and the Old Testament in particular – abounded in examples. The most noteworthy of these was the trickery of Esau by Jacob and Rebecca. Of the first, Luther remarked: "when God truly commands saints and faithful men to do something, it is without doubt holy and permissible"; of the second he wrote: "Rebecca handled the matter with skill, with cleverness, and with the most beautiful fraud, and handled it

according to the will of God, who granted a happy ending in a matter so difficult and so filled with inherent dangers”.⁹⁸ As Bornkamm remarks, these are, “historical examples, showing that faith may break the law”.⁹⁹ This is precisely the message of *Jacob and Esau*, an anonymous comedy published in 1568 expounding the theology of predestination: the gulling of Esau (and indeed Isaac) is justified by a faithful insight into divine election and reprobation (where Jacob is aligned with Abel, Esau is aligned with Cain).¹⁰⁰ Noting the originally Marian context of this play, a number of scholars read this as a justification of political resistance along the lines of Knox and Ponet.¹⁰¹ *Hamlet* is an Elizabethan play of course, but if faith is enough to justify Rebecca’s trickery of Esau, would it not also justify Hamlet’s disingenuous apology to Laertes for having killed Polonius (the speech in which Brljak following Lawrence, finds the damning invocation of Lamech or Lameth)?¹⁰² We are invited to weigh one possibility against the other.

Between the intense and quasi-reformed moment of “perfect conscience”, and the following one of the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” is the extended comic interlude in which Osric delivers the challenge of the duel. Notwithstanding this interlude, most pro-Hamlet readers prefer to telescope the two moments at either end of it, reading the second very much as a consolidation of the first. This is possible (there is very little that one can claim with certainty about the ending of *Hamlet*). One might indeed note the resonance between “*perfect* conscience” and “*special* providence” (my italics): the point being that both these words bespeak a strongly Reformed conception of justice. But it is equally possible to read the two moments against each-other. My own preference is to take the Osric interlude as signaling a disjunction between the moment at which conscience is frog-marched into line with necessary violence¹⁰³, and the moment of simple “readiness” to await whatever providence may send one’s way. In this reading, Hamlet is “ready” only when he has *dropped* the attempt to yoke conscience to his project of revenge (Horatio’s non-assent to Hamlet’s proposition might suggest why that is a non-starter). Again at issue here is faith itself. The Hamlet who tries to conscript conscience is not notably religious, let alone a true protestant believer. Hence we find ourselves hoist on the same petard as feared by Bradley, Sinfield and Edwards (that of a *faux* Protestant piety). How is it credible that Hamlet should suddenly reach for the patently Calvinist category of “special providence”, or Q1’s “Predestinate providence”?

One is tempted to say that what separates these two moments is an unseen leap of faith. It is quite possible however that the Osric interlude itself signals Hamlet's change of mind. The interlude, which is present at greater or lesser length in all three texts presents a difficulty equivalent to the Lamord passage: its length and elaborateness (particularly in Q2) is not justified by its functionality. Yet part of the reason for this impression – I suggest – is a failure to appreciate its resonance with the Lamord passage. Osric is a kind of double to Laertes in the sense of his devotion to fencing: its courtliness and its technical language (the term “carriages”, 5.2.117-19, for example, which Hamlet professes not to understand). Osric positively embodies the courtly enthusiasm infusing Claudius's account of Lamord. Laertes in turn is linked to Lamord: both as an admirer (calling him, “the brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation”, 4.7.79-80) and as the object of Lamord's own admiration (4.7.81-5). As Lamord is to horsemanship, so is Laertes to fencing. What Hamlet so disdains in Osric then is not just his idiocy but the courtly emulation that he represents, the ethic of which Hamlet himself (according to Ophelia, 3.1.155-7) was once a conspicuous example. Revenge is equally part of this courtly ethic. Honour must be satisfied at all costs. It is possible then that the Osric episode in its own right has something to do with Hamlet's change of mind, and equally something to do with the abrupt contrast posed by the Calvinist “special providence” to which Hamlet now submits himself.

