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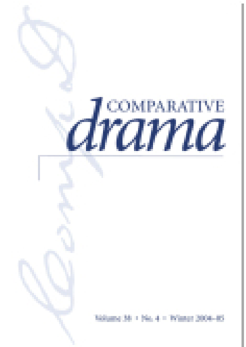

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"Forward Backward" Time and the Apocalypse in *Hamlet*

MAURICE HUNT

Ophelia's remarkable description of a distraught, disheveled Hamlet leaving her chamber figures a paradoxical simultaneous "forward backward" movement of time in the play, one enriching (and enriched by) its apocalyptic overtones:

> At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
> And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
> He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
> As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
> And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
> And with his head over his shoulder turn'd
> He seem'd to find his way without his eyes,
> For out o' doors he went without their helps,
> And to the last bended their light on me.[1]
> (2.1.92–100)

Eric Levy has found significant meaning in this contorted exit of Hamlet's:

> Hamlet turns his head back toward Ophelia, and continues to gaze at her face while his body moves ineluctably forward—as if in leaving the room he is also leaving his awareness there in the chamber, for the part walking away remains sightless and distracted. By this extraordinary gesture ("with his head over his shoulder turn'd"), Hamlet seems to confirm an inaccessible past, from which he is now forever separated, as Orpheus was from Eurydice because he looked back at her as he was leading her away from Hades, realm of the dead, toward return to the living.... But whereas Orpheus's gesture is involuntary, Hamlet's is deliberate, at least at some level. His need is, not to be reunited with Ophelia, but to feel irrevocably sundered from her and the past which she comes to represent. Significantly, this associating of Ophelia with the past is reinforced later by her own madness: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance—pray you, love, remember." (IV.v.173–4)[2]

Whether one agrees with Levy's provocative reading of Hamlet's odd departure, one cannot deny that his interpretation involves the issue of time, in this case "an inaccessible past" that Hamlet seems to feel the need to forget and to remember (that backward stare) at one and the same time. And yet it is possible to interpret Hamlet's strange departure and its relation to time in a different way. In fact, a later image in the play encourages playgoers and readers to do so.

The memorable image of a forward backward-turned progress of Hamlet, out of Ophelia's closet, complements a remarkable metaphor of Hamlet's in act 2. When Polonius asks Hamlet in the second scene of this act to identify the "matter" he reads, the prince "madly" replies:

> Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams—all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am—if like a crab you could go backward. (2.2.196–204)

Possibly Hamlet's utterance alludes to the crab apple, which could be said to "go backward" in the sense that it violates a common aging process by being sour to the taste early in its lifetime but sweet later.[3] The popular belief that crustaceans called crabs can only move forward or sideways encourages the crab apple reading of Hamlet's utterance. Nevertheless, according to the testimony of the crustacean specialist in the Baylor University Department of Biology, "There is no doubt that crabs can walk backward, and they do so with approximately the same frequency and dexterity that humans walk backward: not very well, not very fast, and not very often."[4] Hamlet most likely refers to the infrequently seen locomotion of the crustacean, if only because this reading correlates with the prince's strange way of exiting Ophelia's chamber.

Even then, the image of Hamlet leaving Ophelia's closet and that of the crab going backward are not exactly alike. Hamlet walks forward; only his head is turned back. He suggests that the crab points one way and scuttles another, its fixed head looking in the direction opposite its progress. Nevertheless, in each case, auditors imagine a forward backward progress, a progress that in Polonius's case refigures and focuses a strange operation of time—that of paradoxically growing younger as one grows older. This temporal paradox informs Hamlet's and other characters'

experiences in the play. Cumulatively, these forward backward temporal experiences manifest the presence of apocalyptic time in Denmark, a singular forward backwardness of the Last Days suggested by sixteenth-century commentators on Apocalypse.

The tremendous psychological stress occasioned by the Ghost's command that Hamlet avenge his father's murder causes the prince to regress back through time to the primitive beginnings of both classical and Christian culture. As a result, Hamlet appears an old man in the wisdom this regression confers. The aging of Ophelia's wits serves, by contrast, to accentuate the different aging of Hamlet's mind. Her father's mysterious death and Hamlet's harsh rejection of her love shock Ophelia's mind into a premature but fatal old age. Confronted with the heart-wrenching sight of his mad sister, Laertes exclaims, "O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits / Should be as mortal as an old man's life?" (4.5.159–60). The answer to this rhetorical question is apparently affirmative; the "whips and scorns" of time have so aged Ophelia's wits that they have naturally died, like "an old man's life." Hamlet, however, resists this particular kind of self-destructive intellectual aging. The Ghost's chilling admonition "Remember me," heard at the end of a horrifying story, causes shocked Hamlet to exclaim, "Hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up" (1.5.93–95). Hamlet successfully resists the aging produced by shock, choosing instead to look backward intellectually in time in order to move forward toward accomplishing the Ghost's command. In the process, he discovers a "wise" perspective on human existence associated not simply with the final phase of a person's life but also with the old age of the world just before Apocalypse.

