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The Branches of an Act: Shakespeare's Hamlet Explains His Inaction

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ABSTRACT

In the "How all occasions … " soliloquy Hamlet expresses his own failure to understand why he has not fulfilled his promise to kill Claudius notwithstanding that he has the "cause, will, strength, and means to do't". The passage, occupying two and a half lines which begin and end with caesurae, consists entirely of 27–29 monosyllabic words, thus emphasizing its importance. This short essay analyses the speech in terms of the philosophical notion that action is the inevitable consequence of stimulus, intention, ability, and lack of hindrance, and, relying on the conventions applicable to soliloquies, argues that it reveals that Hamlet's inaction is the result of his fear of post-mortem torment.

KEYWORDS

Philosophy; akrasia; Hales v. Petit; soliloquy; monosylabic speech; afterlife

"an act hath three branches: it is to act, and to do, to perform" (*Hamlet* 5.1.11–12[1])

The First Gravedigger's garbling of what he conceives is "crowner's quest law" has long been understood as a parody of *Hales v. Petit*, 1 Plowden 253, 75 Eng. Rep. 387 (Common Bench, 1563). That was the opinion of Samuel Johnson's lawyer, Sir John Hawkins, and it has been a commonplace notion ever since it was first reported in the 1773 Johnson-Steevens edition of *Hamlet* (Burton 71). Counsel for the plaintiff in *Hales* argued that the act which caused the suicide's death preceded his demise, so he could not have been *felo de se*:

> [T]he act consists of three parts. The first is the imagination, which is a reflection or meditation of the mind, whether or no it is convenient for him to destroy himself, and what way it can be done. The second is the resolution, which is a determination of the mind to destroy himself, and to do it in this or that particular way. The third is the perfection, which is the execution of what the mind has resolved to do. And this perfection consists of two parts, viz., the beginning and the end. The beginning is the doing of the act which causes the death, and the end is the death, which is only a sequel to the act. (1 Plowden at 259; 75 Eng. Rep. at 397)

It is not my purpose to question the traditional view that the Gravedigger's speech is intended to ridicule that sophistry, although it is a stretch to suggest that counsel's contention represented the actual state of the law, even "crowner's quest law" (*Hamlet* 5.1.22), as the argument failed and the court (Lord Dyer) did not even deem it necessary to mention the alleged tripartite nature of an act: "the forfeiture here shall have relation to the time of the original offence committed which was the cause of the death, and that was the … throwing himself into the water, which was done in his life-time" (1 Plowden at 262, 75 Eng. Rep. at 401; see, also, e.g. Regnier 119–20, for an explanation of the decision).

I expect that Shakespeare did indeed intend some such satire of the plaintiff's counsel's sophistical argument in *Hales*, but I believe he had another, more thematic, purpose in mind as well. I suggest that the First Gravedigger's absurd use of synonyms to describe the "three branches" of an act might

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have reminded alert audience members of Hamlet's "How all occasions" soliloquy in act 4, scene 4,[2] in which he says that his failure to kill Claudius is as much a mystery to him as it has proved to be to sixteen generations of playgoers and critics:

> … Now whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on th'event –
> A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward – *I do not know*
> *Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do',*
> *Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means*
> *To do't*. Examples gross as earth exhort me. (4.4.J.30–37, italics added)

The two and a half italicized lines are, I think, the key to understanding the central mystery of the play. For starters, that independent clause (which can stand alone as a sentence) consists entirely of monosyllabic words, 26 of them (28, if we count "thing's" and "do't" as two each). It isn't easy to compose a meaningful sentence of that length entirely from monosyllabic words, especially in perfectly regular iambic pentameter. Try it.[3] In addition, the passage in question begins after a caesura and ends before another, thus requiring the actor to stop twice in mid-thought and then restart with a new idea, necessitating additional beats which tend to call attention to the importance of the speech by interrupting the flow of the metre. To achieve this effect, Shakespeare had to sandwich a related but different thought between the beginning of Hamlet's main observation and its crucial monosyllabic conclusion. Examples of rhetorical "sandwiching" appear elsewhere in *Hamlet*: e.g. 1.2.27–30 (Claudius); 1.2.143–51 (two instances in Hamlet's first soliloquy); 1.3.94–95 (characteristic of Polonius); 2.2.132–40 (same); *cf*. 4.5.67–71 (Ophelia in her madness). The rhetorical practice of inserting a new idea as a sort of apposition or aside within a different but related expression is not unusual in Shakespeare. See, for example, *Cymbeline* 1.1.4–7, containing a tangential thought within a parenthetical thought; *Pericles* Sc.18, ll.17–22; and *Henry VIII* 1.1.66–69.[4] This trope might actually be a hallmark of Shakespeare's style;[5] he made use of it throughout his career. For example, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Biron foreswears ostentatious figures of speech:

> I do foreswear them, and I here protest,
> By this white glove – How white the hand, God knows! –
> Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
> In russet yeas, and honest kersey noes. (5.2.410–13)[6]

(Ironically, Biron's vow to use only unadorned language is expressed in a regular Shakespearean sonnet.)