The result that Hamlet awaits at providence's hands is undeniably ominous. What “will come” (5.2.168) is heavy with the dread that Hamlet already feels at conceding the initiative to Claudius: “thou wouldst not think how [ill all's] here about my heart” (5.2.158-59). In these circumstances, blind faith is surely fatal, and Hamlet knows it. Yet it must also be said that the event proves Hamlet's strategy to have been right, if the crucial issue is ending the catch-22 situation whereby Claudius cannot be brought to justice. In her last moment, Gertrude takes her first and only moral decision by unmasking Claudius and putting an end to his public immunity. It is as if Gyges's ring had been snatched away from him. Laertes seconds her accusation. Claudius now stands naked not just before Hamlet but before the shadowy collective which had elected him king. Though a cry of “treason” is raised by “all” (5.2.275), no one steps forward in Claudius's defence: “O yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt” (5.2.276). In principle, it is possible to see the violence of the conclusion as lawful, rather than impulsive (as Adorno thought) or vengeful (as most levelling critics

suppose).¹⁰⁴ It is possible that Hamlet dies as “elect” in a double sense: the rightful prince of Denmark and the Pauline athlete whose final deference to providence has invited an opportunity for lawful violence that he could never have foreseen if left to his own devices.

If this reading avoids the trap of “levelling” (that of the anti-Hamlet school, and the original sin school) it steps willfully – not unlike Hamlet himself – into the trap of the religious (that of which Sinfield and Edwards were wary and which Kierkegaard welcomed). Just one issue with this is that the play might seem less a mirror of our own times than Jan Kott insisted that it has to be. While the political fervor with which Kott read the play (along with his appetite to read it in terms of moral blacks and whites) may have waned considerably, we are – as Simon Critchley’s *Faith of the Faithless* (2012) might remind us – no more truly religious in the early twenty-first century than we were c.1960 when *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* appeared in English. We are however at an historical juncture far more receptive to what one might loosely call “original sin thinking” than at any stage in the last half century.¹⁰⁵ The unipolar yet implosive world of the early twenty-first century seems subject to a systemic malaise to which writers of the left (such as Badiou) are beginning to respond in Pauline terms.¹⁰⁶ The category of “interest” is beginning to seem far less ameliorable than it did to Enlightenment optimists concerned to unlock the grip of original sin from the idea of human nature. This being so, a *Hamlet* laden with “religious doubt” could be more historically illuminating than ever, if we better understand Hamlet’s entrapment, his anxiety, and his “kind of fighting” (5.2.4). If this looks back to Luther’s spiritual struggle (*anfichtung*), it might look forward to Kierkegaard’s political theology and Badiou’s political reading of St. Paul.

I would like to thank: Ewan Fernie and Peter Holbrook, fellow panelists at our SAA panel on *Shakespeare and the penalty of Adam* (2012), Richard Strier for an important reference in Calvin, John Drakakis for a lucid discussion of Hamlet’s last moments, Marion O’Connor for tips on Tudor Protestant drama, and Dan Watts for his animated Kierkegaard seminar at Essex, 2011. I also thank the two readers retained by *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

¹ Alan Sinfield, “Hamlet’s Special Providence”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 33, (1980), 89-98, 93. Citations of Shakespeare’s plays reference *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Works*, Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor, eds., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

Citations of *Hamlet* Q1 adopt the “Through Line Numbering” (TLN) convention, and reference: *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*, Paul Bertram & Bernice Kliman, eds., (New York, AMS Press, 1991)

² “I personally cannot see a way forwards in any discussion of *Hamlet*, that does not take as a point of departure that it is a religious play”, (Philip Edwards, “Tragic Balance in *Hamlet*”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 36, (1983), 43-52, 45)

³ See especially, Joseph de Maistre, *The St.Petersburg Dialogues*, Richard E. Lebrun, ed., (Montreal, McGill-Queen’s UP, 1983). Disciples tend to be of the right like E.M. Cioran and Charles Baudelaire, but Maistre’s influence can be traced in writers of the left such as Adorno: “Too little that is good has power in the world for the world to be said to have achieved progress, but there can be no good, not even a trace of it, without progress” (Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: lectures 1964-1965*, Rolf Tiedemann, ed., (Cambridge, Polity, 2006) 149. Adorno comments favourably on Maistre (24). See also notes 74 and 104 below

