



2015

## Hamlet Reinvents Himself

William Walsh

Butler University, [wwalsh@butler.edu](mailto:wwalsh@butler.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Walsh, William, "Hamlet Reinvents Himself" *International Journal of Language and Literature* / (2015): 1-10.

Available at [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/960](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/960)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## Hamlet Reinvents Himself

William Walsh<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

We see the early modern as an open carry society. Hamlet's success in the swordplay at the end is usually seen as his triumph, fulfilling his father's injunction at last. The 2013 RSC production of *Hamlet* projected ambiguity, which I share. The most intriguing angle was Hamlet's costume. Jonathon Slinger very quickly donned *half* of a fencing jacket; but the straps of the jacket dangled, strongly suggesting a straight jacket. Half mad, half resolute, Hamlet is driven through much of the play until, I will argue, he reinvents himself as a mad version of divine providence. The providential idea is deeply rooted in the duel ethos, as drawn by Vincentio Saviolo, in *Saviolo His Practice*. I propose that Hamlet substitutes his will for God's, claiming the agency of Providence as he strikes down those who beset him. Hamlet's complacent fatalism is self-constructed as he enacts the Providence he claims to trust. Hamlet's moral thoughtfulness becomes his downfall, creating the desperation that is his fall from greatness. [164]

---

*The sixteenth century was the golden age of arms.*  
J. D. Aylward, *The English Master of Arms*  
*In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tempers were short*  
*and weapons to hand. The behavior of the propertied classes,*  
*like that of the poor, was characterized by the ferocity*  
*and childishness and lack of self control of the Homeric age. . . .*  
Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641*

The 2013 RSC production of *Hamlet* projected ambiguity about male violence in the last half of the play. Under the direction of David Farr, Jonathan Slinger gave one of the edgiest performances I have seen. Slinger alternated between raving and giggles and firm self-assertion, between violence as troubling and as resolution. The most intriguing angle was Hamlet's costume. He very quickly donned half of a fencing jacket, foreshadowing the final duel with Laertes as well as his need to destroy Claudius; at the same time the straps of the jacket dangled, strongly suggesting a straight jacket. Half mad, half resolute, Hamlet is driven through much of the play until, I will argue, he reinvents himself as a mad version of divine providence exacting revenge--in the duel. I wish to discredit the random duel, especially as providential, and with it Hamlet's violence.

Fraught with baggage, the honor duel is all that remains of the chivalric military role and comes to bear the weight of maleness itself. Aldo Scaglione traces the evolution of the knight into the early modern courtier beginning in Italy and spreading through Western Europe; in early modernism chivalry becomes courtesy, shrinking the military role to personal combat: "Thus, around the middle of the sixteenth century the new sociopolitical situation forced a major shift in the self-image of the nobleman/gentleman.

---

<sup>1</sup>Butler University, U.S.A. E-mail: [wwalsh@butler.edu](mailto:wwalsh@butler.edu)

The ideals of courtliness and chivalry underwent a momentous reduction that centered the new idea of nobility on personal 'honor,' with an accent on the duel as the definitive test of truth and merit. . . . [resulting in] the key principle that honor supersedes all other values, including loyalty to the prince and the laws of the country." The knightly heritage "was adapted to a theatrical show of Castiglionesque gracefulness as the foundation of a new nobility, whose chief function was to serve the prince in his public display of splendor."<sup>i</sup>The age romanticizes confrontation itself as personal integrity in the face of opposition from church and state;<sup>ii</sup> it is about the individual's honor and its defense, a still powerful cultural myth of self-assertion. As today, there is a certain theatricality to confrontation, a self-conscious maleness expressed as power.<sup>iii</sup>

The duel is not Hamlet's first choice. Opportunities for the chivalric challenge appear for Hamlet, but he ignores them. He distrusts violence and pursues moral autonomy independent of the formal duel. Only at the end does he embrace the sword as resolution; action becomes manly and inaction dishonorable. The failure to challenge indicates his rejection of traditional male values, but his own autonomous moral responsibility ("Whether 'tis nobler" [3.1.56])<sup>iv</sup> will fail him as well. In a complex state of mind, Hamlet finds serenity in a conventional attitude about the duel, that its outcome manifests God's justice. I propose that Hamlet substitutes his will for God's, claiming the agency of Providence as he strikes down those who beset him. Hamlet's security and fatalism have been embraced by critics, but I find them tragic. Hamlet's complacent fatalism is self-constructed as he enacts the Providence he claims to trust.

Condemned by both church and state (Laertes' "both the worlds I give to negligence" [4.5.135]), the honor duel nonetheless rose in popularity in England in the later sixteenth century, coinciding with the advent of the rapier (and usually dagger) replacing the broadsword and buckler. The lightweight rapier was a thrusting weapon and, as it turns out, much more lethal than the sword: "The art of fencing . . . was a skill devised solely for the efficient killing of a man in a private quarrel," and one asset of the rapier was that it was a portable weapon that could be worn at all times.<sup>v</sup>It was an open carry society. Might society have been ambivalent?