The nonlinear structure of the passage I focus on, with its two caesurae and its use of only monosyllabic words, strongly suggest that Shakespeare intended to give it special emphasis and make it actor-proof. As an experienced player himself, Shakespeare must have known that the speech could not be performed with meaning unless the actor paused before and after the monosyllabic passage and enunciated each word separately and clearly. It is very difficult to give due significance to a string of monosyllabic words while reciting them in a rush. Unfortunately, however, I have heard actors ignore Shakespeare's hint and throw the lines away, even changing the order of "cause … will … strength, and means". The apparently pedestrian nature of the lines might be the reason why actors fail to give weight to the lines and why the significance I attribute to them has not been observed before; they appear so ordinary as to be all but invisible. Marjorie Garber, for example, comments on "the single string of relentless monosyllables" in "To be or not to be", but she does not observe the more impressive string of monosyllables in "How all occasions" even though she quotes that very passage at length earlier on the same page (Garber 475). An actor also might pay little attention to the passage and not devote much effort to memorizing the sequence of cause, will, strength, and means if he believes it doesn't matter. In fact, the order is crucial.

What is so special about those two and a half lines that Shakespeare wanted his audience to note them particularly? The answer, I submit, lies in the philosophical idea which seems to underlie counsel's rejected argument in *Hales v. Petit*. That is the ancient notion in the debate about free will *vs*.

determinism and, more generally, the philosophy of action, which maintains that voluntary human action consists of three components: (1) the agent's belief in the existence of a compelling external stimulus, which produces (2) a volitional impetus which in turn inevitably generates (3) the appropriate action, provided, of course, that (4) performance or completion of the action is not hindered by external circumstances. A good summary of the idea can be found in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy:

> A person's doing of something intentionally, it may be argued, always results from that person's believing something, and her desiring something, which jointly constitute her having a reason to do the thing. The definition of action, then, may be part of a view according to which a certain sort of causal history distinguishes actions from other events. (Honderich 5)

Philosophers have expressed this notion in a variety of ways which, however, make the same essential argument. For example, David Hume said:

> It is universally allowed that matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it. … [A]ll mankind have ever allowed, without any doubt or hesitation, that these two circumstances take place in the voluntary actions of men, and in the operations of mind; it must follow, that all mankind have ever agreed in the doctrine of necessity … . (Hume 91–92)

As P.S. Wadia put it, "action must necessarily follow upon belief that we have overwhelming reasons for doing that action", unless performance is prevented by external circumstances (Wadia 232–33). Or, as Baron d'Holbach expressed it in 1770, action will inevitably flow from stimulus and volition, unless a different motivation supplants the first: An agent "acts necessarily … from the motive [which has] disposed his will. When he does not act according to this impulse, it is because there comes some new cause, some new motive, some new idea, which … gives him a new impulse" (d'Holbach 89–90).[7] Philosophically grounded readers will probably recognize these expressions as applications to the interior mental world of the notion of physical determinism first enunciated in the fifth century BCE by the atomist philosophers such as Democritus and Leucippus. The latter famously said that "everything is driven by necessity" resulting from the state of atoms and the void, which the atomists considered the sole components of the universe (Durant 74).

The application of deterministic philosophy to the question of voluntary action is at least as old as Plato's report of Socrates' dialogue with Protagoras, in which Socrates constructed the questionable paradox that no one could voluntarily act against his own better judgment (e.g. Plato, *Protagoras* 62 [358] ["no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil"]). Here Socrates seemed to deny the common experience of "weakness of will" (ἀκρασία [akrasia]), although he elsewhere allowed for the possibility that an agent might fail to do the right thing as a result of ignorance (e.g. Plato, *Laws* 670 [689]).[8] Aristotle took a different tack and sought to harmonize Socrates's position with reality by emphasizing the vagaries of perception (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1041–42; see, also, Aristotle, *On the Soul* 593–95). More contemporaneously with Shakespeare, Sir Francis Bacon expressed a deterministic view of actions in his *Advancement of Learning*, using language reminiscent of the unsuccessful argument in *Hales v. Petit* ("imagination ever precedeth voluntary motion") (Bacon 55).