⁴ “If Shakespeare does not give Hamlet religious presuppositions that conspire against him in religious doubt...then Hamlet is essentially a vacillator”, (Soren Kierkegaard, “A Side Glance at Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”, in *Stages on Life’s Way*, Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, eds., Princeton, Princeton UP, 1998, 452-54, 453)

⁵ Andrew Hadfield, “The Radical *Hamlet*”, in his *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2005), 184-204; Linda Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality*, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010) *passim*

⁶ Donald V. Stump, “Hamlet, Cain and Abel, and the Pattern of Divine Providence”, *Renaissance Papers*, (1985), 27-38

⁷ “Hamlet, Cain and Abel”, 35

-
- ⁸ Catherine Belsey, "Sibling Rivalry: Hamlet and the first Murder", in her, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Family Culture*, (Houndsmills & London, Macmillan, 1999), 129-74
- ⁹ Heather Hirschfeld, "Hamlet's 'first Corse': Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54:4, (2003), 424-48, 426
- ¹⁰ John Alvis, "Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Machiavelli: How not to kill a Despot", in, John E. Alvis & Thomas G. West, eds., *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, (Wilmington Delaware: ISI Books, 2000), 289-313
- ¹¹ Vladimir Brljak, "Hamlet and Lameth", *Notes & Queries*, 58:2, (2011), 247-54.
- ¹² I make no assumptions about the lost *Ur Hamlet* of c.1589
- ¹³ Michael Long, *The Unnatural Scene: a study in Shakespearean Tragedy*, (London, Methuen, 1976)
- ¹⁴ *Luther's Works*, 55 Vols., (St. Louis, Mo., Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76), Vol.25, 292
- ¹⁵ *A Commentarie of John Calvine, upon the first booke of Moses called Genesis*, (London, Thomas Thynne, 1578), 94-5
- ¹⁶ Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, John Pitcher, ed., (London, Penguin, 1985), 158-59, 158
- ¹⁷ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, "An inquiry concerning virtue or merit", in his, *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times*, Philip Ayres, ed., 2 vols., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), Vol.1,163-230
- ¹⁸ *Institutes*, 2.1.3, in, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., 2 vols., (Louisville & London, Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), Vol.1, 243-44
- ¹⁹ *Tyndale's New Testament*, 207; *Institutes*, 2.1.3
- ²⁰ *Luther's Works*, Vol.25, 300

²¹ *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, eds., *Bollingen Series LXXI*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 478. Joseph de Maistre observes that, “in contemplating himself...[Plato]...does not know if he sees a monster more duplicitous and more evil than Typhon, or rather a gentle, and benevolent being who partakes in the nature of the divinity.” (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, 38). Quite independently, Kierkegaard cites this same passage: “Socrates, despite being very knowledgeable about human nature and having a great deal of self knowledge, did not know with certainty whether he was ‘a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being’”. (*Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, Edward F. Mooney & M.G. Piety, eds., Oxford, Oxford UP, 2009, 31)

²² For a brilliant discussion of the Gyges story in the context of original sin to which I am indebted, see, Patrick Downey, *Desperately Wicked: Philosophy, Christianity and the Human Heart*, (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove Ill., 2009), 15-29

²³ *Dialogues*, 607

²⁴ *Dialogues*, 607

²⁵ *Dialogues*, 607

²⁶ R.S. White, “Theatrum mundi: The Theatre Metaphor in Calvin”, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 31: 3, (1994), 309-25

²⁷ Carolyn Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and what it tells us*, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1932, rpr. 1996), 318-19

²⁸ Hirschfeld discusses this well, as recapitulating a pattern of traumatic narrative repetition within *Genesis* (“Hamlet’s ‘first corse’”, 438-39)

²⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, ”Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern”, in his, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Alasdair Hannay, ed., (London, Penguin, 1992), 137-61,154

³⁰ *Either/Or*, 153

³¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, E.F.J. Payne, tr., 2 vols., (New York, Dover, 1969), Vol.1, 254

³² Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, Geoffrey Shepherd, ed., (Manchester, Manchester UP, 1973), 117

³³ The passage is from Tyndale's translation of Luther's prologue to *Romans*. See, *Tyndale's New Testament: Translated...in 1534*, David Daniell, ed., (New Haven & London, Yale UP, 1989), 208

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed., G.R. Hibberd, (Oxford & New York, Oxford UP, 1987), 150

³⁵ For a discussion of the Brutus story, see, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, 184-204.