Early modern culture did seek to control male violence and the duel for both moral and political reasons. The ethical issues for the church involve taking life, usurping God's prerogatives of life and death. Politically, Lawrence Stone places the duel in the context of the Tudor drive to centralize power and monopolize violence for the early modern state. The private violence of the duel was most difficult for the state to contain: "The traditional ambition of the propertied classes to demonstrate their personal courage and to avenge any disparagement of their virtue or their honour was given an outlet which at last affected no one but themselves."<sup>vi</sup> Stone is dismissive of such manliness, but the age saw significant bloodshed and eventually James I made serious efforts to contain the practice.<sup>vii</sup> Jennifer Low focuses on the masculinity issue. She argues that the honor duel was the touchstone of aristocratic masculinity and class a crucial marker for it. Low too places the duel in the context of early modern humanistic self-fashioning. The early modern duel sanctions ritual violence as a quest for "honor." The duel could be fought for apparently trivial causes because it is the aristocracy defining itself—as male: The duel "embodied a masculine code that shored up the faltering sense of masculinity among young male aristocrats and members of the gentry." Low emphasizes the sense of individual heroism the duel represented for the aristocrat.<sup>viii</sup>

Despite social and religious disapproval, we suppose that it was widely accepted in early modern times that personal honor may require personal action: Duelling was a daily reality for the Elizabethans. In the 1590s such English actors and playwrights as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Gabriel Spenser, John Day, and Henry Porter were involved in life-and-death duels that incurred a variety of legal penalties. Londoners enjoyed non-lethal prize-playings or fencing "performances," especially in theaters and inns in the districts outside the city limits and its regulations. But bloody swordplay was also a common occurrence in London as in most of Western Europe in the sixteenth century. Considered the "golden age of arms," this century "became the 'most quarrelsome' in history." Aylward observes that in 1586 Holinshed remarked that one rarely saw any Englishmen "'above eighteen or twenty years old'" without arms; men wore at least a dagger, and the nobility also carried swords or rapiers. Turner and Soper speculate that England, especially after 1603, probably resembled France with regard to mortality rates from duels; in France between 1590 and 1610, despite the illegality of dueling there, "one-third of the nobility—around 4000 men—were killed in private combats."<sup>ix</sup>

The youthful male aristocrat was easily slighted and responded to real or imagined offense with the challenge to combat. Fencing schools, lessons, books, and demonstrations become commonplace, often in theater settings, sometimes in other designated places in the city of London.<sup>x</sup>

But I question whether all of these encounters were duels or wanton violence. In the examples above, commonly cited as evidence that the duel was everywhere and more or less acceptable in the age,<sup>xi</sup> the idea of honor duel seems far-fetched. It is certainly true that “Although dueling is primarily a gentle phenomenon (ironically), the easy intercourse between gentlemen and other types in London disseminated once-exclusive cultural practices.”<sup>xii</sup> But are these duels? The last four men mentioned were pairs who fought each other (Spencer and Porter dying)—and the Ben Jonson event was a brawl. In his biography of Jonson, David Riggs makes the essential point: “But the idea of a ‘duel’ between a bricklayer and an actor, neither of whom was entitled to bear arms, is a contradiction in terms.” Jonson escaped the death penalty only by pleading the benefit of clergy. At that the court confiscated his property and had his thumb branded with a T for Tyburn where he would have been hanged (so that he might not make the plea a second time).<sup>xiii</sup>

Park Honan, Marlowe’s biographer, agrees that “Dueling on the city’s outskirts had become fashionable . . . . It was, of course, a violent age—a playgoer was run through for disputing a theater’s gate fee. Tempers flared quickly and a scholar such as Sir William Sidney, aged 15, knifed his own schoolmaster. Ben Jonson killed Gabriel Spencer and is said to have put out a boy’s right eye. Moreover, prearranged duels were popular among well-heeled males, who sometimes died to prove how far they were from being ruffians. Fighting was a badge of gentility, a proof of courage, *virtu*, and the passionate heart; and there were locales for duels.” In one such locale, Marlowe met one William Bradley to fight apparently over a complex debt/loyalty-to-friends situation. Thomas Watson, the friend, then appears and asks Marlowe if he might step in and take over. It is Watson who kills Bradley, but in the end both Watson and Marlowe wait to be arrested for murder. Both men are eventually exonerated from guilt in the affair, but Marlowe is heavily fined and Watson needs a royal pardon.<sup>xiv</sup>

It is hard to tell “honorable” dueling from brawling. Honan undercuts some of this violent inclination of the age with the irony of men fighting not to be thought ruffians; he adds “that dueling had become a matter of show, a figment of make-believe; the comic actor Tarleton had been a master of fence [an official title].”<sup>xv</sup> Some of this ritual combat is heroic theater, enacting the age’s patriarchal values: manliness, honor, justice. Just about any male could play the game, apparently, whatever the rules about formal honor of place. In effect the duel can become cultural coin to excuse and justify violence for personal purpose. The duel’s manliness was pervasive, but hardly wholly honorable.

