Shakespeare, Renan and Weber: an interdisciplinary study of the violence paradigm and what it means to law and the nation-state

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6 *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

6.1 Introduction

First of all, a few words about the manuscript and the content of the play, as the publishing history of Hamlet has caused difficulties among scholars. In 1603, a "bad quarto" (Q1) was published. In 1604/05, an apparently "good quarto" followed (Q2). The first folio (F) appeared in 1623. Below, I will follow the conflated text of the Oxford Shakespeare, which indicates the additions and omissions from the three editions.

In his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary,* Jan Kott mentions the fact that the bibliography of dissertations and studies devoted to *Hamlet* is twice the size of Warsaw's telephone directory.[1] Further down in his discussion, the same author asserts that the issues addressed in *Hamlet* are countless.

> There is politics, force opposed to morality; there is discussion of the divergence between theory and practice, of the ultimate purpose of life; there is tragedy of love, as well as family drama; political, eschatological and metaphysical problems are considered. There is everything you want, including deep psychological analysis, a bloody story, a duel, and general slaughter. One can select at will.[2]

All the aspects mentioned in this quote are encompassed within the tragic process that Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, goes through. The spectator cannot help but be moved, witnessing it. The play attacks the viewer, grabbing him by the throat. And it has done so throughout the centuries, and it still does, even to postmodern man. This characteristic, this streak of genius, makes for the universality of *Hamlet*.

In this colorful landscape of thematics I will limit myself (with the utmost prudence and modesty) to the theme at hand: the development of a nation through tragic crisis and the corresponding patterns of violence; full well knowing that, looking at the amount of research and inquiry into the brilliance of *Hamlet*, it will be a next to impossible task to jot down something not-as-yet-observed about this tragedy. This, certainly, is not my aim. I will try to come as close as possible to the quintessence of the *Hamletian* tragic violence.

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1 J. Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, p. 57.
2 Ibid, p. 59.

Hamlet starts where *Macbeth* leaves off. In *Macbeth,* we saw the desire to form a unity/embryonic nation by abolishing the legal primitivism of *sippenhaft* revenge. In this chapter, I argue that the *Hamletian* theme revolves not around revenge, but around the building of a nation-state out of a tribal community. *Hamlet* marks the transition from tribal law to monarchical law, including a first hint at a separation of powers. The types of violence we see in *Hamlet* evolve parallel to this; moreover, the play takes a hinge position between *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Like in the other tragedies discussed, *Hamlet's* violence paradigm too is pre-ethical and a-religious, as will be shown in this chapter.

Furthermore, in this chapter, I show that Renan's will is not the only resultant of the tragic crisis; also values such as those discussed by him ensue from the same tragic crisis.

There is no single system clash in Hamlet. It is a cascade of system clashes that, through enormous leaps in time, tumble over each other. Herewith, Shakespeare stretches the tension within the play to the limit.

Firstly, Claudius breaks with the old Nordic elective system and murders his brother. This, however, is just a relapse of another older custom of succession violence. Next we see him inefficiently using the new form of diplomacy and negotiation. He completely loses his bearing as to governance and diplomacy. Polonius is the caricature of a diplomat and Lord Chancellor.

I will explain that the violence used by Hamlet[3] – he kills not only Polonius, but also Guildenstern and Rosencrantz; his last murder being that of Claudius – is justified and I will assess him along the lines of the young and developing craft of the statesman/politician/courtier; concluding that he is, in fact, far better than his father.

Finally, in Act 5, we see Hamlet casting his vote for a new monarch, stipulating in his will a separation of governmental duties and responsibilities: a first hint at a separation of powers. The entire play exudes an uneasy atmosphere of transition between Nordic/Anglo Norman chieftainship and Tudor/Stuart leadership.

6.2 Discussion of *Hamlet*: the setting of the scene

The play opens with a scene on the battlements of Castle Elsinore. Two guards had seen a ghost and now Horatio, Hamlet's friend and fellow student from Wittenberg, has come to see for himself. The ghost appears again; it strikingly resembles Hamlet's father (who died a few weeks earlier), having the same

3 In order to be able to enjoy the plot of this beautiful tragedy to the full, I gladly refer to the summary in the Appendices.

"martial stalk"[4] and battle array he had. Horatio tries to speak with the apparition, but it refuses to talk.

From the dialogue between the two guards, we learn that, not long ago, there had been two conflicts (a war against Norway and an armed skirmish against Poland[5]) in which the "warlike form"[6] of Hamlet Sr. had taken part, winning both. We also learn that Hamlet Sr. was provoked by Norway to start the war,[7] but, against all odds, apparently, Danish Hamlet Sr. had won and claimed all land from the slain Norwegian king. The conflict between Poland and Denmark[8] was also won.[9] Hamlet Sr. is described as having been of a belligerent disposition and successful in protecting his country against aggressors (as befitting a true tribal warrior – Hamlet Sr., in this sense, incorporated the last echoes of old lore). The country is preparing for war again, as is said during the same conversation: the Norwegians want to win back their former territory, taken by the late Danish king. But, Denmark having no longer the prowess of a good fighter and leader, Horatio fears the worst for the Danish lands. He compares the precarious state it is in with Rome's hazardous situation just before Julius Caesar was killed.[10] Why is it that Horatio makes this comparison? He explains: there is something fundamentally amiss[11] with the country. And that something could be compared with the perilous state Rome was in. This is an important remark linking the thematic of this tragedy with that of our next play *Julius Caesar*. Moreover, this is but the first reference in this play to *Julius Caesar*; more are to follow. It is another indication that *Hamlet* is a transitory play between two worlds: the world of Macbeth and the world of Rome.