Hamlet memorably regresses through time when he asks the First Player to recite certain verses about the Fall of Troy in an anonymous dramatic tragedy, poetry that transports Hamlet to the scene of Pyrrhus's slaughter of Priam and Hecuba's pathetic mad grief, both outlined against the flaming, collapsing city (2.2.430–516). Hamlet apparently asks for this speech in hopes that the image of the blood-revenger—that of remorseless Pyrrhus—will inspire him to similar swift action. The player's unexpected tears, springing from the imagined pathos of Hecuba, however, preclude this hypothesized effect. The prince feels the grief rather

than the wisdom of the gods presumed to look down on this carnage. Such, however, is not the case when Hamlet regresses through time during the graveyard scene. Even before Hamlet and Horatio enter, the Gravedigger looks backward and then forward through time, back to "Adam's profession"—digging, according to the clown—and ahead to Doomsday. The "houses" a "'grave-maker'" builds last "till doomsday" (5.1.58–59). Watching the Gravedigger at work, Hamlet regresses to the time of the biblical first murder when he imagines a cast-up skull as that of Cain (5.1.74–76). Such an identification colors his subsequent personifications of other skulls and bones as those of a recently buried politician, courtier, lawyer, and landowner. Considered from the perspective of the first murder, the vices of these supposed men, when alive, seem predictable and their pursuits trivial. Having gone backward through time, Hamlet finds Alexander the Great in Danish bones thrown up before him. Suddenly Hamlet expresses a certain wisdom of the aged man, of the long view of time from near beginning to its end. This wisdom concerns the relative final unimportance of any one life in the scope of history. The transformed remains of Alexander could have become the loam stopping a beer barrel, while Julius Caesar's may have patched "a wall t'expel the winter's flaw" (5.1.196–209, esp. 209). This "aged" insight, gained by going backward in time, allows Hamlet to proceed forward to the duel with Laertes and possibly to accomplish his revenge because the revelation makes his own existence seem notably unimportant and thus expendable.

Hamlet's regression is different in kind from the scholar Horatio's reversion to earlier times and his use of salient moments of the ancient world. Horatio journeys backward in time to the days and nights before Julius Caesar's assassination, in an effort to comprehend the meaning of a royal ghost's appearance in Denmark. "In the most high and palmy state of Rome," Horatio explains,

> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
> As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
> Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,

> Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
> And even the like precurse of fear'd events,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen.
> (1.1.116–28)

Horatio's reversion to the past has a bookish quality, informed by his reading of classical texts. His momentous earlier time functions to confirm the opinion that the ghost walks to warn Danes to defend the lands once awarded by the king of Norway to Denmark. That Horatio is mistaken in this respect accords with his "decorous" use of history. Decorous instincts generally mislead characters in *Hamlet.* The "greenness" of memory that Claudius associates with Old Hamlet's death, in the case of Horatio's recollection of "palmy" Rome, as a concept connotes not just rawness but a certain immaturity that abuses the past.

The major, most intriguing version of forward backward time in *Hamlet* involves the reversion of aging adults to childhood and infancy, a phenomenon that also applies to the society of Denmark and—apocalyptically—to the societies of London, England, and the world. Occasionally in the play, characters speak positively of a reversion to infancy, as when Claudius, alone in a chamber, says, "Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe" (3.3.70–71). These usages lack the negative overtones of the repeated articulations in the play of the familiar notion that old men and women eventually "grow into" a second childhood, that, indeed, in progressing forward in time they seem to regress to their origin. Concerning Polonius, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling-clouts" (2.2.378–79). Rosencrantz, not surprisingly, understands Hamlet's remark in the most conventional sense: "Happily he is the second time come to them, for they say an old man is twice a child" (2.2.380–81). The notion receives a darker treatment later in *King Lear,* when Goneril pronounces apropos of Lear that "Old fools are babes again, and must be used / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused" (1.3.20–21), and when the Fool tells his master that "when thou gav'st [thy spiteful daughters] the rod and putt'st down thine own breeches,"

> [*Sings.*] "Then they for sudden joy did weep,
> And I for sorrow sung,
> That such a king should play bo-peep
> And go the fools among."
>
> (1.4.170–75)

Validating Hamlet's, Rosencrantz's (and the Fool's) above-quoted opinions are the portrayals of the sixth and seventh ages of humankind in the Seven Ages of Man conceit of Shakespeare's culture. In *As You Like It*, Jaques portrays the sixth age as shifting

> Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
> His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
> Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
> And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange, eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
>
> (2.7.157–65)

This is Polonius in Rosencrantz's interpretation of Hamlet's view of Ophelia's father. Polonius's tediousness, his fussiness—traits of the old man—encourage the application of Rosencrantz's characterization to Ophelia's father. The relevance of the last of Jaques's characterizations for Polonius becomes more apparent if the actor playing this role adopts a tone of voice approaching a "childish treble." The stage direction at the beginning of act 2 of the Second Quarto (adopted by Jenkins) reads "*Enter old* Polonius, *with his man* Reynaldo." Shakespeare suggests that growing into childishness afflicts not just "*old* Polonius" but the Danish court as well. Horatio depicts the silly courtier Osric as essentially a child when, on the latter's exit, he tells Hamlet, "This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head"; and Hamlet replies, "A did comply with his dug before a sucked it" (5.2.183–84). Hamlet (and through him, Shakespeare) implies that such adult babes are common in Denmark: "Thus has [Osric]—and many more of the same bevy that I know the drossy age dotes on—only got the tune of the time and, out of an habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fanned and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out" (5.2.184–91). The image of blown bubbles,

associated with childhood, reinforces the identification of the Danish courtiers as children of a kind. The paradoxical childishness of adulthood and especially of old age gives the lie to what is decorously appropriate to times of life. Late in act 4, Claudius tediously moralizes:

> for youth no less becomes
> The light and careless livery that it wears
> Than settled age his sables and his weeds
> Importing health and graveness.
> (4.7.77–80)

Such airtight, compartmentalized reasoning denies the real mystery of an old man or woman moving forward through time and yet backward into the life of a child, and then that of a helpless babe.