³⁶ Compare *The Duchess of Malfi*, (John Russell Brown, ed., Manchester, Manchester UP, 1976):

Virtue, where art thou hid? what hideous thing
Is it that doth eclipse thee? ...
Or is it true, thou art but a bare name,
And no essential thing? (3.2.71-71; 73-74)

³⁷ *The Geneva Bible: the Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition*, Gerald T. Sheppard, ed., (New York, Pilgrim Press, 1989), 75. Grafting is elaborated as an emblematic frontispiece in, *In Librum Psalmorum Iohannis Caluini commentarius*, (Geneva, Robert Estienne, 1557). The emblem shows a man standing beneath a tree surrounded by a pile of leafy branches which have been lopped. Those branches remaining on the tree are grafted. These are fruit-bearing. Sap runs from a gash in the trunk. The man speaks the words "Noli Altum Sapere" (do not seek higher wisdom).

³⁸ *Genesis* 3 is recounted in "Eden: The 1 Part of The 1 Day of the 11 Week", and "The Imposture: The 1 Part of the 1 Day of the II Week". *Genesis* 4 is recounted in, "The Handy-Crafts: The IIII Part of the 1 Day of the II Week". For simplicity's sake, further references to Du Bartas in the text will cite sections by name, then follow with line references. The full text of the 1598 English edition can be found in, *The Divine Weeks and Works of Guillaume de Saluste Sieur Du Bartas, Translated by Joshuah*

Sylvester, Susan Snyder, ed., 2 vols., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), Vol.1, 316-37; 338-56; 380-402

³⁹ In his, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, (Edinburgh, Clark, 1986), T.H.L Parker comments, "the general tendency was to give the Old Testament a lower religious position than the New" (44)

⁴⁰ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, Victor I. Gruhn, ed., E.W. & R.C. Gritsch, tr., (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1969), 219-20

⁴¹ *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 47-48

⁴² Bornkamm observes of Luther's Old Testament commentaries that, "mankind always remains essentially the same", that, "the word of God and his own period of time were contemporaneous" (*Luther and the Old Testament*, 18, 19)

⁴³ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 98

⁴⁴ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 98

⁴⁵ *Divine Weeks*, The Second Week, The First Day, "The Furies", 745-55

⁴⁶ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, (Harper Perennial, New York, 1993)

⁴⁷ Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, (Cambridge Mass., Belknap Press, 1984), 1

⁴⁸ *Ordinary Vices*, 2

⁴⁹ *Ordinary Vices*, 2. Shklar remarks how: "liberalism owes a deep and enduring debt to misanthropy, or, to be exact, a suspicious temper that does not think that any set of officials is fit to do more than to inhibit, within strict legal limits, the grosser forms of violence and fraud" (3)

⁵⁰ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, (London, Oxford UP, 1952) , 93. The oxymoron descends from Shaftesbury's condemnation of misanthropy as the worst of vices (*Characteristics*, 225-26). Shaftesbury's disciple, William Richardson, is accordingly exercised to distinguish the excusable misanthropy of Hamlet from the

inexcusable misanthropy of Timon (*Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters*, London, J.Murray, 1786, 107)

⁵¹ Augustine, *City of God*, David Knowles, ed., (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972), Book 15:1, 595-96; 15:17, 627. See also, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 210-13. Augustine interprets the name "Cain" to mean "Possession" (15:17, 627). Schmitt reads the Cain-Abel story as initiating the "enemy", a figure presupposing the existence of politics. See: Jean-Claude Monod, "Hostility, Politics, Brotherhood: Abel and Cain as Seen by Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida", in, Sanja Bahun & Dusan Radunovic, eds, *Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions*, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012), 95-112

