

# Tragic Excess in *Hamlet*

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“Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar,” the aging Polonius counsils his son Laertes in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1.3.60). Polonius proceeds with several additional “precepts” (1.3.57) which similarly promote the Aristotelian ideal of the golden mean, a cultural commonplace of the early-modern age which valorized the perfect middle ground between two extremes:

Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,  
Bear’t that the opposed may beware of thee. . . .  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy. (1.3.64–70)

Polonius goes on (and on), but the principle is clear. *Don’t be too hot, but don’t be too cold. Don’t be too hard, but don’t be too soft. Don’t be too fast, but don’t be too slow.* In each of these formulations, there is no substantive ethical good other than moderation. Virtue is thus fundamentally relational, determined by the extent to which it balances two extremes which, as extremes, are definitionally unethical. “It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean,” as Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.2.6–7).<sup>1</sup>

More generally, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare paralleled the situations of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras (the father of each is killed, and each then seeks revenge) to promote the virtue of moderation: Hamlet moves too slowly, Laertes too swiftly—and they both die at the end of the play—but Fortinbras represents a golden mean which marries the slowness of Hamlet with the swiftness of Laertes. As argued in this essay, Shakespeare endorsed the virtue of balance by allowing Fortinbras to be one of the very few survivors of the play. In other words, excess is tragic in *Hamlet*.

<sup>1</sup> In his powerful narrative of the cultural and literary history of the Aristotelian golden mean in early-modern England, Scodel apologized for saying “little about Shakespeare, whose treatments of means and extremes deserve a book unto themselves” (11). As Miles outlined in his identification of “an Aristotelian pattern of virtue as a mean between excess and defect” in Shakespeare’s plays (111), Aristotle’s ethics of moderation were mediated, for Shakespeare, by the stoicism in Amyot and North’s translation of Plutarch (obsessed with the virtue of “constancy”) and the skepticism in Montaigne’s *Essays* (obsessed with the ubiquity of “inconstancy”). With rather different emphases than mine, and much more Aristotle involved, Langis has also read *Hamlet* as a text concerned deeply with virtue ethics and specifically with the golden mean.

## I

The parallels between Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras have been recognized by critics at least since A. C. Bradley noted that, among the secondary characters in *Hamlet*, there are “two, Laertes and Fortinbras, who are evidently designed to throw the character of the hero into relief. Even in the situations there is a curious parallelism,” Bradley continued, “for Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a king, lately dead, and succeeded by his brother; and Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him” (90). My reading of this “dramatic triad” is something of a corrective to O. B. Hardison, Jr’s treatment of *Hamlet* as a thinly veiled morality play, Hamlet an Everyman placed before three competing options, Ophelia standing for suicide, Laertes standing for revenge, and Fortinbras standing for forbearance. That arrangement makes a certain bit of sense, but it runs into several problems. First, while Hardison gave examples of Shakespearean “dramatic triads” in the Hal–Falstaff–Henry IV relationship and the Prospero–Caliban–Ariel relationship, the math doesn’t add up when we look at the four characters involved in the Hamlet–Laertes–Fortinbras–Ophelia relationship. It’s not a “triad” at all: there’s something else going on here. Second, whereas Hardison associated Fortinbras with “inaction” (158), and thus with Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare presented Fortinbras as a man of action both at the beginning and the end of the play. Third, *Hamlet* is not a moral comedy (in the vein of the Tudor morality plays that ushered their protagonists through adversity to a happy ending); the play is a tragedy in which the protagonist dies. It is, at the very least, conceptually dissonant to have Hamlet and Fortinbras both represent the space between action and inaction, and yet Hamlet dies while Fortinbras lives.

Based on this ending, I want to put Fortinbras, not Hamlet, at the center of the triad—not in the sense that Fortinbras is the main character who receives most of our attention, but in the sense that Fortinbras is the virtuous character who does the right thing. Thus, instead of asking, like Bradley, Hardison, and nearly every other critic who writes about the parallel (excepting only Margaret de Grazia’s brilliant reading in *Hamlet without Hamlet*), how Fortinbras and Laertes illuminate Hamlet, I want to ask how Hamlet and Laertes illuminate Fortinbras.