David Kaula, Arthur McGee, Linda Kay Hoff, Hiroshi Ozawa, and Margreta de Grazia have shown how thoroughly allusions to Apocalypse pervade *Hamlet*. These include biblical descriptions of Doomsday, the association of Claudius with Antichrist, the polarization of characters such as Hyperion and a satyr into the godlike and the bestial, an "Apocalyptic zeal" that manifests "its own psychodynamics relating to oxymoronic violence," and the representation of "a world that has undergone a radical fall or transformation into an 'unweeded garden' overwhelmed with corruption."[5] According to Kaula, "*Hamlet* contains more explicit references to doomsday than any other Shakespeare play—five in all."[6] One reason for the number of explicit allusions to Apocalypse in *Hamlet* may involve the performance of a version of the play "possibly even before the end of 1599 and certainly in the course of 1600."[7] Frank Kermode has emphasized that any postclassical millennial year is guaranteed to become a candidate for Doomsday, simply because "the Jewish equation one day equals a thousand years, ensures that millennial dates may be brought in as valid counters in the game [of predicting the date of Doomsday], this being the point at which apocalypse and millennium may merge."[8] The year 1600 of course is a centennial rather than millennial date. But because of the remarkable number of books and pamphlets predicting the imminence of Doomsday that appeared throughout the 1500s, the centennial year 1600, for Englishmen and women, acquired some of the apocalyptic overtones of a millennial year. "Melancthon and Luther both believed the end was not far off," Katharine

Firth notes, "and likely to come before 1600."[9] Hiroshi Ozawa notes that "eclipses were observed in England in 1598, once of the sun and twice of the moon, which stirred fresh popular speculation that the end of the world was close at hand."[10] These eclipses ominously followed "a sequence of apocalyptic signs in the nova of 1572, the great conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1583, and the defeat of the Armada in 1588."[11] Nevertheless, some later Elizabethans, such as Robert Pont in his widely read *A Newe Treatise of the Right Reckoning of the Yeares* (1599), believed that Doomsday would occur at some time just after the centennial year 1600.[12] Hamlet in act 2 of the play alludes to the nearness of Doomsday (2.2.238). Pont's volume appeared near the end of a decade, the 1590s, that witnessed a spate of books on the Apocalypse, including the godly Protestant preacher George Gifford's fifty collected sermons expounding the Book of Revelation (1593, 1599) and other texts in Latin on Revelation by Francis Trigge (1590), John Napier (1593), and John Foord (1597).[13]

Hamlet's naming his society's age "drossy" implies that it is far removed from the mythical age of gold near the beginning of time. At this point in my argument, the notorious references in *Hamlet* to the London child acting troupes and their popularity with adult audiences become relevant. Analysis of these references within the context of the claim that *Hamlet* is an apocalyptic play necessarily involves a brief consideration of certain differences among the texts of this tragedy. Roslyn Knutson has recently concluded that "[n]early everyone now agrees that Shakespeare was composing his first *Hamlet* in 1599–1600. It might have been ready for staging by the spring of 1600, but it was almost certainly in the repertory by the fall."[14] Since the year 1600 possessed strong apocalyptic value for Shakespeare's age, the extant text of *Hamlet* closest to this date—the 1603 quarto (Q1)—might reward special attention in this respect. In this text appears the original version of the allusion to child acting troupes. In reply to Hamlet's question about why "the Tragedians of the Citty" travel to the Danish equivalent of English provinces, Gilderstone asserts,

> Yfaith my Lord, noueltie carries it away,
> For the principall publike audience that
> Came to them, are turned to priuate playes,
> And to the humour of children.[15]
>
> (Sig. E3)

Editors generally agree that these lines allude to the reopening in the winter of 1599 of the private playhouse at Paul's, where a troupe of boys to popular acclaim gave two performances a week, apparently drawing audiences away from the public playhouses and thus representing a commercial threat to adult repertoire companies like Shakespeare's. "The jest in the 'humour of children' passage," Knutson argues, "is that kings and players alike are at the mercy of a shallow public," of the craving for "noueltie."[16] In the text of *Hamlet* closest to a noteworthy centennial (and so to a traditional candidate for an apocalyptic) year, Shakespeare plants the germ of a passage concerning a reversion to childish behavior and tastes that he would significantly develop between 1601 and 1606–1609, or (less likely) between 1601 and the time of his retirement from the theater.[17]

The 1623 Folio text of *Hamlet* reveals that Shakespeare had rewritten and expanded his momentary reference to a revolution in playgoers' taste into a complex thirty-five-line dialogue between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2.2.324–58). This revision shows traces apparently of the so-called War of the Theaters in 1601 and, according to Knutson, also of "the wayward behavior of the boys' company" in 1606–1608.[18] One might argue that the farther in time that a revision of a dramatic passage important for an apocalyptic argument progresses beyond an important centennial apocalyptic year, the less reliable it becomes as evidence for apocalyptic commentary. The following analysis of the thirty-five-line 1623 Folio passage of *Hamlet*, however, essentially confirms the point of the four-verse 1603 Q1 passage (while adding to it), while one might moreover claim that a certain passage written within ten years either way of a major apocalyptic date could be reasonably assumed to provide potential apocalyptic commentary. Be that as it may, Hamlet, in the Arden 2 edition of the play, learns that "tragedians of the city" (327) are on provincial tour because their popularity there has waned, chiefly because men and women throng to see "an eyrie of children, little eyases," child actors playing adult roles "[who] cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapp'd for't. These are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages—so they call them—that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills and dare scarce come thither" (2.2.337–42). The context of these remarks is clearly