⁵² *Desperately Wicked*, 103

⁵³ *Biblia Sacra Vulgatae Editionis*, (Rome, Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1861). See the array of parallel readings of *Jeremiah 17:9*, in *Luther and the Old Testament*, 221

⁵⁴ In *The Gallants Burden*, (London, 1612), Thomas Adams compares the physical chastisements of the Old Testament God with the inner chastisements of latter days when, "God's punishments reach most to the Conscience: (*Implex circa praescriba ferrum*) a sensuall and senseless heart without apprehension of Gods incensed anger (*Cor nullis violabile tellis*) not made of penetrable stuffe" (5). The seeming echo of Shakespeare is intriguing and suggests at least some interpenetration of homiletic and theatrical discourse.

⁵⁵ *Divine Weeks*, "The Imposture", 171-80; 426. In Du Bartas, Eve's frailty is explicitly imagined as a susceptibility to persuasion – a strong suit of Claudius in *Hamlet*.

⁵⁶ *Concept of Anxiety*, 22

⁵⁷ *Concept of Anxiety*, 22

⁵⁸ *Concept of Anxiety*, 26

⁵⁹ *Concept of Anxiety*, 26

⁶⁰ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 141. Compare the moment of the sacrifice in Du Bartas. Where Abel, “with zealous cry / Cleaves bright Olympus starrie Canopie”, Cain, “with fained lips...lowd-resounded / Hart-wanting hymnes, on self-deserving founded” (“The Handy-Crafts, 287-90)

⁶¹ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 132

⁶² *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 131

⁶³ See Edwards’s note to the Lamord passage in his *New Cambridge* edition, 1985, 207

⁶⁴ *Unnatural Scene*, 134

⁶⁵ Simon Goulart, *A Learned Summery upon the famous poem of William of Saluste, Lord of Bartas*, (London, 1621), 135

⁶⁶ *Learned Summery*, 135

⁶⁷ Samuel Ward, *A Coale from the Altar*, (London, 1628), 70. What Ward has in mind is less a show pony (of the type chosen by Cain and envisaged by Claudius and Laertes) than a work horse. Ward’s opposition to aristocratic elegance is probably code for an anti-prelatical bias.

⁶⁸ *Luther’s Works*, Vol 1, 279-80

⁶⁹ *Luther’s Works*, Vol.1, 280

⁷⁰ *Luther and the Old Testament*, 38

⁷¹ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 138

⁷² *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 138

⁷³ In her, “The Case of Hamlet’s Conscience”, *Studies in Philology*, 76:2, (1979), 127-49, Catherine Belsey discusses Hamlet’s testing of conscience against a tradition of Calvinist casuistry exemplified by William Perkins’s “cases of conscience” (133)

⁷⁴ *Unnatural Scene*, 123-29

⁷⁵ Two books witnessing the shift I suggest here, are Downey, *Desperately Wicked*, (2009), and, John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, (London, Granta, 2002). While entirely secular in his orientation, Gray conscripts original sin thinkers such as de Maistre, Cioran and Schopenhauer to his case that: “the uses of knowledge will always be as shifting and crooked as humans are themselves”. “These”, he adds, “are not flaws that can be remedied” (28)

⁷⁶ Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1971), 194

⁷⁷ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, Boleslaw Taborski, tr., (London, Methuen, 1964), 49-50. Kott’s reading is durable enough to have influenced Linda Woodbridge in 2010 (*English Revenge Drama*, 174)

⁷⁸ *Dialogues*, 610

⁷⁹ *Hamlet and Revenge*, 205

⁸⁰ *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, 51, 59

⁸¹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Demythization of Accusation”, in his, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Peter McCormick, tr., (London, Continuum, 2004), 332-50

⁸² The moral authority of the ghost is a vexed question. To Prosser, he is demonic. (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 100-116). But it is, in any case, significant that Hamlet should second-guess the ghost’s testimony by means of the mousetrap. My instinct is that Shakespeare treats the ghost with a moral skepticism similar to that in which ghosts are treated by Seneca. Purgatory is a good indicator of this ghost’s moral level. Hamlet’s compulsive affinity with Pyrrhus suggests a parallel with the bloodthirsty ghost of Achilles in *Troades* (whose very existence, let alone moral authority, is questioned by the chorus). See *Troades*, in, *Seneca’s Tragedies*, Frank Justus Miller, ed., *Loeb Classical Texts*, 2 Vols., (Heinemann, London: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1960), Vol.1, ll.371-408