## II

Immediately after the spirit of Hamlet’s murdered father calls Hamlet to “revenge his most foul and unnatural murder” (1.5.25), the wronged prince vows to move quickly: “Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love,/ May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.29–31). It is ironic that Hamlet characterizes thought (“meditation”) as speedy, since Hamlet’s intense deliberation is precisely what slows him down over the next few acts. “The time is out of joint,” he says at the end of Act I (1.5.191), somewhat oddly posing the problem of his father’s murder as an issue related to time: why is it “time” that has been disrupted, as opposed to the state, nature, or justice? Why does Hamlet experience his quest for revenge as a problem of “time”? More to the point, why did Shakespeare associate vengeance with time? In what way does the act of revenge raise the issue of time?

Repeating this phrase, “the time is out of joint,” almost ritualistically dozens of times throughout her account of Shakespeare as a philosopher of history, Agnes Heller explained that “this is, however, only historical time and not cosmic time” (16). She felt that “the time is out of joint” means that there is, in *Hamlet* and in all of Shakespeare’s tragedies, a “double bind, the insoluble tension between two legitimacy claims, the clash between the premodern and the modern world” in which “the old (traditional) rights, justifications, and institutions clash with new ones” (21). Another possible explanation is that “the time is out of joint” foreshadows the dramatic slowdown in the pace of the play in Acts II–IV. This pause in the action is first felt during Polonius’s rambling and digressive conversation with Reynaldo (2.1.1–73), and it is then symbolized by the hesitation in Pyrrhus’s attack on Priam during the recitation of Aeneas’s Tale to Dido, an interlude which delays the plot development of a scene which delays the plot development of the entire play:

His sword,  
Which was declining on the milky head  
Of reverend Priam, seemed i’ th’ air to stick.  
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,  
And like a neutral to his will and matter  
Did nothing. (2.2.417–22)

Pyrrhus doing nothing is a metaphor for Hamlet doing nothing even though he has vowed to take revenge against Claudius with haste. “This is too long,” says Polonius (2.2.438), describing both Aeneas’s Tale to Dido and, symbolically, Hamlet’s revenge against Claudius.

At the end of this scene, Hamlet stays behind to soliloquize about his delay, which he sees as evidence of cowardice:

It cannot be  
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should have fatted all the region kites  
With this slave’s offal. Bloody – bawdy villain,  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
Oh, vengeance! (2.2.545–51 in the Folio)

Like the earlier aborted line about how Pyrrhus “Did nothing,” the half-line “Oh, vengeance!” symbolizes Hamlet’s aborted vengeance, his struggle continuing it through to completion. The sense of incompleteness in these aborted lines is later thematized in Act IV when Hamlet disappears from Denmark and all but disappears from the play.

Like Aeneas’s Tale to Dido, Hamlet’s soliloquy in response to the Tale is a long, drawn out passage which delays the plot while alluding to Hamlet’s delay:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words. (2.2.521–24)

Here language—“words” or, as Hamlet puts it elsewhere with repetition that delays the progress of his conversation with Polonius just as language and thought repeatedly delay action and revenge in the plot of *Hamlet*, “words, words, words” (2.2.192)—has come to symbolize slowness, while action symbolizes speed. In Acts II–IV, Hamlet is paused in language—in soliloquies—just as he is brought to a standstill by his reflection on the afterlife during his “To be, or not to be” soliloquy: “What dreams may come/When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,/Must give us pause” (3.1.66–68). While “pause[d]” in this soliloquy, Hamlet’s description of “the whips and scorns of time” (3.1.70) captures the image of time as a violent and oppressive force, as experienced by someone who feels compelled to act quickly but finds himself moving slowly. Shakespeare also encoded Hamlet’s fraught relationship with time and delay in the pun on “currents” (from the Latin *currere*, “to run, move swiftly”) in Hamlet’s description of “thought” precluding “enterprises” and making “their currents turn awry,/And lose the name of action” (3.1.85–88).