London; most editors of *Hamlet* believe that Shakespeare in this folio passage refers to the success of "the Children of the Chapel, who began to act at the Blackfriars theatre towards the end of 1600,"[19] or to boy players at Blackfriars active—and especially successful—between 1604 and 1608.[20] There, among other plays, they acted Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* and later in 1601 performed his *Poetaster*, both of these dramas "gibing at the plays and playwrights of the public playhouses."[21] Considered in the context of the suggestions in *Hamlet* that the old age of both a man and a culture becomes childish, the described popularity of the children's company indicates the last age of a world in dotage, one of the many signs of approaching Apocalypse in this play. Time has gone forward in London and in Shakespeare's Denmark only to run backward in the lives of men and women.[22]

It is not surprising that the adult company, public playwright Shakespeare should imply that the children's company inevitably violates Hamlet's portrait of ideal acting and theater. Hamlet (and Shakespeare) reduces the children to birds in order to stress the shrillness and contentiousness of their voices. As a nest (an "eyrie") of young hawks ("little eyases"), they are notable for their high-pitched clamor. In this sense, they violate Hamlet's strictures for thespian elocution, which involves a "temperance" and "smoothness" of delivery (3.2.7–8). Moreover, as children playing adults' roles, these actors necessarily distort, most likely comically, the representation of adult behavior and concerns. In this sense, they can neither "[s]uit the action to the word, the word to the action" nor "hold as 'twere the mirror up to [adult] nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.17–18, 22–24). In this latter case, the children inevitably "o'erstep ... the modesty of nature" (3.2.19). Perverting the end of playing, the children's company is "tyrannically clapp'd"; no longer does a freedom of interchange and response exist between actor and audience. The ridiculousness of the children's portrayal of adults dictatorially compels a satirical adult delight, a pleasure that serves no higher educational or moral end but instead caters to a debasing instinct for universal scorn.[23]

Finally, the formation of a London children's company promotes later hypocrisy, for, once the children become adult actors, they will

have hypocritically undercut their very livelihood (in their earlier implicit ridicule of adult playing companies). Involved here is the issue in *Hamlet* of primary human inconstancy. Hamlet does not find the new taste in theater strange, "for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out" (2.2.359–64). The something more than natural—what philosophy cannot discover—in the children's establishing the basis of their later hypocrisy is a theological mystery, as Hamlet's oath by Christ's blood suggests. The mystery is that of radical self-betrayal, the fruit of Adam's Fall. At the turn of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century in London, the theater, according to Hamlet (and Shakespeare), lapsed to dotage, to a pernicious childishness. It lapsed, in short, into the age of the Last Days before Doomsday, a "drossy" age, an old age of foolish childishness—like that in the Denmark of a stage world.[24] The most influential Tudor apocalyptic writer, John Bale, could be said to have predicted such childishness when, after Cromwell had fallen and King Henry VIII had turned against reform, he lamented these setbacks to the Protestant cause "as the recovery of the Wounded Beast [of Revelation 13.3] and bitterly condemned the behavior of kings as 'childish or else tyrannous.'"[25]

Ricardo Quinones has argued that the apocalyptic overtones of the Gravedigger scene in *Hamlet* identify the play's time scheme. In this scene (5.2), Quinones remarks, "Man is seen in a more universal horizon, stretching from Adam to doomsday. Yet there is a basic sameness of pattern within this duration. The essential stages of life between the termini of birth and death are reduced to the termini themselves. Hence, the paradox that time is of such vast extent is actually single in its pattern: earth returns to earth.... The transparent cunning of the politician, the foppery of the courtier, and the superficial glossing of the lady—all are vanities when measured against this background of beginnings and end."[26] The temporal pattern in this case is circular, the wheel coming round, the serpent taking its tail in its mouth. This purported cyclical pattern lends Shakespeare's play its sense of inevitability, of the tragic course of every life, whether Caesar's or a Danish politician's. Only the occurrence of Doomsday, according to Quinones, can end this repetition.

Other portrayals of time in *Hamlet* lack the connection with the play's apocalyptic motifs made by Quinones. Depicting destructive, saturnine time in *Hamlet*, Clifford Davidson sets the tragedy in the context of the "Triumph of Time" as rendered by the painter Brueghel. Behind Death and Time, which overwhelms the emblems of civil accomplishment, rides Fame. "[A]fter Time and Death have completed their work," Davidson concludes, "only Fame"—not Apocalypse—"remains behind beneath the heavens," the heavens of Shakespeare's Denmark, one might add.[27] Other accounts of time schemes supposed to inform *Hamlet*, such as those described by Wylie Sypher, Barbara Everett, and Eric Levy, also do not include mention of the Apocalypse.[28]

Quinones's time scheme is not the only one capable of being associated with Apocalypse in *Hamlet*. Another in fact finds its grounding in sixteenth-century thinking and writing. The most influential sixteenth-century Protestant reading of the Apocalypse, John Bale's *The Image of Bothe Churches* (1547, 1550, 1551), postulates seven ages of history beginning with the death of Christ, with Doomsday occurring in the short seventh age (the forty-two-month period of Last Days suggested in Revelation).[29] Bale at mid-sixteenth century predicted that the seventh age was not far off. Because Revelation includes mention of seven churches, seven angels, seven seals, and seven trumpets, seven became a popular apocalyptic number.[30] The doctrine of the seven seals, for Shakespeare's contemporaries, plausibly dovetailed with the notion of seven historical epochs of apocalyptic time, with each age breaking one of the seals.[31] Bale's time scheme gained credibility by its correspondence with the prominence of the number seven in Tudor conceptions of secular time and government. In book 2, canto 10 of *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), Edmund Spenser, in his version of English history set forth in two fictitious volumes titled *Briton moniments* and *Antiquitie of Faerie lond*, implies, following Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577, 1587), that the "changes in the government and the religion of Britain occur in cycles, each a multiple of seven or nine."[32] In this respect, however, the poet prefers seven to the virtual exclusion of nine: Brutus's heirs held his scepter for exactly seven hundred years (*FQ* 2.10.36.1–3); seven beneficent kings and their offspring and then "seuen hundred Princes" precede the rule of mighty Elficleos (King Henry VII) (*FQ* 2.10.73–74, esp. 74.3). The