Approval of male violence is not automatic in the theater. Scholars agree that Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights typically mock the duel, perhaps because aristocratic honor is foreign to them. The playwrights are often skeptical about the idea of aristocratic masculinity that underlies the duel. Morsberger believes that “few formal duels were presented on stage doubtless because of the opposition that the authorities raised to dueling . . . .”<sup>xvi</sup> For him Shakespeare consistently ridiculed the formal duel of honor, most particularly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*.<sup>xvii</sup> Holmer shows the tragic potential of male violence in *Romeo and Juliet* as well as the comic version in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. Morsberger agrees that in *Romeo and Juliet* “hot-headed swordplay precipitates the tragedy.”<sup>xviii</sup> The comedies satirize the male folly of such violence. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, Demetrius and Lysander arrange to duel to win Helena. That Helena might be a person in her own right does not seem to penetrate their consciousness; she is certainly not prepared to embrace the winner. The duels are humorous for their foolish maleness, and the tragic potential seems to be part of the joke: Are you men stupid?

Shakespeare allows us to be skeptical of any specific “duel”: “It is therefore necessary to differentiate between the impromptu fight and the formal prearranged duel to which both parties consented. The duel had rules, ethics, and science of which one must have some knowledge to understand those elements of the Elizabethan drama which pertain to it.”<sup>xix</sup> I will return to the honor/ethics issue, but I want to do it in considering *Hamlet* and a Renaissance text on duels.

For dueling orthodoxy, I turn to the period. Only three manuals on fencing/dueling in English from the end of 16th century are extant, the most important of which is *Vincenzio Saviolo his Practice* published in 1595. Joan Ozark Holmer makes a convincing case for Shakespeare’s use of Saviolo for *Romeo and Juliet* both for its fencing rhetoric and Shakespeare’s “careful articulation of the ethic informing the truly honorable duello [Saviolo’s word].”

Holmer uses Saviolo as a moral compass for the behavior of Tybalt, Mercutio, and Romeo to highlight the tragic cycle of male violence excused by the participants as defending their honor.<sup>xx</sup> Saviolo himself calls this rationalization a “vulgare opinion” and does not support such action. The text’s modern editor, James L. Jackson, informs us that “The Saviolo volume is in two parts, the first a valuable manual on fencing with the rapier and the rapier-and-dagger; the latter half of his volume, ‘Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels,’ is a translation of an older, standard Italian volume on the duello.”<sup>xxi</sup> Today the second book might have been called Rules for Duels. It is not about technique (as are the other texts) but rather the ethos of honorable combat. It opens with a lengthy section on the chivalric challenge, my watershed issue for *Hamlet*.

The simple part is the overt ritual. One is obligated to charge the accused with a specific offense. One knight accuses another of an offense. The accused replies, “Thou liest,” and the game is on. This phrase is called “giving the lie” (Touchstone has fun with the lie in *AYLI* 5.4 for which this book is cited as an analogue in the Riverside edition). It is technically the lie accusation that the first party now challenges (and thus becomes the official challenger). The defender has the choice of arms and time of combat.<sup>xxii</sup>

Twice Hamlet finds himself in challenge situations, but the challenge ethos seems completely irrelevant to him in the middle of the play. And it is this irrelevance that offers some insight into the moments. In 3.3, the prayer scene, Hamlet does not even consider the formal challenge. Then in 3.4, the closet scene, Hamlet is all draw and thrust, killing Polonius without confronting him. There is actually an idealistic view of the duel in Saviolo, perfectly consistent with early modern Christian values and it is suggestive for Hamlet.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is a hybrid of the judicial duel and the honor duel, which Morsberger believes (unlike most critics) “carried over from the judicial duel the theory that one would triumph not through skill but by the justice of his cause.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Saviolo agrees and stresses that for the morality of the duello one’s motive must be pure.

Violence for personal revenge is simply wrong, whatever the vulgar, like Laertes, might think. Still, it is not the violence that is wrong, but the motive, though for Saviolo violence is always a last resort. Personal honor is subordinate, by its very purpose, to the upholding the Christian social order. The knight: “will doe anything rather then take weapons in injustice: . . . he will not be brought to take weapons but for a just and lawfull occasion: and in summe, [in an unjust cause, not to fight] is the testimonie of sinceritie and true faithfulness . . . hee who like a man governing himselfe by reason like a Knight, taketh justice for his guide, and like a Christian observeth the true law. . . .but that the choosing rather to fight wrongfully, then satisfie by reason, is judged beastlynes of every man of understanding.”<sup>xxv</sup> The true chivalric knight is deeply devoted to Christian justice and maintaining social order. These assertions are repeated endlessly in the volume: reason must guide action; honor is subsumed into justice which is the only legitimate goal of knightly action; providence will guide the outcome; the duello is a legal process of justice sought only when civil redress is unavailable. There is nothing here to prevent Hamlet from taking action, and several scholars justify Hamlet’s revenge on the basis of achieving public good (see below).