After the Mousetrap confirms Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet is finally ready to act upon his vow to take revenge, as communicated in the urgency of the repeated “nows” when he comes upon Claudius praying: “Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying,/And now I’ll do’t” (3.3.73–74). Hamlet delays again, however, because he reasons that killing Claudius while the murderer is at prayer, thus with a clean soul, would send Claudius to heaven rather than hell. Hamlet again draws attention to the phenomenon of delay (the imagery in the line is medical, but the point of the line is temporal): “This physic but prolongs thy sickly days” (3.3.96). It should be noted that, at least by the logic of the play, it is a mistake not to kill Claudius in this moment—not only because Claudius is not sincere in his prayer, as the audience immediately learns (3.3.97–98), but also because killing Claudius here would have prevented the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet himself. But when Hamlet finally does act in the next scene, he *still* makes a mistake, killing Polonius in “a rash and bloody deed” (3.4.27). Moving too slowly, Hamlet made the mistake of not killing Claudius; moving too quickly, Hamlet made the mistake of killing Polonius. Hamlet’s tragic mistake, or *hamartia*, is not moving either slowly or quickly, but moving too much in one way.

After Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, instead of then proceeding to kill the right person, Claudius—whom Hamlet still has every reason to kill—he gets distracted and starts berating his mother. Shakespeare presented this exchange as further delay by bringing back the Ghost who, Hamlet thinks, comes to correct the speed at which Hamlet is exacting revenge: “Do you not come your tardy son to chide,/That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by/The important acting of your dread command?” (3.4.106–08). Like the reappearance of the Ghost in Act III, the appearance of Fortinbras’s army in Act IV is experienced by a guilt-stricken Hamlet as a lash upon his delay: “How all occasions do inform against me,/And spur my dull revenge!” (4.4.32–33). Saying he has “let all sleep” (4.4.59), Hamlet returns to the imagery of sleep used to symbolize his delay in his “To be

or not to be” soliloquy (“dreams . . . give us pause” [3.1.66–68]). Re-committing himself to revenge, he draws attention to the issue of “time”: “O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (4.4.65–66).

Between Acts IV and V, the way Hamlet experiences time changes. Previously, he sought to move speedily. As soon as he finally does exact revenge against Claudius, becoming mortally wounded in the event, he wants time to move more slowly: “Had I but time – as this fell sergeant, Death,/Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you –/But let it be” (5.2.319–21). The return to the imagery of sleep in Hamlet’s final words—“the rest is silence” (5.2.341)—recalls the association between sleep and slowness in Hamlet’s thoughts on delay and emphasizes the fact that Hamlet dies because he delayed so obsessively—throughout the play, but also specifically in his decision not to kill Claudius when he had the chance. Hamlet’s *hamartia*—traditionally seen as delay, uncertainty, or inaction—is really a matter of excess: excessive delay, excessive uncertainty, excessive inaction. There would have been nothing wrong with moderate delay, uncertainty, and inaction—indeed, that deliberateness is precisely what allows Hamlet to confirm the guilt of Claudius and the propriety of revenge—but Hamlet’s excessive employment of those actions transforms them from virtues into vices. The form of excess rather than the content of Hamlet’s actions is his tragic mistake.

### III

The same holds true for Laertes even though his mistake—rashness—seems to be the exact opposite of Hamlet’s. With Laertes, Shakespeare used the oceanographic imagery of swift “currents” in contrast to Hamlet’s delay. Laertes speeds back from France to Denmark to avenge his father’s murder even faster than those currents: “The ocean, overpeering of his list,/Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste/Than young Laertes” (4.5.99–101). When the “incensed” Laertes (4.5.126) reaches Denmark, his display of passion and anger are the opposite of Hamlet’s turn to uncertainty and madness in the wake of his father’s murder. The vengefulness which Hamlet kept private, resulting in his delay, Laertes makes public, resulting in his haste, which Shakespeare captured in the choppy staccato of his charge on Claudius:

I’ll not be juggled with.  
To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,  
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!  
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,  
That both the worlds I give to negligence,  
Let come what comes, only I’ll be revenged  
Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.130–36)

Because Laertes wants fiery speed, Shakespeare associated him with heat: “It warms the very sickness in my heart,” Laertes says in response to Claudius’s plan for the duel with Hamlet (4.7.53). Indeed, Shakespeare put the imagery of time, associated with slowness,

into direct contrast with the imagery of fire, signifying speed, in Claudius's stoking of revenge:

Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.  
 There lives within the very flame of love  
 A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,  
 And nothing is at a like goodness still,  
 For goodness, growing to a plurisy,  
 Dies in his own too-much. That we would do  
 We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes,  
 And hath abatements and delays as many  
 As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,  
 And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh,  
 That hurts by easing. (4.7.111–21)