concept of seven apocalyptic ages also corresponded to the seven ages of humankind, with the last Doomsday period corresponding to the seventh, senile old age of a person—Jaques's word picture in *As You Like It* of "second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.164–65). Given the pervasive apocalyptic allusions of *Hamlet*, astute playgoers could understand Hamlet's characterization of Polonius's childish behavior and the childishness of a society that preferred child actors to adult ones as evidence that the world of the play has entered the final stage of apocalyptic time.

This conclusion seems at odds with Hamlet's "old-age" wisdom in the graveyard as well as—more tellingly—with the impression of the ongoingness, the renovation (or purgation) of Denmark created by the ending of the play.[33] Attempting a description of why Hamlet should be immune to the childish thought and behavior involved in the deteriorating apocalyptic society of Denmark seems to be required by my judgment at the end of the preceding paragraph. Hamlet's calm pronouncement that "[t]he readiness is all" (5.2.218), that being intellectually and spiritually ready to die at any moment, derives from his Christian conviction that "[t]here is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.215–16). Hamlet has rationalized that his killing of Polonius was not accidental, but in fact God-ordained to make him the divine scourge ordained to weed morally the wild garden of Denmark, at the necessary price of his own sacrificial death (3.4.174–81). Hamlet's belief that Providence rules his actions calms him, giving him the confidence to drift into the duel with Laertes. The answer to the Gravedigger's riddle about who among masons, shipwrights, and carpenters builds strongest is the grave maker, for "[t]he houses he makes lasts till doomsday" (5.1.37–59, esp. 59). Believing himself to be God's scourge and minister (3.4.174–79), Hamlet must also believe that he will die in cutting out the evil of Denmark and that the grave soon will be his house until the great trumpet blows at Doomsday and he is judged. Hamlet knows that, whether Apocalypse is near or far off, the self-sacrificial role that he will have played as God's scourge will determine his personal doomsday judgment.

Christopher Marlowe in *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I & II* (c.1587) had popularized in his portrayal of the notorious Scythian shepherd become emperor the biblical Scourge of God, that is, a ruler of terrible

cruelty with a fearsome capacity for violence like the Assyrian chronicled by Isaiah (10:5–12).[34] But Hamlet does not appear to resemble this horrific model. Jeffrey Knapp has pointed to an alternative biblical idea of a scourge sometimes quoted by Elizabethans attempting to define the scourge's moral status: "'[I]t must needs be that offenses shall come, but woe be to that man, by whom the offense cometh'" (Matt. 18:7).[35] In this case, an Attila-like appetite for cruelty is not required for the man becoming God's rod to chastise evildoers, the man who will die after he has performed—or as he performs—his providential role. R. W. Dent expanded our understanding of the early modern English conception of the Scourge of God by demonstrating from an analysis of contemporary texts that a human scourge need neither be terrible in evil nor necessarily damned. Among these texts, which include John Marston's *Scourge of Villanie*, Antony Nixon's *Scourge of Corruption*, and Samuel Gardiner's *Scourge of Sacriledge*, Dent cites Thomas Churchyard's *A Scourge for Rebels: Wherin are many notable seruices truly set out ... touching the troubles of Ireland, as farre as the painfull and dutifull seruice of the Earle of Ormound* (1584). This title, in Dent's words, "expresses nothing but admiration for the Earl as a divine scourge who 'took no regard of blood, birth, friendship, familiarity, nor personage whatsoeuer, when it came to ye point of iustice.'"[36] Hamlet seems closer in characterization to Churchyard's Earl of Ormound than to Marlowe's Tamburlaine or Isaiah's frightful Assyria. When the prince says that "heaven hath pleas'd it so, / To punish me with this [the killing of Polonius] and this [Polonius's corpse] with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.175–77), he may mean no more than that he will suffer the legal penalty for murder—not damnation—as the ultimate "punishment" entailed in becoming heaven's scourge.

Hamlet's later calmness in the face of death, at times almost a serenity, suggests that he believes that the killing of Polonius does not inevitably involve a damning judgment on him. One way of understanding Hamlet's exemption from the pervasive regression to childishness in Denmark involves grasping his possible status as God's agent, a man divinely sanctioned to go backward in time through his mind so as to gain a kind of wisdom appropriate for his singular role. Hamlet's dying wish that Horatio "[r]eport [him] and [his] cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (5.2.344–45)