Such rarefied thinking, while interesting, is not, however, essential to an understanding of Hamlet's expression, which reflects simple commonplace concepts. Shorn of philosophical flourishes, all we need to grasp is the idea that the confluence of motive, intention, physical ability and absence of hindrance is necessary, and also sufficient, condition for the completion of any act. To take a classic instance,[9] if we observe someone drink a glass of water, we can assume that she did so because she intended to – i.e. she wanted or "willed" that action – and we can further deduce that she reached that desire as a result of some stimulus; perhaps she was thirsty. A neurologist would attribute the chain of causation to the coordinated actions of the cerebellum and the frontal lobe's motor cortex (e.g. Ramnani; Ghez and Fahn). But regardless of whether volition is free, mechanistic or deterministic, an intention can be frustrated if something hinders the performance, say, in the example I gave, if someone knocks the glass away.

All that is needed to make Hamlet's "cause … will … strength … means" completely congruent with the deterministic idea and Hales's counsel's "imagination … resolution … act" formulation is to equate imagination with cause. Actually, even though a cause is external and belief is a function of the mind, that is not at all difficult: an external stimulus can be known to us only if it is perceived by our senses and it can motivate us only if we trust what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Interestingly, however, the notion that voluntary action is the result of an interior chain of causation intervening between exterior cause and exterior effect might be contradicted by recent discoveries in neurology: experiments employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to investigate the genesis of voluntary motion indicate that neural impulses initiating action may actually *precede* awareness of the conscious "decision" to take the action. A 2008 study found lags of as much as ten seconds (Chen et al.). William James anticipated something like this ("ideo-motor action") more than a century ago (e.g. James 790–94). The fMRI results have been replicated;[10] but as of this writing they still await physiological explanation (see, e.g. Bear ["the precise way in which the mind could do this is still not fully understood"]), and it is doubtful that many adherents of mind/body duality will revise their theories in order to accommodate coloured images of the brain reflecting responses to experimental stimuli; it is certain that sixteenth and seventeenth-century thinkers will not.

Of course, it is possible that Shakespeare did not have a formal philosophical idea in mind when he wrote the "How all occasions" soliloquy; for one thing, he might have come up with the notion on his own from common experience. But it seems improbable that Shakespeare would have listed the elements of an act in the precise order in which they appear in the soliloquy – stimulus / motive / belief / imagination (i.e. "cause"), intention / desire ("will"), ability to perform ("strength") and absence of external hindrance ("means") – unless he had that idea in mind, even if he had to think of it himself without the benefit of reading classical philosophy. A similar confluence of factors leading to and facilitating a homicide is listed by Lucianus, the murderer in "The Mousetrap": "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing, / Confederate season, else no creature seeing" (3.2.243–45). It has been suggested that this speech might be part of the "dozen or sixteen lines" inserted by Hamlet into "The Murder of Gonzago" (2.2.539–44) (Skinner 241–42). While Lucianus's language does not precisely match the expressions we have used to describe the four elements of a completed act (motive, volition, consequent activity, and absence of external hindrance), they are close enough to stand for the essential consecutive links in the chain of voluntary causation from origination to consummation. Since those four elements are sufficient conditions for the successful completion of any action, and since they coincide in his case, Hamlet is mystified by his failure to fulfil his promise to his father's ghost. He expects the confluence of those factors to result in the death of Claudius at his hands, and he cannot understand why it did not; in other words, he recognizes that he is in the grip of ἀκρασία and wonders why. As A.P. Rossiter put it, "Cause, will, strength, means: nothing is missing. Yet since the thing remains undone, some or all of these must be illusory" (Rossiter 177).

Of course, if we consider revenge to be immoral, then Hamlet is only pseudo-akratic, as he is not failing to do what is in fact best. However, as I discuss below, in the context of the play it is Hamlet's understanding that matters, and the overarching ethical question is immaterial to his internal conflict; or, if it is not, then it adds a complication which is beyond the scope of this essay.