Whereas Hamlet is concerned with questions posed in the subjunctive mood, Claudius and Laertes resist “woulds” and “shoulds”; they want action in the present tense, “is” and “does.” In contrast to the Hamlet, whose desire for revenge to be just outweighs his desire for revenge to be quick, Claudius believes that “revenge should have no bounds” (4.7.126). Laertes's response—“And yet 'tis almost 'gainst my conscience” (5.2.279)—recalls Hamlet's “conscience” which “does make cowards of us all” by delaying the revenge which would be swift (3.1.83). In contrast to Hamlet, however, Laertes's desire for swiftness (spurred by Claudius) outweighs his desire for prudence. Even Hamlet goads Laertes to move more quickly during their duel: “Laertes: you but dally” (5.2.280). Vowing revenge in Act IV, achieving it shortly thereafter in Act V, Laertes is the counterpoint or, as Shakespeare explicitly said, “foil” (5.2.233) to the Hamlet who does nothing in Acts II–IV. If Hamlet's tragic mistake is moving too slowly, Laertes's is moving too swiftly.<sup>2</sup>

Here Shakespeare was using the genre of tragedy to level a moral critique of Hamlet and Laertes. According to the tragic logic of *Hamlet*, those who die are necessarily guilty. Claudius killed King Hamlet; Gertrude married her brother's murderer; Polonius conspired against Hamlet; Ophelia betrayed Hamlet; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did as well; Hamlet sought revenge sluggishly; and Laertes sought revenge hastily. This absolute connection between guilt and death does not inform all Shakespearean tragedy: the death of the innocent occurs in earlier tragedies, as with Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* or Cinna the Poet in *Julius Caesar*. In *Hamlet*, however, Shakespeare seems to have extrapolated the logic of Aristotelean *hamartia* from the tragic protagonist to all characters in the play. Without question, the punishment often doesn't fit the crime: the discrepancy between the severity of the guilty act and the severity of death is what produces tragic pity and

<sup>2</sup> For a different take on the Hamlet–Laertes parallel, see Levin, who unabashedly praises Hamlet for the noble motive behind his vengeance (love of his father) and criticizes Laertes for his ignoble motive (concern for his own honor).

fear. But in *Hamlet* death implies guilt and, by the same token, survival implies virtue, which brings us to Fortinbras.<sup>3</sup>

#### IV

It could be argued that Fortinbras is not seeking revenge at all.<sup>4</sup> When we do the math based on the numbers we get in Act V—his father was slain on the day the Clown became a gravedigger (5.1.135–36), some 30 years ago (5.1.152–53), on the same day Hamlet was born (5.1.138–39)—it hardly seems that Fortinbras is in a hot rage to snatch back the lands taken from him when King Hamlet killed his father. It could even be argued that Fortinbras’s campaign against Denmark has nothing to do with retribution: it could be seen instead as an act of nation-building done independent of his father’s death (the young Fortinbras seems to be coming, after all, not just for the sliver of land that was his birthright, but all the way to the castle of Elsinore, “colleaguéd with this dream of his advantage” [1.2.21], for the whole kingdom of Denmark. At the very least, Fortinbras moves much more slowly than Hamlet.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the apparent absurdity of the timeline, however, Shakespeare at the start of the play presented young Fortinbras as if he were burning hot with revenge, beginning with the “now” that in *Hamlet* signifies speed:

Now, sir, young Fortinbras,  
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,  
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there  
Sharked up a list of lawless resolute,  
For food and diet to some enterprise  
That hath a stomach in’t; which is no other,  
As it doth well appear unto our state,  
But to recover of us, by strong hand  
And terms compulsory those foresaid lands  
So by his father lost. (1.1.95–104)

Here Fortinbras is basically Laertes. The “re-” in his “recover” points forward to the “re-” in Hamlet’s “revenge” and, in terms of the way Shakespeare structured the story, the Hamlet who vows revenge against his father’s murderer in 1.5 recalls the Fortinbras introduced in similar terms in 1.1, even if that Fortinbras is belied as a fiction by the information later revealed in 5.1. Indeed, the way in which Fortinbras seems hot with

<sup>3</sup> Lee-Riff and Dion also saw Fortinbras as a symbol of virtue. Additionally, Wilson—while opposing performances which cut the character—saw Fortinbras as a foil for Hamlet and central to the thematic unity of the play.