Motive, however, is a complex issue for Hamlet. Just as for Hamlet himself, no value is more important to Saviolo than reason. In a dozen places he emphasizes that the gentleman is a man of reason and that the duello is not about the honor of chivalry but only for the sifting out of truth.<sup>xxvi</sup> The problem here is that emotion may taint one’s chivalric motives—to the extent of losing a just confrontation: “They that maintaine any quarrell, use most commonly to undertake the combate with such intent, that howbeit the cause of their quarrell be just, yet they combate not justly, that is, not in respect onley of justice and equitie, but either for hatred, or for desire of revenge, or for some other particular affection: whence it commeth to passe, that many howbeit they have the right on their sides, yet come to be overthrown: For that God whose eyes are fixed even on the most secret and inner thoughts of our harts, and ever punisheth the evil intent of men, both in just and unjust causes, reserveth his just chastisements against all offenders, untill such times as his incomprehensible judgement findeth to be most fit and serving to his purpose.” And again: “Wherefore, no man ought to presume to punish another, by the confidence and trust which heereposeth in his owne valour, but in judgement and triall of armes, everyone ought to present himselfe before the sight of God, as an instrument which his eternallmajestie hath to woorke with, in the execution of justice, and demonstration of his judgement.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The truth for Saviolo is that personal honor is secondary to the pursuit of justice; one must be the instrument of God’s justice. It is a role Hamlet embraces—perhaps too presumptuously, for it dissipates the need for personal moral responsibility, the loss of which is the root of Hamlet’s tragedy for me.

While the duello is everywhere debased in practice as a test of courage and manhood, for Saviolo it is an effort to support the divine will with justice when the civil authorities are unable to do so. Being told “Thou Liest” does not mean that the duel is one’s only choice: “we doe not say therefore that is to be understoode, that presently for the lye a man should runne to his weapon: for the triall of the sworde being doubtful, and the civilecertaine, the civile is that way by which every man of reckoning and reputation ought to justifiehimselfe . . . . But I see amongst Gentlemen to be noted such an abuse that they thinke themselves to have committed villainye, to attempt any other meanes than by the sworde: . . . thecivileprofe is the profe of reason, & fighting but the profe of force: . . . they would wel consider that it is no lesse a parte of a Cavalier to know, to put up well his sworde, then well to drawe it out.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Hamlet puts up his sword in the prayer scene; we shall examine his reasoning.

In two of the three passages above Saviolo warns the cavalier not to rely overmuch on providence: “for the triall of the sworde [is] doubtful, and the civilecertaine.” Nonetheless one must place himself in God’s hands: “Wherfore, no man ought to presume to punish another, by the confidence and trust which heereposeth in his ownevalour, but in judgement and triall of armes, everyone ought to present himselfe before the sight of God, as an instrument which his eternallmajestie hath to woorke with, in the execution of justice, and demonstration of his judgement.” That Hamlet does so place himself is widely recognized. In Act 5, he returns to Elsinore, identifying himself completely as an instrument of God’s justice; as Frank Kermode puts it: “Yet on his return, as everybody notices, his mood is different . . . What Hamlet has discovered is simply that ‘there’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough hew them how we will’ (V.ii.10-11). He does not have to decide whether or not to be a scourge,” alluding to Hamlet’s speech after killing Polonius.<sup>xxix</sup> He does not have to decide whether to be God’s instrument because, having killed Polonius, he just must be; “Hamlet does it not” (5.2.236), he explains to Laertes later. Hamlet is far more self-assured about this role than Saviolo, who warns of presumption. For me the instrumental role is of a piece with the acceptance of the sword as resolution. Both attitudes abandon personal moral responsibility and introspection in favor of violence. This seems to be the import of the “How all occasions” soliloquy where Hamlet turns from introspection to external models of behavior, based on honor. The values turn from personal to social, as Hamlet seeks to emulate Fortinbras, whom I assume to be making his case to succeed his uncle in Norway (4.4.32-66).

My case is that what Hamlet gets from the culture in general and the duel tradition in particular is belief in his providential role. Ideally the duel is the active pursuit of God’s justice, but even here there is risk that one’s efforts may be unworthy, as Saviolo suggests above in the failure of a just cause tainted by personal emotion. Emotion runs deep in Hamlet and influences whatever abstract sense of justice he might envision. In appropriating the providential justification for his behavior, Hamlet is, I believe, playing God. It is not that providence constructs Hamlet but Hamlet providence: As I will, God wills. By claiming to be in God’s hands, Hamlet can abdicate moral responsibility. It is just this failure that the state emphasizes: “*When passion leads the line, we may observe every particular man almost to take upon himself to be a god, and the judge, and a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil* (my emphasis). . . . Who is in any sort offended and crossed, thatseeketh not revenge? . . . Beloved, what high presumption is it and boldness, that for every slight affront and idle word the king must have a subject, or two, ravished from him? . . . [God appoints kings so that] every man might not be the judge and revenger of his own grief, and that wrath and passion might not take the place of law.”<sup>xxx</sup> It is to prevent such presumption that Saviolo undertakes his treatise: Men do not control what “by the eye of reasonhee might finde controllable and blameworthy in his disordered affections . . . . But sithence it is a thing common in experience, and usually seene, that through want of government in some persons (who giving themselves to the ful current of their disposition, *making their wil their God, and their hand their lawe*[my emphasis]) matters are carried in a contrarye course: it is necessarye that something be written of this action, even as muche as shall bee consonant to reason and judgemente.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

State control of violence is just to prevent individuals playing God. The danger of violence is the presumption of divine prerogative. The prayer scene, 3.3, is curious because Shakespeare deliberately breaks the line of action from Hamlet’s readiness for “hot blood” (3.2.390) to the stabbing of Polonius (3.4). I believe the scene reinforces Hamlet’s noble character in the moment he begins to diminish it. As reflected in Laertes, Hamlet passes through deep grief to moral blindness, violence, and death. Hamlet discovers Claudius praying and draws his sword to kill him then and there; it is an opportunity for revenge/manly action which Hamlet chooses to forego. He has just had his uncle’s guilt confirmed at the Mousetrap play and has claimed that he is at last ready for action, but he does not act.