To solve Hamlet's paradox and tease out a thematic function for the speech, let us now turn from philosophical musings to literary analysis: The principal convention of early modern soliloquies is that the character confiding in the audience must tell the truth, that is, he cannot misrepresent his state of mind. Thus, common definitions of the soliloquy describe it as "a speech by a solitary character on stage, in which he reveals his true feelings" (Perng 203). Shakespeare in particular used it as "a true indicator of the mind of his characters" (*Enc. Brit.*). This stage convention was so ingrained that Shakespeare was able to employ it as a dramatic element beyond its merely expository function: for example, he twice used it as a plot device in *All's Well that Ends Well*: (1) when, as a result of an unguarded soliloquy which was overheard by the Steward, the Countess of Roussillon

learns that Helena loves Bertram (1.3.103–117),[11] and (2) when the Dumaine brothers overhear Paroles's soliloquized acknowledgement of his cowardice (4.1.24 *et seq*.).

Of course, a soliloquizing character might be mistaken about the facts he describes as, for example, Othello, Macbeth and Leontes habitually are, but he cannot tell us he believes something unless he truly does. It does not appear that Shakespeare ever deviated from this convention; to do so would result in epistemological confusion which playgoers could not easily unravel. Applying this dramatic convention to the passage which I believe Shakespeare expected us to give special attention, we find that Hamlet tells us five things:

(1) He does not understand why he has not murdered Claudius. That is not surprising; the question has confounded auditors and critics for four centuries. But Hamlet's expressed lack of insight about his inaction is significant, as it signals an apparent change in his attitude: he previously offered excuses to explain his vacillation, such as that the ghost "may be" a devil sent to damn him (e.g. 2.2.600–605), and (as I shall elaborate later) that killing Claudius is tantamount to suicide (3.1.58 *et seq*. ["To be or not to be … "]), which he regards as a sin (1.2.131–32).[12]
(2) Hamlet believes he has a good reason to kill Claudius; that is, by some earlier point (perhaps the "Mousetrap" scene) he concluded that the ghost was *bona fide* and had made a legitimate demand for revenge. His unqualified declaration that he has "cause" to kill Claudius puts paid to the theories that Hamlet's vacillation is explained by his scepticism about the provenance of the ghost or his reluctance to accept the ghost's moral authority. Other passages in the play, such as earlier lines in "How all occasions" (4.4.J 47–48 ["I … | That have a father killed, a mother stained"]) and his later unequivocal declaration to Horatio that Claudius "hath killed my king and whored my mother" (5.2.65), also make it unlikely that Hamlet's lack of action was the result of doubt about the reliability of the ghost (see, also, Bradley 85–87). Those statements offer cumulative evidence supporting the sincerity of Hamlet's flat declaration that he has "cause" to kill the king. And, as for a possible ethical explanation for his withholding action, A.C. Bradley persuasively observed that Hamlet's reluctance to kill Claudius at prayer for fear that he would thereby send the king's soul to heaven seems inconsistent with the idea that he was forestalled by stirrings of conscience telling him that revenge is immoral (Bradley 87–88). As I shall shortly show, Hamlet's excuse for holding his hand in the chapel scene strikes a modern reader as a rationalization; but that does not deprive Bradley's observation of its force: the fact that a person rationalizes his action (or lack thereof) with an excuse that does not stand up to scrutiny doesn't mean that the reason he gives himself is not sincerely felt. Indeed, in Freudian terms, an excuse could not serve to defend the ego from the assault of the superego if the ego knows that the excuse is spurious.
(3) He has the will to kill the king, that is, he wants to do it. More about this later.
(4) He has the physical ability to accomplish the act. That is obvious and non-controversial.
(5) He is not prevented by external circumstances from doing the deed. At first blush this is problematical, as at the time of this speech Hamlet is under guard to board ship for England, having been given only temporary leave to be alone with his thoughts. The Arden3 editors observe, "[i]t is not clear why Hamlet, as he is being escorted out of the country, claims he has ample *strength and means* for his revenge" (Thompson and Taylor 1:370, italics in original). I think, however, that Hamlet was referring to conditions prior to his then situation, when he seems to have had unobstructed access to the king (see, also, Bradley 82–85). There were many scenes in which Hamlet was in proximity to Claudius and he seems to have been habitually armed, as he was when he encountered Claudius on the way to the interview in his mother's closet. That scene in particular (3.3.73–96), in which Hamlet finds himself alone with Claudius in private and "might do it pat", supplies an instance in which Hamlet surely had the opportunity if he was ready to take it. It seems all but certain that Shakespeare included the chapel scene, at least in part, to dramatize that fact. However, Hamlet failed to act and excused his failure by reasoning that the king was praying and, therefore, his soul would go to heaven. Any hearer who has

passing familiarity with the doctrine of penance would recognize Hamlet's rationalization as sophistry. Claudius himself provides the refutation:

> My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3.3.97–98)

One could quibble that Hamlet did not know that Claudius had not made a perfect act of contrition, but it must have been evident to him that, as the king acknowledges (3.3.51–56), Claudius was not about to relinquish his crown, his ambition, and his wife and, therefore, could not expect to be pardoned. Under the theological doctrine correctly expressed in Claudius's couplet, Hamlet should have known that the king's petitions to heaven were in vain. Henry V understood that clearly (*Henry V* 4.1.289–302).[13] But, as with so much else we are considering in this essay, it is Hamlet's actual state of mind, not a more considered or rational view, which matters.

Thus, in brief, Hamlet tells us, and we are bound to believe, that he had the inclination and opportunity to assassinate Claudius, and, as the philosophical theory discussed above postulates, intention and ability to perform should be enough to result in action. (In this formulation, motive [or "cause"] is conflated with intention [or "will"] to form "inclination", and absence of hindrance along with "strength" are both elements of "opportunity".) This idea has important consequences in the real world; for example, the common law allows circumstantial evidence of opportunity and inclination to stand as proof of an act where direct proof of the crucial fact is difficult to come by.[14]

The Chapel Scene shows Hamlet staying his hand when he has the perfect opportunity to keep his promise to the Ghost, even though he again credibly declares his eagerness to fulfil it, at least under the right circumstances. So what solves the mystery Hamlet propounds? Let's look more closely at the four elements: strength and means are straightforward and not subject to disputation. Cause, also, for the reasons I gave, cannot seriously be questioned: if Hamlet believes he had a good reason to kill the king (even if he is factually or ethically in error), that supplies the necessary precondition to action. This leaves "will". That word is more flexible, as it embraces more than one concept. It can mean "desire" or "intention", and that is what I think we are expected to understand Hamlet meant, for surely he did want Claudius dead, and by his hand (see, also, Nuttall 201). But "will" can also mean resolution, fortitude, etc., and that it seems Hamlet lacked. So, if we regard the term in its macho sense, Hamlet was wrong about having the necessary will. This conclusion does not mean that Shakespeare departed from the rule that a soliloquy cannot misrepresent the speaker's belief, as Hamlet honestly believed that he wished to kill Claudius (and we can accept that he really did want to); but he was mistaken as to the force of his will. Consider the adolescent boy who says he wants to invite a particular girl on a date; when asked why he doesn't simply do it, he says "I just can't". He has the desire, but is too shy or fearful of rejection to carry it out. In terms popularized by the contemporary American philosopher Harry Frankfurt, he lacks an "effective will [of] the second order" to achieve his "first order" wants (Frankfurt 13 *et seq.*). Frankfurt's idea, in essence, is that second order volition is an executive function that determines whether or not our first order desires are fulfilled: for example, an addict craves his drug of choice (first order will), but his "second order will" prefers that he remain sober; if the second order will prevails, it may be said to be "effective" (Frankfurt 13). In Hamlet's case, his sincere desire for the satisfaction of killing his father's murderer is overridden by his superior desire to remain alive and avoid the pangs of Hell.

Does all this mean that the answer to Hamlet's question about whether he is a coward is "Yes"? He tells us more than once that he suspects he is. The very passage from which this essay draws its impetus begins with the suggestion that Hamlet thinks that his inaction is mostly – about three quarters – attributable to cowardice. And, notably, in "Oh what a rogue … " he asks:

> … Am I a coward?
> Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
> Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
> Tweaks me by th' nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat

> As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
> Ha? 'Swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be
> But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
> I should 'a' fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal … (2.2.573–82)