⁸³ *Luther’s Works*, Vol.1, 266-67

⁸⁴ Lukacs describes Schopenhauer’s system as: “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity [in which] the

daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.” (*The Theory of the Novel*, London, Merlin, 1971, 22)

⁸⁵ In, “The Case of Hamlet’s Conscience”, Belsey traces the origins of the standard association of conscience with cowardice to a generic opposition of conscience and wrath in the morality tradition. Her discussion of the meaning of conscience in *Hamlet* is situated mainly between this and the later tradition of Calvinist casuistry (see note 72, above)

⁸⁶ *Sermons or Homilies*, fourth edition, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1841), 468-516

⁸⁷ *Homilies*, 91-94

⁸⁸ *Commentarie of John Calvine*, 141

⁸⁹ *Tyndale’s New Testament*, 238

⁹⁰ *Geneva Bible*, 78

⁹¹ The first letter is capitalized in F: “Canker” (TLN 3573)

⁹² In “Hamlet’s Conscience”, Belsey reads the “perfect conscience” passage as a moral injunction “to prevent further villainy” (144). Horatio’s “outraged reaction...is I think the audience’s: Claudius is not a fit ruler” (144). Lars Engel reads Horatio’s response as non-committal, but keys “perfect conscience” to Hamlet’s perception of Horatio (“How is Horatio Just?”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62:2, 2011, 256-62, 260)

⁹³ In her, “‘Caviare to the general?’ Taste, hearing, and genre in *Hamlet*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62:2, (2011), 230-55, Alison K. Deutermann remarks, “Horatio’s listening...is cautious, thoughtful, and always directed to the specific circumstances in which each act of hearing takes place” (242)

⁹⁴ *Geneva Bible*, 107. Tyndale also uses the form “canker” (316), where other translators use “gangrene”

⁹⁵ *Geneva Bible*, 9

⁹⁶ *Tyndale’s New Testament*, 239-40

⁹⁷ *Geneva Bible*, 73

⁹⁸ Cited in *Luther and the Old Testament*, 22, 24

⁹⁹ *Luther and the Old Testament*, 25

¹⁰⁰ *A newe mery and wittie comedie...of Iacob and Esau*, (London, Henrie Bynneman, 1568). The furious Esau regrets that “God was angry with Caim for killing Abell / Els might I kill Iacob mervellously well”, (Gi), and is warned by Rebecca: “Beware by the example of Caym, I thee rede / That thou bringest not the Lorde’s curse upon thy head.” (G.iii). Resonances in *The Merchant of Venice* suggest that Shakespeare knew this play. The blessing Gobbo seeks of his blind father (2.2.85-96) seems to burlesque the blessing of Isaac on Jacob (disguised as the hairy Esau). Portia’s expression that Bassanio is “dear bought” (3.2.311) seems to echo this same expression in respect of the pottage for which Esau sells his birthright, (*Jacob and Esau*, Cii, Di)

¹⁰¹ See the survey of opinion in, Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England*, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1993), pp.122-23.

¹⁰² Brljak, “Hamlet and Lameth”, passim. See also the note against 5.2.204-21, in, Ann Thomson & Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet*, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 2006: “This apology to Laertes....has struck editors and commentators since at least Johnson in 1765, as disingenuous”

¹⁰³ Belsey takes Hamlet’s decision to kill Claudius as justified, but also sees it as tainted. Though “as ethically scrupulous as it is possible to be”, Hamlet, “is inevitably corrupted by his mission.” (“Hamlet’s Conscience”, 148). On the ethical dilemma presented by dirty hands in a good cause, see, John M. Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007)

¹⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, Rolf Tiedeman, ed., Rodney Livingstone, tr., (Cambridge, Polity, 2010), 233-34. See also, note 2.

¹⁰⁵ See, note 70

¹⁰⁶ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Norman Madrasz, ed., tr., (Albany, SUNY, 1999)