In his sixth soliloquy Hamlet decides that he must not kill Claudius at prayer, for the king might then go to heaven. Claudius took his brother in the midst of life with his final "audit" (3.3.82) in question. Hamlet chooses inaction over action; the moment becomes a major turning point for Hamlet's values, just as killing Polonius will turn the plot toward its tragic end.

This desire for revenge not only on Claudius' body, but also on his soul, prompted Eleanor Prosser to begin her investigation of the ethics of revenge in Renaissance drama, where she found "not one example of a noble revenger who sought the damnation of his victim, not one example of a play in which revenge was clearly portrayed as a moral duty." Rather than excuse this awful motive as a convention of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Prosser suggests that we accept our "contemporary moral response" of dismay.<sup>xxxii</sup> But it is only in the twentieth century that the revenge imperative appears ambiguous, Paul N. Siegal argues in his review essay on the issue: "For more than two centuries critics of Hamlet were in agreement that Hamlet is morally obligated to take revenge on Claudius."<sup>xxxiii</sup> It is the word "morally" that I question, as surely Saviolo would; in general the duel is about "courage, *virtu*, and the passionate heart," as Honan, says.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The standards for personal moral violence are very difficult; Laertes for example makes no pretense that his revenge is morally or socially acceptable ("both the worlds I give to negligence" [4.5.135]). The most convincing defenses of ethical revenge rest on the same providential case Saviolo makes, particularly in the face of corruption in the state. R. M. Frye argues: "the normal counsel is personal forbearance in the face of conflict with authority, but in the case of pursuing the public good, there may be moral obligation to act. A tyrant may justifiably be destroyed to restore divinely ordained order." But to kill Claudius at this moment would reduce Hamlet to a "simple thug."<sup>xxxv</sup> For Fredson Bowers, Hamlet's goal should be to act as God's minister, doing God's work in the world, and "God will see to it that a proper opportunity is offered in some way that will keep him clear from crime, one which will preserve him to initiate a good rule in Denmark."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Hamlet does not wait for God to show him the way but presumes to make his own way. There is no overt evidence that Hamlet is seeking the public weal.

Of course the moment may also be about character. Coleridge supposes that the hesitation is "not from cowardice, for [Hamlet] is made one of the bravest of his time . . . but merely from that aversion to action, which prevails among such as have a world in themselves . . . . Shakespeare wished to impress on us the truth that action is the chief end of existence--that no faculties of intellect, however brilliant, can be considered valuable, or otherwise than as misfortune, if they withdraw us from or render us repugnant to action."<sup>xxxvii</sup> It is true enough that Hamlet's justification for not acting seems contrived—he would be doing Claudius a favor by killing him, thus sending him to heaven.

What puzzles me even more is that the action is also unmanly: Bradley asks the Saviolo question, "Can it be right to do it, or noble to kill a defenseless man?"<sup>xxxviii</sup> Or as Brucher observes: Shocked as we are to hear Hamlet senior describe the poison coursing through his body, we "desire to see the swift extermination of the murderer. Yet to see Hamlet stab a praying man in the back would be appalling."<sup>xxxix</sup> But to imagine Hamlet calling out Claudius and challenging him to a duel is almost beyond imagination. Why? From Saviolo's point of view, Hamlet is certainly aware that he is not free from personal emotion, simply seeking to administer providential justice, though in an odd twist he reinvents that role. Brucher argues that in the end Shakespeare courts ambivalence about the hero's actions. Shakespeare problematizes dramatic violence, not letting us enjoy the fantasy of revenge nor escape the brutal moral failure of mimetic bloodshed: "In part, Hamlet builds on a simple but powerful conflict produced in the audience between desire for strong action and revulsion from violence . . . . On one level at least, the power of the play derives from the way Hamlet's experience forces the audience to confront the squalor of violence, which becomes increasingly real and painful as the play progresses. Rather than indulging an audience's fantasies about justice and heroic action, *Hamlet* offers and then denies the popular ways of resolving the conflicts inherent in 'Murder most foul, as in the best it is.'"<sup>xl</sup>

The prayer scene is certainly about something. I argue that Hamlet suffers physical and moral paralysis: both the choices are bad. If he stabs Claudius in the back, he is as cowardly as Claudius; if he challenges Claudius in his current overwrought state, he is a version of Laertes with his soul at risk. The duel is fantasy maleness which Hamlet has always been reluctant to pursue. But if he does nothing, that is also failure. As much as Hamlet is temporizing, I want to accept the speech as indicative of Hamlet's disorientation.