<sup>4</sup> See Lawrence for a historicist account of the origin of the Fortinbras material.

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Hamlet’s father and Laertes’s, Fortinbras’s was killed in fair combat. Jenkins described Fortinbras’s quest not as revenge for a wrongful death but as further open war (99–100).

revenge at the beginning of the play but cool and belated at the end speaks to his position in the middle space between Hamlet's slowness and Laertes's hastiness.<sup>6</sup>

That image of two Fortinbras or, rather, a Fortinbras able to modulate his tempo based upon the circumstances of a situation, is also evident between the second and third allusions to the character. In 1.2, Claudius presents the Fortinbras of fastness with the rhetoric of urgency ("Now follows, that you know, young Fortinbras" [1.2.17]), whom Claudius rebuffs with the play's most prominent symbol of slowness, language ("We have here writ/To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras" [1.2.27–28]). In this scene, Claudius is seeking "to suppress/[Fortinbras's] further gait herein" (1.2.30–31), which works, as the Danish ambassadors report in Act II: "Upon our first [letter], [Old Norway] sent out to suppress/His nephew's levies" (2.2.61–62). The "arrest[ed]" (2.2.67) Fortinbras emerges here only moments before the arrested Hamlet emerges feigning madness, revenge deferred, later in this scene. Upon his uncle's request, Fortinbras agrees to halt his charge against Denmark, commencing instead a campaign against Poland, which requires passage through Denmark (2.2.68–75), which allows him to survey the Danish lands and forces, which means it probably isn't really a cessation of his plan against Denmark. It is merely a delay.

Of course, Fortinbras has none of Hamlet's existential angst over his delay. The Norwegian simply marches on steadily to the beat of his soldiers' footsteps.<sup>7</sup> He does not question his campaign against Denmark, but he does not rush it either. This moderate pace allows Fortinbras to arrive at the castle of Elsinore in Act V immediately after the culmination of the catastrophe caused by the excessiveness of the Danes: any faster and he might have gotten wrapped up in the catastrophe, any slower and someone else might have slipped into the Danish throne. It is not a logical, cause-and-effect relationship that represents reality but, in terms of the dramatic structure of the play, having the temperate Fortinbras emerge and survive out of the carnage of all the immoderate Danes who die gives off the impression that Fortinbras survives because of his temperance. "Th' election lights/On Fortinbras" (5.2.338–39) not simply because he has some ancient claim to the throne (that is the explanation of Fortinbras's success from the perspective of realism), but also because he represents the virtue of moderation (that is the meaning of Fortinbras's success from the perspective of symbolism).

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins also observed that Fortinbras changes but, curiously, presented this inconstancy as evidence that Fortinbras isn't realistic: "Once we have seen that his role changes from that of a hotheaded insurrectionary to that of a dignified soldier prince, it becomes almost absurd to discuss him as if he were a single coherent person" (105). To me, singularity of character in the face of changing circumstances is evidence of artificiality. Indeed, obsessive constancy is the *hamartia* of Hamlet and Laertes, making them artificial in their excess even as Fortinbras is human in his inconstancy.

<sup>7</sup> We first see the cool and steady Fortinbras in the flesh (4.4) only one scene before Laertes enters with fire (4.5). Curiously, the "lawless resolute" of Fortinbras's rebellion (1.2.98) seem to have transformed into the "rabble" supporting Laertes (4.5.102). Jenkins presents this transformation as a mid-course revision on Shakespeare's part: he initially planned to have Fortinbras storm the castle in Act IV (103).



## V

Shakespeare's use of the structure and logic of tragedy to endorse the virtue of moderation is confirmed by the only other major character to survive the play: Horatio. His story has nothing to do with revenge, yet we cannot say that Hamlet and Laertes die because they seek revenge while Fortinbras and Horatio survive because they don't: as noted, Fortinbras is initially characterized as a revenger. Thus, we must ask, what is the quality that Fortinbras and Horatio share? What is the shared quality that allows them, symbolically, to survive the tragedy that befalls every other major character?