Cowardice is also the theme of "To be or not to be" (3.1.58–90). That speech is most often understood as a contemplation of suicide. It makes more sense in the context of Hamlet's situation, however, if we regard it as his deliberation on the likely consequence to him of killing the king, which, indeed, would be a form of suicide, now commonly called "suicide by cop". Claudius was protected by Swiss Guards (4.5.95), whose reputation for loyalty, bravery, and effectiveness is legendary. By "tak[ing] arms" against Claudius, Hamlet would "end" the discontent which plagues him, both by fulfilling his promise to the Ghost and by losing his own life in the process, and such a death would not be in a state of grace. Something like this view was offered as early as Dr Johnson's 1765 edition (Johnson 8:207).[15] The soliloquy begins with a fatalistic acceptance that Hamlet will necessarily die as a result of honouring his dead father's commandment, a result which he does not at first regard as too terrible ("to sleep – / No more … "); but, upon further reflection, he realizes that the consequence of his act could be an eternity in Hell or at least a stretch in Purgatory. This "gives <him> pause"; and at the end of several lines in which he rationalizes his decision to abandon or at least defer his vengeance by generalizing his particular situation to the plight of all humanity (3.1.72–84), Hamlet concludes that

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action. (3.1.85–90)[16]

The "regard" that thwarts action is the dread of post-mortem torment, which "puzzles the will" (3.1.82), i.e. confounds, frustrates or paralyses one's volition. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the original definition of "puzzle" as "To cause (any one) to be at a loss what to do or how to turn; to embarrass with difficulties; to put to a non-plus; to perplex, bewilder, confound: said of circumstances, material obstacles, etc."[17] Frank Kermode, the editor of the tragedies in the Riverside edition, glossed "puzzles" as "paralyzes" (Evans 1208). William James wrote that "*dread of the irrevocable* … often engenders a type of character incapable of prompt and vigorous resolve, except perhaps when surprised into sudden activity" (James 795, italics in original). Perhaps James had Hamlet specifically in mind.

This disabling dread is of a different character from the kind of irresolution postulated by Coleridge and Schlegel (see Bradley 91–93), which stems from a morbid tendency to ruminate excessively. Schlegel, for example, summed up the play as "intended to show how a calculating consideration which aims at exhausting, so far as human foresight can, all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, cripples the power of acting" (quoted in Bradley 91–92). Harley Granville Barker and others also have attributed Hamlet's inaction to excessive introspection, which is not necessarily due to depression (e.g. Barker 133, 285–87). A.D. Nuttall proposed something similar:

> It is a mistake to suppose that Hamlet's problem is weakness of will. If will is involved with wishing, then we must grant that Hamlet's will to do what must be done is huge. His malady is disjunction of the will. The very act of mental willing has assumed a strangely separate existence and has become disengaged both from the normal corroborative emotions and from action. (Nuttall 202)

D.A. Traversi offered a similar notion; he said that Hamlet "regards action as natural to the rational and undivided personality" and that his "chief task interests Shakespeare as an act which requires the unity of purpose and sentiment in a harmonious personality", the absence of which "constitutes

Hamlet's problem" (Traversi 2:40).[18] On the other hand, the usually insightful nineteenth century American Shakespeare critic H.N. Hudson objected to the view that Hamlet's "will [is] practically crippled by excess of intellect" and suggested that the theory's proponents, principally Coleridge and Dowden, were projecting their own personality foibles onto the character of Hamlet (Hudson 2:263–65). Hudson regarded Hamlet as an intelligent and deliberate man whose inability to act was an inevitable result of his circumstances (Hudson at 2:268 *et seq.*); but that takes no account of his failure to act in the Chapel Scene, when the circumstances presented no obstacle.

Of course, these notions do not satisfy a reader who seeks for a more-or-less rational or, at least, coherent explanation for Hamlet's failure to accomplish what he says is his "will". Dread of eternal torment offers such an explanation, but it is not the only condition which can "puzzle" the will; so, to be fair, we should consider the alternative before deciding definitely that Hamlet was forestalled by thoughts of the afterlife. A.C. Bradley felt that the lassitude accompanying melancholy can also have a disabling effect (Bradley 104–09); he even said that Hamlet's inability to understand why he delays can be "fully explained *only* by" melancholy (Bradley at 108, emphasis added), but that overstates the case. To be sure, lethargy and indecisiveness are common markers of depression, and are important factors in defining the condition (DSM-5 160–61). But Hamlet's symptoms are more consistent with bipolar disorder or cyclothymia than they are with unmediated depression; his depressive episodes alternate with periods of hyperactivity (see DSM-5 123–26), as Bradley himself recognized (Bradley 106). Hamlet is no Antonio; he does not dwell on being sad, at least not explicitly (*contrast Merchant of Venice* 1.1.1–7). If Hamlet's episodes of depression deprive him of the energy and decisiveness to execute his promise to the ghost, his alternating periods of mania or hypomania should furnish sufficient impulsiveness to go forward regardless of the consequences.