Confronting the reality of “hot blood,” Hamlet is overwhelmed. He makes up a role for himself in which he can play providence, punisher of evil, disposer of souls—and pretend that inaction is action, beginning the abdication of responsibility that alters his character. This decision opens the door to violent events Claudius will foster and even to Polonius’s victimization as Claudius’s surrogate. It is Hamlet who constructs providence here, not providence Hamlet. Here his desperation for right behavior diminishes him. Ironically, inaction will become a means to agency for Hamlet. Moments later Hamlet kills Polonius without a thought. It is an act of anger and frustration, unjustifiable and unmanly: “And sometimes men . . . suffer themselves to bee carried awaie and overmastered too much with choler and rage . . . takeheed that you suffer not yourselfe to bee blinded and carried awaie with rage and furie.”<sup>xii</sup> It is a strangely antiseptic moment with his victim unseen, the “hot blood” invisible. But Hamlet finds solace again in enacting God’s justice: “For this same lord,/ I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so/ To punish me with this, and this with me,/ That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.172-75). Hamlet repents here and goes on to say that he expects to pay for this deed (“I will bestow him, will answer well/ The death I gave him,” 176-77). When Hamlet now invokes divine agency as his role, it rings hollow (God made me do it), reflecting Hamlet’s sense of guilt, of failure, and divesting himself of moral responsibility, the core greatness that has sustained our admiration and sympathy.

The final moments are about manliness expressed as violence willed by God. It has been Hamlet’s strength that he sought the “nobler” action, but that hope is subsumed into the quest for honorable action and “greatness.” On his way to England Hamlet learns of “a delicate and tender prince” (4.4.48), like himself, proving his character and potential leadership: “Rightly to be *great*/ Is not to stir without *great* argument,/ But *greatly* to find quarrel in a straw / When honor’s at the stake” (4.4.53-56; my emphasis). Greatness appears to require action rather than thought; it is no longer simply moral character, but the greatness of a public leadership role. Hamlet will return to England claiming to be “Hamlet the Dane” (5.1.258). That role must reinforce his divine sponsorship, for “such divinity doth hedge a king” (4.5.124). Hamlet is changing, I think tragically.

On his return from his excellent adventure Hamlet appears at peace “as everyone has seen.” This is, ironically, a peace of moral rectitude based on a sense that providence will manage affairs to his satisfaction. While “. . . nothing in the play prepares us for a religious conversion, yet Elizabethan pietists would not have been mystified for a moment,” argues Peter Iver Kaufman. Hamlet’s progress toward faith in providence, the ultimate assurance of one’s salvation, follows the pattern of the Calvinist’s doubt to faith, in Hamlet’s terms, from “rage to readiness.”<sup>xiii</sup> Kaufman argues only for analogous behavior, asking us to accept Hamlet’s faith as authentic. My reservations concern the convenience of this faith for a man who has murdered. It is likely that the human sense of providence is always self-constructed to justify events in the world in a way acceptable to one’s sense of self. As Hamlet reports on his journey to England, he claims “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). In a restlessness, he stole the commission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and discovered his death warrant. He is shocked, but writes a new commission asking that his “friends” be put to death, “Not shriving time allowed” (5.2.47), his intention to damn surfacing again. The new commission was sealed with a signet ring in his purse, “for even in that was heaven ordinant” (5.2.48), for carrying a memento of his father was the work of God. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like Polonius, busy themselves with Hamlet’s affairs and “did make love to this employment” (5.2.57). If one is God, death and damnation are within one’s purview.

Horatio seems shocked at this news and turns the conversation to Claudius, against whom Hamlet says he is now ready to act:

He that kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,  
 Popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes,  
 Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
 And with such coz’nage—is’t not perfect conscience  
 To quit him with this arm? And is’t not to be damn’d  
 To let this canker of our nature come  
 In further evil?

(5.2.64-70)



Killing Claudius is perfect conscience, but Hamlet adds in his own way, that not killing him would be damnable. This is Hamlet's frequent rhetoric of alternatives, here not opening a question, but closing it. Nonetheless, Hamlet dithers as events come to him. He has a bad feeling about the proposed fencing match, but dismisses the misgivings as "such a kind of gain-giving, as would perhaps trouble a woman" (5.2.215-16). It is time to be male. He refuses to back away from the match because "we [the royal plural!] defy augury. There is 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" (5.2.219-22). The words, alternatives again, are perfect acquiescence to events, apparently as divinely willed. It is difficult for me to accept the stage littered with corpses as manifesting God's will.

In the end there is a swordfight. A good deal has been written about it, much of it on how the exchange of rapiers might be managed with authenticity.<sup>xliii</sup> As a duel, critics suggest that it shows Hamlet's manly character. For Jackson, "The match in Hamlet not only carries out the plotlines to the play's conclusions but also vividly demonstrates Hamlet's strength of character once the treachery is revealed."<sup>xliv</sup> For Morsberger "In Hamlet the duel is a very theatrically effective way to resolve the action of the play, but it is more than that. It illustrates the nobility and generosity of Hamlet's character. Laertes' energetic action previously had been a foil to Hamlet's procrastination, but in the fencing scene the genuine nobility of Hamlet's soul shames the treachery of Laertes. The duel also gives Hamlet a chance to redeem himself from his delay; we finally see him in action, fighting instead of talking and planning."<sup>xlv</sup> Low finds the duel as duel ambiguous, unable through its ritualistic power to resolve Hamlet's issues. The end is a bloodbath and Horatio must still finish Hamlet's story.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The scene is usually called a duel, but it seems to me a fencing match become a brawl. At no time do both men have equal weapons, there has been no challenge, and no overt cause is at stake. Hamlet's actions against Laertes are certainly self-defense, but we are hardly in the context of a fair fight. One man poisons another and that man poisons in turn. There is no honor and there are no winners. Like Low, I do not see that the ritualistic power of the duel realized. The rationale is that the ritual will prove character and resolve conflict—and for Saviolo achieve moral justice. As a ritual, the duel has a beginning, a middle, and an end—a winner and a loser, resolution. But here there are only losers, physically and morally. The swordfight thus reflects the tragedy itself in destruction and loss: mindless, chaotic, deadly.