Even more clearly than Fortinbras, Horatio is characterized by his temperate, even stoic personality. His disposition is not figured through his relationship with time, as Hamlet's, Laertes's, and Fortinbras's are. Instead, Hamlet describes Horatio as even-handed, even-tempered, and "e'en as just a man/As e'er [his] conversation cop'd withal" (3.2.53–54). Hamlet proceeds to characterize Horatio as one who suffers his fortunes steadily, taking the good with the bad. The highs never get him too high; the lows never get him too low. Horatio is, in Hamlet's vinyette,

As one in suffering all that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks. . .  
Whose blood and judgement are so well commedled  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. . .  
not passion's slave. (3.2.65–71)

Positioned in the middle space between opposed extremes—"all" and "nothing," "buffets" and "rewards," "blood" and "judgement"—Horatio is characterized as an in-between, "e'en," "equal," and "commedled." Thus, looking at both Fortinbras and Horatio, we can posit heroic moderation as the antidote to tragic excess.

## VI

If *hamartia* is, indeed, not simply any variety of error or flaw but, instead, inextricably bound up with excess, it allows us to reconsider what tragedy is all about. Going back to Aristotle, tragedy is traditionally seen as a story

1. serious in tone;
2. serious in purpose;
3. represented in dramatic form;
4. written in elevated language;
5. telling one and only one story (not several woven together) with a beginning, middle, and end;
6. about royals and nobles;
7. making it socially significant;
8. usually involving a reversal of fortune from a good situation to a bad;
9. usually ending in some major catastrophe;

10. arousing pity (feeling sorry for the undeserved suffering of another) and fear (being afraid such misfortune could befall oneself) in the audience;
11. effectively purging pity and fear from the emotional lexicon of the audience;
12. yet remaining morally satisfying;
13. because it represents, not a good person meeting good fortune (which is morally satisfying but isn't pitiable because it doesn't pain us to see good deeds rewarded), nor a totally wicked person meeting misfortune (which is morally satisfying but isn't pitiable because the bad deserve misfortune), nor a totally virtuous person meeting misfortune (which is pitiable but not morally satisfying because the good don't deserve misfortune), but a good person who makes some slight mistake which brings everything crashing down (which is pitiable because the good receives misfortune but is also morally satisfying because the misfortune results from a mistake that was indeed made);
14. in which the protagonist at some point recognizes the mistake made.

The reading of *Hamlet* I have offered opens up the possibility of adding a fifteenth element—excess—to the essential features of tragedy. In *Hamlet*, and many other examples as well, tragedy is about the route from excessiveness in an individual's actions to catastrophe in society.

Oedipus's *hamartia* is often identified as *hubris*, a word usually translated as "excessive pride." The word "excessive" is more significant than the word "pride" from the perspective of a theory of tragic excess. In this theory, *hamartia* is not simply an "error," "mistake," or "flaw." It is an act or habit of excessively displaying a trait that, if employed moderately, would be perfectly fine. From this perspective, Macbeth's *hamartia* is not ambition but excess: had he realized that murder was too steep a price to pay for power, everything would have been fine. Lear's *hamartia* is not vanity but excess: had he separated his desire to gauge his daughters' love from his responsibility to govern effectively, everything would have been fine. Othello's *hamartia* is not jealousy but excess: had his belief that his wife was unfaithful to him not been coupled with a belief that offense must be met with violent anger, everything would have been fine.

In each of these instances, the tragic protagonist uses transparently immoral means to pursue perfectly ordinary, even socially promoted desires. Perhaps there exists some unrecognized, elemental connection between Machiavellianism and *hamartia*. That connection, however, would not explain Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother completely ignorant of their true identities, which Aristotle provided as the best example of *hamartia*.