and his plea that his friend tell his story so that Hamlet does not leave "a wounded name" behind him (5.2.344–45, 349–50) imply that Hamlet does not think that he has acted hellishly (that is to say Hell-bound). Hamlet's purging Denmark of evil and his desire that Horatio live to tell his story, presumably to clarify his role as divine scourge, suggest that Doomsday is not near. The possibility inherent in *Hamlet* that the prince is God's scourge suggests that a society's renovation rather than destruction is the issue at play's end. Shakespeare's age understood Revelation to forecast two victories over Antichrist, an initial one followed by a literal or figurative millennium of peace, and a second conclusive triumph, after the loosed Beast has again terrorized the world. After the final battle at Armageddon, "the earthly stage of the cosmic drama ... will then be replaced by 'a new heaven and a new earth', while a 'new Jerusalem' will come down 'from God out of heaven' to be married to the Lamb in an eternal union."[37] Norman Cohn has described the historical origin of this order in a sixth-century Sibylline prophecy of the Emperor of the Last Days, a powerful ruler who would preside over the golden age of the millennium existing between the first and the conclusive binding of the Beast/Dragon/Antichrist.[38] In 1600, the candidate for this popular apocalyptic ruler, who at one time or another had been Constantine; Charlemagne; Charles, King of the Franks and King of the Lombards; and Frederick II, was Queen Elizabeth I.[39] Many English citizens regarded the spectacular defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 as the initial binding of the Beast that would begin the golden age ruled by the Emperor of the Last Days, Elizabeth Regina.

The positive sense of the ongoingness and purified nature of Denmark at the end of the apocalyptic play *Hamlet* can be explained as a fictional correlative of the optimism, expressed at times during the English 1590s, inherent in the apocalyptic doctrine described in the latter half of the preceding paragraph. This optimism is most memorably expressed at the conclusion of book 1 of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene.* Florence Sandler has recently explained how thoroughly Spenser's Legend of Holiness is an apocalyptic argument, one culminating in Queen Elizabeth's figuration as Una, the Woman of the Sun of Revelation, participating in book 12 in the final defeat of the Great Dragon and, as Bride, in the marriage with the Lamb (*FQ* 1.12.19–24, 36–39).[40] This

allegorical allusion, however, points out a difference between Elizabeth's figuration and Elizabeth herself that suggests a nonoptimistic apocalyptic reading of the ending of *Hamlet*. The Woman of the Sun of Revelation is with child; "threatened by the Great Red Dragon, [she] escapes and delivers the child who is to rule the nations and is caught up to the throne of God."[41] Queen Elizabeth remained childless, her barrenness a source of profound cultural anxiety in the centennial year 1600 when she turned sixty-seven. Those subjects of hers who did not believe 1600 might be an apocalyptic year nevertheless likely feared that her death could not be far off and that civil war among claimants to the throne could turn England into a wasteland approximating the landscape of Apocalypse.

Like Shakespeare's Denmark at the end of *Hamlet*, England in 1600 lacked a natural heir to the throne. Even though electors determine the monarch in the playwright's Denmark (5.2.65, 360–61), no one worthy among the cast of characters survives to promise worthy rule. Fortinbras seizes Denmark to make it a satellite of Norway. Left as citizens of this possessed state are the superficial Osric and the faceless toadying courtiers who went along with Claudius's morally questionable marriage to Gertrude. Hamlet may have weeded Denmark of evil, but the country is left a political wasteland. Fortinbras's deception of his uncle, the king of Norway, and his willingness to waste his soldiers' lives for trivial ends do not promise happiness for Danes under his rule. In 1600, the rapidly aging Elizabeth had not named a successor; she would only do so in a reported dying breath whispered in 1603 into Lord Burghley's ear. All this is to say that Queen Elizabeth in 1599–1600 to many of her subjects did not appear to be the Emperor of the Last Days of the Apocalypse, but an unpopular, barren ruler of a country racked by economic inflation and oppressive taxation, threatened by the agents of the Catholic Antichrist, decimated by venereal disease, bubonic plague, and agricultural shortfalls.[42] England's heirless future seemed to reflect the exhaustion of a world, the short time before Doomsday rather than the advent of the millennium. Shakespeare constructs the ending of *Hamlet* to reflect this possibility also.

One leaves Shakespeare's tragedy with the impression that the playwright, to use a phrase of Joseph Wittreich's, subscribes to an "apocalypse of the mind" rather than an Apocalypse of the world.

"Resisting the inclination of their age to trust in the imminence of the apocalypse, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the later Milton relegate Apocalypse, as popularly understood, to the future . . . and make that event dependent upon an apocalypse of mind in the present age. Each of these poets creates a great prophetic projection through which we can read the Poets' Revelation and which gathers into focus an authentically British tradition."[43] This relegation in Spenser's case is to a future beyond history; for by the time he broke off the apparent fragment of book 7 titled "The Mutability Cantos," Apocalypse had been deferred beyond Red Cross Knight's years of renewed earthly service to Gloriana to "that great Sabbaoth God," whom Spenser begs to "graunt [him after death] that Sabaoths sight" (7.8.2.9). Spenser "prays for the sight of the Lord on the last day: both for the sight of the host, the body of the redeemed, and for his place of rest after the six days of creating the six books of the *FQ*."[44] The deferral of Apocalypse is both created by and the product of an apocalypse of mind—an intellectual state with spiritual dimensions that experiences the Apocalypse inwardly rather than literally. Wittreich argues that when Kent late in *King Lear* asks "Is this the promised end?" and Edgar responds "Or image of that horror?" (5.3.268–69), Shakespeare opts for the latter possibility and thus the deferral of Apocalypse. The same point could be made for the ending of *Hamlet*. In the degeneration focused by the apparent forward backward movement of time in this tragedy, Danish society is imaged in a paradoxical childishness of the elapsing Last Days. Shakespeare's is one of "the Poets' Revelations," to use Wittreich's phrase, that may have helped early modern English playgoers and readers to "know" the Apocalypse they very likely in their lifetimes would not experience.

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NOTES

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden Shakespeare, Second Series (London: Methuen, 1982). All quotations of *Hamlet* are taken from this edition. All other quotations of Shakespeare plays are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, updated 4th edition (New York: Longman, 1997).