"What a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.150). Hamlet's descent into his own world begins in the prayer scene. He temporizes over his inaction in the only way that he can remain blameless. At the same time, presuming to enact the divine will is fundamentally blameworthy. As a model of vengeance, the duel ethos tries to justify violence as divine justice; it is the position Hamlet chooses for himself when his inaction /action (3.3, 3.4) make no sense. Embracing violence as the alternative to reason destroys Hamlet. When he chooses "to take arms against a sea of troubles," (3.1.58) events prove deadly for everyone. I do not mean that we lose sympathy for Hamlet who faces an insoluble moral dilemma of enacting the deed he wishes to punish. It is Shakespeare's great achievement that he creates tragedy, not from a weakness, but from the character's greatness. Hamlet's moral thoughtfulness becomes his downfall, creating the desperation that inexorably ends in death, his fall from greatness.

1. Aldo D. Scaglione, *Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottoman Germany to the Italian Renaissance* (University of California Press, 1991), 282-83, 285, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft4j49p00c/>

2. Jennifer A. Low, *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 18-24; Sydney Anglo, introduction to *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, ed. Sidney Anglo (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1990), xi-xvi.

3. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 18; Scaglione, *Knights at Court*, 280.

4. Citations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G Blakemore Evans et al. 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

5. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 245; Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 44-46; Turner and Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, 3; Sydney Anglo, "How to Kill a Man at Your Ease: Fencing Books and the Duelling (sic) Ethic," in *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, ed. Sidney Anglo (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1990), 5-6, 11; the specific quote is Anglo's.

The duel has some socio-political forms: the state duel between monarchs (the elder Hamlet and Fortinbras) and the trial by combat when the combatants agree to let God adjudicate their cause (Bullingbrook and Mowbray). "The last trial by combat held in England was in 1571; at this occasion both parties defaulted." The duel of honor, however, has no social value or role, but is a purely personal response to a perceived slight: Robert E. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage. Jacobean Drama Studies*, 37, ed. James Hogg. Salzburg, Austria: University of Salzburg 1974, 32-34. He calls the socio-political forms the state duel and the political duel. See Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 12-17, for parallel categories. See also Anthony Turner and Tony Soper,

*Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), xxii. *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), xxii.

6. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 239, 244; see also Anglo, "How to Kill a Man at Your Ease," 1-12, and introduction: "the transmutation of knight into courtier or gentleman is one of the central problems for the student of chivalry in the Renaissance," xi. The medieval knight had no place in early modern military strategy. And "More paradoxical was the development of the personal duel: for this sanguinary social habit, while standing at the opposite extreme in ferocity and peril, was similarly irrelevant to modern military needs. Here there still flourished the old individualism, recklessness, and even a kind of prowess . . . The duelling craze was chivalric honour gone rotten," xiii. And Anglo, "How to Kill a Man at Your Ease," again: "the duel's purpose is to kill: And it is in this duelling ethic and the duelling craze that we see the most dramatic transformation of chivalry in the Renaissance: with courage, honor, and individual deeds of arms metamorphosed into bullying, dishonor and psychopathological egoism," 12.

7. V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): In 1615 the courts "unanimously condemned any idea that the private duel in any person whatsoever had any ground of honor," 82-83. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, asserts that along with the puritan moralists and James I, "Intellectual opinion in England ranging from Sir Walter Raleigh to Sir Francis Bacon was equally critical of the dueling code," 246.

8. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 5; heroism is the subject of chapter 1. Low argues that even aristocratic male body language derived from rapier exercises, defining and extending one's personal space, chapter 2.

9. Joan Ozark Holmer, "'Draw if you be men': Saviolo's Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1994), 178. The passage about armed men on the streets is not from Holinshed, but from William Harrison, *Elizabethan England* (London and Felling-on-Tyne, 1577-1587), 227; quoted in Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 3. Morsberger also suggests that "the duel in England never attained the popularity that it had in France," 41.

10. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 58-61.

11. Turner and Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, 19, 53; Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, xx; Holmer, "'Draw if you be men,'" above.

12. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 3.

13. David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 49-50, 53.

14. Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy* (Oxford UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 223-25; Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, states that it was Spencer who put out the boy's eye, 69.

15. Honan, *Christopher Marlowe*, 224.

16. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 4; Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 31.

17. On *TN*, see Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 16-17, 52-56, 92-95; on *MWW*, 28-29; ". . . Shakespeare satirized the sword and buckler play of Sampson and Gregory; and it is probable that in *Romeo and Juliet* he was attacking the unbridled use of swordplay in general, for it is that which helps bring about the tragedy," 30; see also "hot-tempered youths who would as soon fight as breathe. . . ," 44. On *Romeo and Juliet*, see also Turner and Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, 54.

18. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 48.

19. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 31

20. Joan Ozark Holmer, "'Draw if you be men,'" 163.

21. James L. Jackson, introduction to *Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*, ed. James L. Jackson (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1972), v; The citations are from this edition; the Saviolo phrase is on 454. This second volume, *Of Honour and Honourable Quarrels*, is largely a translation of an earlier Italian text, Girolamo Muzio's *Il Duello*, first published in Venice in 1550. See Ruth Kelso, "Saviolo and His Practice," *Modern Language Notes* 39 (1924), 33-35. See J. D. Aylward, *The English Master of Arms from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1956), for contemporary views of Saviolo who cut an impressive figure on the London scene, 54-60. "Shakespeare is said to have learned to fence at Blackfriars, most probably under the instructions of Vincentio Saviolo, who had arrived in London when the young playwright was 26." Richard Cohen, "'Swear by My Sword,'" *Royal Shakespeare Company Program Notes, Hamlet*, 2013, 5.

22. Laertes, the man of honor, not surprisingly, conforms to the dueling ritual. In 4.5 Laertes enters the great hall at Elsinore after raising an army, overwhelming the king's forces, and seizing Elsinore itself, where he issues a challenge to gain revenge for his father's death: "O thou vile king,/ Give me my father" (4.5.116-17). It is perfectly acceptable for an accused to deny the charge and explain the accuser's error, as Claudius does. Laertes acknowledges the culture's social and religious reservations about his action: "I dare damnation. To this point I stand/ That both the worlds I give to negligence,/ Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd/ Most thoroughly for my father" (4.5.134-37). C.B. Watson, *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960, tells us that "the sentiment of honor was regarded by the men of the Renaissance as something innate, an instinct toward virtue and an almost instinctive shrinking from vice. In its stress on self-reliance, it is distinct from

Christian conscience, since it is not a God-given attribute but one which results primarily from an aristocratic lineage and from early training in the moral disciplines," 207. A gentleman always follows honor over the law, 209.

Laertes calls on the protocol of the challenge to arms again in 4.7 as Claudius begins to lay out his plot against Hamlet: "It warms the very sickness in my heart/ That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,/ 'Thus didst thou'" (4.7.55-57). While honor requires fair confrontation, a few lines later, in Claudius's perverse world, Laertes is willing to poison his sword tip in a fixed fight in order to get revenge. Laertes' honor quickly degenerates and opens up larger questions about manly violence: does anything go?

23. S. P. Zitner, "Hamlet, Duellist," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 39 (1969), 1-18, has in fact made this case in favor of Hamlet. For Zitner, Hamlet advances through the play from angry seeker of personal revenge to the final state of tranquility in which he enacts the will of providence.

24. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 35.

25. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 467-68. I have modernized punctuation and the u/v usage in the early modern texts.

26. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 353, 366-67, 376, 389, 399, 401, 424, 431, 451-52, 454, 460, 467.

27. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 381. From the church's perspective, the providential argument is nonsense: See John Reynolds, *The Triumphs of God's Revenge* (1621-1635): "But in the end, God, who would not give all the victory to one side, but will make both parties losers, to shew that hee is displeased with these their bloody actions, and uncharitable resolutions, which though Honour seeme to excuse, yet Religion cannot." Quoted in J. Clements, "Some Rapier Combats in Early 17th Century English Literature," (ARMA: The Association for Renaissance Martial Arts), <http://www.thearma.org/essays/EnglishLit.htm>.

28. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 366-67.

29. Frank Kermode, introduction, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1188.

30. William Dickinson, *The King's Right*, London, 1619; selection reprinted in Constance Jordan, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (2nd ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 205-6.

31. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 316.

32. Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1967), xii, 248-49; Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966; first published 1940), has argued as well that the path of revenge destroys the moral character of the revenger, 94-95.

33. Paul N. Siegal, "'Hamlet, Revenge!': The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism," *Shakespeare Survey* 45 (1993), 15.

34. Honan, *Christopher Marlowe*, 224.

35. Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: issues and responses in 1600*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 195.

36. Bowers, *Revenge Tragedy*, 87

37. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare; The Text of the Lectures of 1811-12*, ed. R. A. Foakes and John Payne Collier. Folger monographs on Tudor and Stuart civilization, no. 3. (Published for the Folger Shakespeare Library by the University Press of Virginia, 1971), 124, 128.

38. Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. (London: Macmillan, 1965. First published 1904), 123.

39. Richard T. Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*," *SEL* 21, no. 2 (1981), 258. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, accepts the speech as authentic: "He does not reject the treacherous stab in the back because it is an ignoble act, but because it punishes Claudius ineffectively," 122.

40. Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence," 270.

41. Saviolo, *Saviolo His Practice*, 238-39.

42. Peter Iver Kaufman, *Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1996), 129, 139.

43. See Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, on the staging of the scene, 96-107; see also Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 69-70, and James L. Jackson, "They Catch One Another's Rapiers': The Exchange of Weapons in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1990): 281-98.

44. Jackson, "Rapiers," 292.

45. Morsberger, *Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage*, 109.

46. Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 121-25.