Thus, the theory of tragic excess bears a complicated relationship to Hegel's famous notion of tragic "one-sidedness." Hegel's theory of tragedy cannot be understood outside of his theory of the ethical life as a harmony of various substantive ethical principles. Turning from ethics to aesthetics, Hegel argued that, in contrast to ancient Greek epic, which represented humans and all their individuality and particularity amidst the endlessly changing circumstances of time and space, ancient Greek tragedy represented characters as lifeless abstractions of identifiable ethical principles. Antigone stands for family, Creon for the state. Tragedy represents these ethical abstractions coming into

ceaseless and irreconcilable conflict with each other, producing tension and eventually catastrophe. But modern tragedy, according to Hegel—who took Shakespeare as the central example—represents humans more like ancient epic than ancient tragedy: individuals remain individuals, do not become ethical abstractions. Thus, on the one hand, the conflict between opposing ethical principles which was external in ancient tragedy—one character representing one principle, another character representing another—now occurs within the tragic protagonist. On the other hand, action is determined more by circumstance and self-preservation than deliberate pursuit of an ethical ideal. In the case of Hamlet:

His character is rooted in a collision similar to that treated by Aeschylus in the *Choephoroi* and Sophocles in the *Electra*. For in Hamlet's case too his father, the King, is murdered and his mother has married the murderer. But whereas in the Greek poets the King's death does have an ethical justification, in Shakespeare it is simply and solely an atrocious crime and Hamlet's mother is guiltless of it. Consequently the son has to wreak his revenge only on the fratricide King in whom he sees nothing really worthy of respect. Therefore the collision turns strictly here not on a son's pursuing an ethically justified revenge and being forced in the process to violate the ethical order, but on Hamlet's personal character. His noble soul is not made for this kind of energetic activity; and, full of disgust with the world and life, what with decision, proof, arrangements for carrying out his resolve, and being bandied from pillar to post, he eventually perishes owing to his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances. (2.1225–26)

I read *Hamlet* differently. By making moderation into a substantive ethical principle in *Hamlet*—indeed, *the* substantive ethical principle—Shakespeare affirmed in his tragedy what the ancient Greeks, according to Hegel, affirmed in theirs: the diversity and variability of ethical action, and the mistakenness of excessively embracing one ethical principle at the expense of others.

In this reading, *Hamlet* actually works more like Hegel's account of ancient Greek tragedy than his account of Shakespearean tragedy. Both epochs of tragedy, the ancient and the modern, identify “one-sidedness” or “excess” as the pinnacle mistake one can make when the ethical order is understood to be a harmony comprised of different notes, each of which sound better when occurring with the rest, making the silencing of any one note in favor of another an affront to the harmony as a whole. While Hegel was certainly right to point out that individual personality and social situation assert themselves more forcefully in Shakespearean than in classical tragedy, he was wrong to suggest that, because of this, Shakespearean tragedy differed in its commitment to the ethical ideal of classical tragedy.

Why is excess tragic? Why should immoderate action end in catastrophe? What is the theory of virtue that views excess as immoral? What is the social order that sees excess as dangerous? These are big questions beyond the scope of this essay, but one could be forgiven for concluding that tragedy, often seen as a skeptical genre invoking individual reflection, has a stridently conservative streak in it. To vilify excess is to valorize the status quo. Tragic excess could very well be the invention of those in power who wish to

maintain the system that has empowered them. Excess, intemperance, immoderation, radicalism—call it what you will—threatens tradition, which makes excess tragic in the context of a desire to conserve tradition. In this line of thought, tragedy is a form of social control, and tragic excess is the main mechanism. This is how, for instance, Bruce Smith has read the popularity of classical tragedy in the early-modern age:

For all its fiery poetry, for all its fierce portrayal of social disaster and intense human suffering, classical tragedy was produced so as to confirm, not challenge, the values of the closed societies, the private sixteenth- and seventeenth-century households, who watched it. Seneca's Phaedra and Oedipus, Euripides' Creon and Eteocles, Sophocles' Antigone, Euripides' Orestes – the insistent individuality of these heroes was seen as a threat to established social values of moderation, obedience, and rationality and thus was not allowed to engage an audience's sympathy for long. In the hands of the earliest English producers, performance of Greek and Roman tragedy became a ritual in which indomitable individuals were ceremoniously exorcised from the social order. (239)

In a different line of thought, however, tragedy could be seen as a form of social survival—as social conservatism, not in the sense of perpetuating the values of those in power, but in the sense of perpetuating society itself. During times of emergency when the fragility of society is laid bare—and those are the only times represented in tragedy—there appears a need to affirm an ethical order which curbs the excessive embrace of ideas and people who shake the common understandings of civil society. Here, the trope of tragic excess is a reminder—basically stoic in sentiment—that the personality of individuals entrusted with great power can, if left unchecked, whip out into social catastrophe.

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