[2] Eric P. Levy, "'The Time is Out of Joint': The Resetting of Time in *Hamlet*," *The Critical Review* 40 (2000): 32–46, esp. 42. Levy also associates the image of Hamlet walking forward with

his head turned over his shoulder with the contortion of "the false diviners or soothsayers in the fourth *bolgia* or pouch of Dante's *Inferno.* There the torment of the damned is to have their heads twisted 180 degrees on their necks: 'because he wished to see too far before him [that is, into the future], he looks behind and makes his way backwards' (*Inferno*, XX. 38–9). Hamlet's plight exactly reverses their predicament. Because he wishes to look behind (that is, at the past), he is hampered in his movement ahead. The link with the *Inferno* is tightened by Ophelia's associating of Hamlet's plight with the state of damnation: 'As if he had been loosed from hell' (2.1.83)" (42–43). Commentators on Shakespeare's plays have generally agreed, however, that Shakespeare almost certainly did not read Dante's *Commedia*, since it did not exist in English translation and few copies in Italian were available in England.

[3] The Fool in *King Lear* testifies to the notorious sourness of the wild crab apple (1.5.14–18).

[4] Edmund Spenser in the "Cantos of Mutabilitie," included in the first folio edition of *The Faerie Queene* (1609), personifies the month of June as riding upon a "Crab [the zodiacal sign Cancer] ... that him did beare / With crooked crawling steps an vncouth pase, / And backward yode [went], as Bargemen wont to fare / Bending their force contrary to their face, / Like that vngracious crew which faines demurest grace" (7.7.35.5–9). *Spenser:* The Faerie Queene, ed. A. C. Hamilton; text. ed. Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki, 2nd ed. (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 707. Later references to *The Faerie Queene* refer to this edition.

[5] David Kaula, "*Hamlet* and the Image of Both Churches," *Studies in English Literature: 1500–1900* 24 (1984): 241–55; Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan Hamlet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 50, 115, 160; Linda Kay Hoff, *Hamlet's Choice:* Hamlet*—A Reformation Allegory*, Studies in Renaissance Literature 2 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990); Hiroshi Ozawa, "'I Must Be Cruel Only to Be Kind': Apocalyptic Repercussions in *Hamlet*," in Hamlet *and Japan*, ed. Yoshiko Uéno (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 87–101; Margreta de Grazia, "Weeping for Hecuba," *Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Carla Mazzio and Douglas Trevor (New York: Routledge, 2000), 350–75, esp. 359. The quotation appears in Kaula, 245.

[6] Kaula, 241. *Hamlet* may contain more explicit references to Doomsday, but the Apocalypse as a dramatic motif is present implicitly to a greater degree in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. See Joseph Wittreich, "'Image of that horror': The Apocalypse in *King Lear*," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 175–206. In addition to his analysis of *King* Lear, Wittreich cites references to the Apocalypse in certain history plays and tragedies of Shakespeare, including notably *Richard III, King Henry VIII, Macbeth,* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (176–78). Interestingly, he does not mention *Hamlet*. For the Apocalyptic dimensions of *Macbeth*, see Wittreich 196 and Jane H. Jack, "*Macbeth*, King James, and the Bible," *ELH* 22 (1955): 173–93, esp. 175–76, 180, 185–92.

[7] Jenkins, 13.

[8] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 185.

[9] Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 17.

[10] Ozawa, 88. This commentator remarks that "[b]y referring to the eclipses of 'the sun; and the moist star,' Horatio's speech of prophecy [1.1.116–28, esp. 21] assumes an apocalyptic immediacy for an Elizabethan audience" (88).

[11] Ozawa, 89.

[12] Firth 191–95, esp. 195.

[13] Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978), 136, 139–40.

[14] Roslyn L. Knutson, "Falconer to the Little Eyases: A New Date and Commercial Agenda for the 'Little Eyases' Passage in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46 (1995): 1–31, esp. 10–11. Knutson further remarks, "Making its debut in spring or summer of 1600, *Hamlet* enjoyed an unusually successful run of sixteen to twenty-two performances over seventeen months and was retired by the fall of 1601. Its registration at Stationers' Hall on 26 July 1602 is a sign that the maiden run had ended in the past twelve months" (29).

[15] *Shakespeare's Plays in Quarto: A Facsimile Edition of Copies Primarily from the Henry E. Huntington Library*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[16] Knutson, 11. This commentator notes that "[t]he unambiguous reference to public audiences and private plays ('the principall publike audience that / Came to them, are turned to priuate playes'), plus a pun on 'humour' as a kind of play and as the whimsical appeal of children players, catches precisely the spirit of the allusion: bemused, tolerant, confident that the fashion will pass, but depressed by the fickleness of playgoers" (11).

[17] Knutson, 30. Significantly, the four-verse passage in Q1 alluding to the new taste for private children's theater is absent from the second quarto of *Hamlet* (1604/1605).

[18] Knutson, 13.

[19] Jenkins, 255.

[20] Knutson, 17, 23–24.

[21] Jenkins, 2.

[22] Cynthia Marshall, in *Last Things and Last Plays: Shakespearean Eschatology* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), incidentally illuminates this simultaneously retrogressive forward function of time when she comments on a Freudian phenomenon in connection with her discussion of apocalyptic motifs in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. "Freud essentially perceives a dialectic in the creative process between time's forward movement and the retrogressive habits of human desire. His model resembles that inherent in the culturally created concept of paradise, whose recurrence at time's beginning and ending testifies to the way 'we can never give anything up'" (96). Marshall's insight prompts the realization that the childishness represented in *Hamlet* at the end of both an individual lifetime and the world's lifetime amounts to an anything-but-paradisiacal regressive adult tendency.