Additionally, for literary reasons as well as medical ones, I prefer the idea that Hamlet's resolution was impaired by rational anxiety, not depression. For the reasons already given, we should trust the soliloquies, especially when they are delivered by someone as self-aware as Hamlet. It is Hamlet's concern that he might be a coward that repeatedly preys on his mind and forces itself to the forefront in his soliloquies. Of course, to a believing Christian, fear of eternal damnation is not irrational and might not deserve the opprobrious name "cowardice". So Shakespeare employs another character to illustrate that fears of that nature are not universally regarded as admirable: Laertes' function as a foil to set off Hamlet's character is never more dramatic than in his willingness to "dare damnation" (4.5.131). The contrast, also, between Hamlet's reluctance to kill Claudius in the chapel with Laertes' willingness to "cut his < fathers' killer's > throat i'th' church" (4.7.99) cannot be accidental.

I anticipate that some might object to the weight I give to "How all occasions" because that speech does not appear in the First Folio; but I am not daunted. I subscribe to the view that at least most of the substantial omissions in the F1 version of *Hamlet* were due to its being set from a prompt book containing performance cuts (see, e.g. Evans 1234; Wells et al., *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* 401–02). There is no doubt that Shakespeare wrote the "How all occasions" soliloquy. So, if he or his company struck out portions of the play to shorten performances, why did they select such an important passage – one that I think explains the central mystery of the play – to end up on the cutting room floor? Schlegel also felt that the soliloquy was a key to Hamlet's character and that, therefore, its omission from the Folio was proof that the cuts were "the work of the players, and not of the poet".[19] I do not think that inference is inevitable, although it is certainly possible.

A purist, such as this writer, is loath to discard any part of Shakespeare's text. But a more practical man of the theatre might consider that the bulk of "How all occasions", shorn of the monosyllabic two and a half lines, is redundant of sentiments repeatedly expressed by Hamlet elsewhere, as A.C. Bradley pointed out (Bradley 119–20). The passage omitted from the First Folio delays the development of the plot and, if it does not otherwise contribute to the theme of the play, it serves little or no dramatic function. Audiences in 1601 were probably no more alert to the subtleties buried in the speech than they (and professional critics and scholars) are today. If the audience did not get the point when the play was performed with the passage included, Shakespeare or his company would have been justified in concluding that there was no theatrical reason to protract the already

lengthy play, especially at a late stage in the performance when the audience's attention was probably flagging.[20] Directors today often cut the scene; and one may ask if there is any reason to perform it other than to please the handful of scholars who read this article and the many theatregoers who just like the speech. My answer is "yes, there is".

Notes

1. Citations and quotations to Shakespeare's works are to Wells et al. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Note that quoted text within square brackets ([ ]) represent editorial emendations of the copytext; material within angle braces (< >) are explanatory interpolations by the author of this article.
2. That speech and the preceding dialogue which provides its context were omitted from the First Folio, as I discuss below. Because the Oxford editors used F1 as their copytext, they printed the passage in question as "Additional Passage J" following the main text of *Hamlet* (Wells et al., *The Complete Works* 717). *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, contrariwise, bases its text on the Second Quarto, and therefore includes the passage in the main text while the F1 version is relegated to a future "*Alternative Versions*" volume (Taylor and Loughnane 542; Taylor et al., *Modern Critical Edition* 2067–68, *Critical Reference Edition* 1199–1201).
3. The poetical uses of monosyllables, apart from their function to supply emphasis, has been observed by B.J. Sokol. For example, as in the lines from *Love's Labour's Lost* quoted *infra*, they may serve to illustrate the point of the speech (Sokol 101; see, also, Sokol 135, 263n.64). The insistent pulsating crescendo and wistful decrescendo of short words in Sonnet 129 provide a striking example of this device.
4. The *Pericles* and *Henry VIII* passages are in Shakespeare's stints (Wells et al. "William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion"130, 618).
5. "Trope" is a particularly apt term to describe a figure which abruptly moves from one thought to another, as it literally refers to a change of direction. The word derives from the Greek noun *τρόπος* (tropos), "turn, direction, way", and the verb *τρέπειν* (trepein), "to turn, to direct, to alter, to change" (Oxford English Dictionary).
6. A parenthetical flourish of this sort is the main cause of the confusion over the garbled passage about "the jewel best enamellèd" in *The Comedy of Errors* (2.1.108-12). As I show in a 2016 article, if we recognize that the "jewel" passage contains two different but related metaphors, one enfolded within the other, and repunctuate the lines accordingly, we neatly solve the crux, albeit a little edification by the margin is not amiss (Weiss 149). The crux (2.1.108–12), emended as I recommend, is:

   I see the jewel best enamellèd
   Will lose her beauty. Yet the gold bides still
   That others touch; and often touching will
   Wear gold – and [any] man that hath a name
   By falsehood and corruption doth it shame.