[23] Admittedly, it is possible to read Rosencrantz's assertion that the tyrannical "clapping" that the boy actors receive for "crying out on the top of question" refers to their punishment (figurative spanking?) by King James's agent for irritating a powerful royal constituency through their shrieking responses to their critics (Knutson, 30). I doubt, however, that the playwright of the King's Men would have called such punishment tyrannical, or that a royal constituency would have become enraged over a manner of speech rather the treatment of certain subject matter. Thus I prefer the reading of the phrase "tyrannically clapp'd" as referring a kind of "dictatorial" audience applause, most likely so both in its provocation and its effect.

[24] Richard Fly, in "Accommodating Death: The Ending of *Hamlet*," *Studies in English Literature: 1500–1900* 24 (1984): 257–74, cites the report of "[t]he celebrated tragedians of the city" giving way to "a troop of satirical child actors" as evidence of a "rank corruption [that] infects all social spheres of the kingdom, undermining previously established value systems" (264).

[25] Bernard Capp, "The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 93–124, esp. 95.

[26] Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 31 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 397–98.

[27] Clifford Davidson, "The Triumph of Time," *Dalhousie Review* 50 (1970): 170–81, esp. 170.

[28] Wylie Sypher, *The Ethic of Time: Structures of Experience in Shakespeare* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 65–89; Barbara Everett, "*Hamlet:* A Time to Die," *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977): 117–23, esp. 119–23; Levy 32–46. Sypher does, however, during his explication of what he calls "punctiform time" in *Hamlet*, assert that after the Gravedigger scene "[t]ime now seems to Hamlet to have a benignity, since the houses a gravedigger makes last until doomsday" (85).

[29] Firth, 38–39, 41. For more on the apocalyptic importance of Bale's writing, including his *Image of Bothe Churches*, see Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 247–94, esp. 258.

[30] John Foxe, in his late work *Eicasmi* (publ. 1587), "found [that] the seven trumpets [of Revelation] clearly contained seven successive and not simultaneous times. He noted the idea of the world-week and the elaboration into seven millennia" (Firth, 93).

[31] Firth, 92.

[32] *Spenser:* The Faerie Queene, 258.

[33] Hamlet's "old-age" wisdom is consistent with the unity of self, symbolized by the word *one* in his pronouncement that "a man's life's no more than to say 'one'" (5.2.74), that he achieves late in the play. For an explication of this unity of self with reference to the word *one* in Hamlet's pronouncement, see Ralph Berry, "'To say one': An Essay on *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 107–15.

[34] See Roy Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), 108–13. Also see C. J. Sisson, *Shakespeare's Tragic Justice* (London: Methuen, 1963), 104–6.

[35] Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 125.

[36] R. W. Dent, "Hamlet: Scourge and Minister," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29 (1978): 82–84, esp. 83. Dent concludes that "[t]here is no hint [of taint or need for eventual punishment] in the praise afforded heroic Talbot at his death: 'the Frenchman's only scourge, / Your kingdom's terror and black Nemesis' (that is, instrument of divine justice; *I Henry VI*, IV. vii. 77).... What was true of Shakespeare's usage was true of the age. How else can one explain the readiness with which writers contemporary with *Hamlet* assumed the title of 'scourge'" (83).

[37] M. H. Abrams, "Apocalypse: Theme and Variations," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 342–68, esp. 344–45.

[38] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 30–33, 71–88. Note that the time period denoted by "the Last Days" in this nonbiblical aspect of Apocalypse differs from that of John Bale and other Protestant Tudor apocalyptic writers, who—as was previously

mentioned—called the short seventh age of history, the forty-two-month period during which Doomsday would occur, the period of "the Last Days."

[39] Capp, 94; Ozawa, 88; Helgerson, 260. Helgerson notes that, like the Roman Emperor "Constantine before her, Elizabeth could be seen as a type of the Emperor of the Last Days, the godly ruler who ends the persecution of the elect and institutes a period of Christian peace. The strongest expression of this imperial association appeared in the 1563 edition of [Foxe's] *Acts and Monuments*, where an initial letter C beginning the word *Constantine* contains a portrait of Elizabeth triumphing over the papal Antichrist" (260).

[40] Florence Sandler, "*The Faerie Queene:* An Elizabethan Apocalypse," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 148–74. The identification of Una as the Woman of the Sun of Revelation is initially made in *FQ* 1.3.4.6–9; it recurs in 1.12.23.1–2 during the Wedding of the Bride Una to the Lamb Christ/Red Cross Knight. The apocalyptic motifs of book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* are described briefly by John N. King, "Spenser's Religion," *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfild (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200–216, esp. 213–14; and more extensively by Kenneth Borris, *Spenser's Poetics of Prophecy in* The Faerie Queene V, English Literary Studies Monograph Series 52 (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1991) esp. 19–35.

[41] Sandler, 163–64.

[42] Evidence for these claims can be found in Eric S. Mallin, *Inscribing the Time: Shakespeare and the End of Elizabethan England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 10–12, 25–166; and, more generally, in Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*, trans. James Coonan (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 53–96 *passim;* Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982) *passim;* A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (London: Methuen, 1985) *passim;* Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances, 1509–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 55–81, 157–229, 255–305; and in Maurice Hunt, *Shakespeare's Labored Art* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 15–18.

[43] Wittreich, 199.

[44] *Spenser:* The Faerie Queene, 712.