   The key to understanding the passage is that it contains two metaphors expressing the dilemma which troubles Adriana. On the one hand, she feels that Antipholus's infidelities will eventually cost him his good name no matter how he strives to cover them up, like enamel concealing a flaw in a jewel which could eventually cease to be effective. On the other hand, she fears that she would be in danger of losing her husband's affection should she attempt to forestall his disgrace by looking too closely into his dalliances or chiding him too much about them, like gold that rubs away when it is tested on a touchstone. Complacency, to the contrary, would not diminish his love, which abides despite the touch of his courtesan. If Adriana remains complacent, she will retain her husband's love but he will injure his good name; or if she takes action, Antipholus might preserve his honour, but she will lose his affection. My suggested emendations were adopted by the Arden3 *Comedy of Errors* (Cartwright 176–77).
7. See generally Jafri ch.10.
8. But see the *Crito*, in which Socrates assumes that it is possible for a man to do evil willingly (Plato, *Crito* 216 [49]).
9. This illustrative example has a long history, stretching back at least to 1770 (d'Holbach 90).
10. E.g. Fried et al. 548–52.
11. It has been argued that Helena feigned soliloquizing (Hirsch 44); but, manipulative as she is, I don't see much dramatic justification for that view.
12. Contrast Horatio's ancient Roman attitude towards suicide (5.2.293).
13. As Dante put it, "he who does not repent cannot be absolved, nor can repentance and will exist together, because of the contradiction which does not allow it" (Alighieri, *Inferno* XXVII:112 *et seq.*).
14. The following officially approved jury charge is a typical statement of the law: "If you find that both inclination and opportunity existed, you may infer that AB and CD did commit the act, because … direct proof of the act is rarely available and not required" (NYPJI 2 Supp: 610–11). Opportunity is usually easy to prove and, as for inclination, see Judge Bowen's oft-quoted dictum in *Edgington v. Fitzmaurice* at 483 ("the state of a man's

mind is as much a fact as the state of his digestion"). Practical considerations do not necessarily support Bowen's idea, however happily it is expressed: we are probably more willing to accept a party's testimony as to the state of his (or his patient's) digestion than we would rely on his (or his psychiatrist's) word about his intentions; and the former is more likely to be appreciated clinically. The most familiar example of evidence of opportunity and inclination as sufficient to prove the completion of an act is the acceptance of "hotel-bill evidence" as proof of adultery in divorce cases. For a satirical criticism of the necessity and reliability of such evidence, see A.P. Herbert's fictitious judicial reports in *Pratt v. Pratt* and *Pale v. Pale* (Herbert 36–41 and 425, 442–43).

15. See, also, e.g. Jenkins 484–85; Rossiter 173–74; but see Bradley 86n.11.
16. Baron d'Holbach would say that Hamlet's original impulse to kill the king was displaced by this new idea that he would be damned if he did so (d'Holbach 89–90). It is interesting to contrast Hamlet's expressed views with those of Socrates in the *Protagoras*, where he employs a series of semantic quibbles to argue that cowardice arises from ignorance of dangers while courage proceeds from "knowledge of what is and is not dangerous" (Plato, *Protagoras* 63 [360]).
17. Webster's adds "frustrate" to the list (def. 7).
18. Rossiter (at 177) expresses a similar idea. On the question of whether Hamlet is in fact mad, *contrast,* e.g. Wilson 217–29 (*The Heart of the Mystery*), *with* e.g. Grabanier 139–51 (*Hamlet Always Sane*).
19. See Collier 5:568 "the omission of such an important soliloquy, in connexion with what immediately precedes it, would convince us, even if we had no other reason for thinking so, that the abbreviation of this tragedy for the stage, as we find it in the folio, 1623, was the work of the players, and not of the poet"; citing Schlegel iii:149.
20. See Maguire and Smith 159: "Preventing audience attention flagging may … lie behind the removal of Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 4. … [W]hen Shakespeare texts appear in plural versions, there is a high concentration of cuts in the fourth act when spectator stamina – or is it actor stamina? – can wane."

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