After having seen the ghost, Horatio again expresses his fears: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state."[12] Horatio's comment is striking for two reasons. Firstly, Horatio defines himself as a Dane (*our* state) or at least he considers himself to be so; and secondly, he mentions the word *state* instead

4 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 65.
5 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 66.
6 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 45.
7 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 64.
8 Some scholars hold that it was Hamlet Sr. that initiated these wars because of lines 112 – 114 (act 1, I): "Well may it sort that this portentous figure,/Comes armed through our watch so like the King/That was and is the question of these wars." However, the war against Norway was most certainly initiated by that country (ll. 85 – 90). Moreover line 114, act 1, I, could refer to Hamlet being the cause of the war, as well as to his armour being a sure sign of the danger of the (impending) war. (Source: *Hamlet*, Arden Edition, ed., Harold Jenkins, p. 173). I would opt for the second interpretation, since it is in accordance with the rest of the text (and the character and actions of (the ghost) Hamlet Sr).
9 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 65. We do not know for sure who started this conflict, but since it was Hamlet Sr. that frowned at the Poles it must have been Poland, since frowning is mostly done in reaction to something.
10 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, ll. 115 – 127.
11 Apart from the fact that Hamlet Sr. is no longer there to protect Denmark.
12 *Hamlet*, act 1. I, l. 68.

of *nation*, *common weal*, or simply Denmark. I will come back to this issue below. For now, let us note that he means the state of the nation at this point in time: it has lost its martial mainstay and there is some fundamental evil, as yet unnamed and frightening, plaguing the country. In the late king's stead, a no-good king[13] now reigns. And there is, of course, the grieving and depressed prince, being not a bit like his successful father. The queen and mother is unstable and weak ("frailty, thy name is woman", act 1.II, l. 146): shortly after her first husband's death, she had, opportunistically,[14] married Claudius and she is therefore no support to her son.

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that a marriage between the victor of a battle and the wife of his victim (mostly the previous tribal leader) was quite customary. From this perspective, Hamlet's reaction to his mother's marriage should be considered out of the ordinary.

Here, Shakespeare evokes the tension of transition between old and new by playing havoc with the expected responses in Hamlet. Shakespeare, with equal ease and in the same swoop, not only provokes a tension between the old northern/Danish customs and the dawning new era (as represented by Hamlet and his studies in Wittenberg), but also between Nordic- and his own time, because Shakespeare indicates the marriage as incestuous and "A little month" after Hamlet Sr.'s death (Act I, 2, l 147.). And indeed, under the strict conditions of the Levirate marriage,[15] the English law of Shakespeare's time would have considered the marriage incestuous, as Posner remarks.[16] However, Hamlet is set centuries earlier – a fact with which, actually, Posner concurs. Yet, he does not conclude that, therefore, the marriage would have been quite ordinary. In this sense, *Hamlet* is a multi-transitional play. As we have seen in the previous chapter, wrenching and reversing imagery, times and a period's particulars are all in the Shakespearean game.

What depresses Hamlet most, though, is not his father's death or his mother's remarriage to a hated uncle, but the fact that he should be silent about this – in his eyes – outrageous fact.

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13 According to Hamlet Jr. At that point in time Hamlet does not as yet know that Claudius is a usurper that killed the lawful king.

14 Gertrude is depicted by Shakespeare as an uninfluential woman busying herself with trivialities, a lightweight much like Ophelia. Not a bit like Portia and Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*.

15 "The conflict between Prince Hamlet and Claudius can be recast as a scriptural conflict between the incest taboo of Leviticus 18, which forbids marriage to a sister-in-law, and the rule of levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25, which commands a brother to marry his deceased brother's widow [these contradictory rulings would have, at best, provoked no small amount of tension]. Of relevance here is Henry VIII's divorce of Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his brother Prince Arthur, in order to marry Ann Boleyn, mother of Elizabeth I." Source: Jason P. Rosenblatt, "Hamlet, Henry, *Epicoene*, and Hebraica: Marriage Questions", p. 14.

16 Source: Posner, Law & Literature, note 45, p. 105.

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of the world!
> […]
> It is not nor it cannot come to good:
> But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.[17]

Hamlet compares his late father and Claudius to Hyperion[18] and a satyr, respectively (act 1.II, l. 140). He adds: "My father's brother, but no more like my father/Than I to Hercules."[19] In other words, Hamlet doesn't deem himself courageous, indeed, he feels himself to be quite the opposite of his father, making an unfavorable comparison altogether.

6.3 King Claudius

Meanwhile, Claudius quickly takes possession of his position and, although he ought to grieve, he admits, he wants to combine the grieving with business as life goes on, doesn't it, and moreover, we should think of ourselves, shouldn't we. Ah yes, and while we're at it, we might as well marry the grieving widow (act 1, II, ll. 1 – 20). Equally effortlessly, Claudius takes the affairs of the country in hand, resolutely reorganizing them.[20] He dispatches two messengers to Norway[21] to "suppress his [young Fortinbras's] gait"[22] towards war with Denmark. In fact, he sends them not to young Fortinbras, but to the latter's bedridden uncle, who is officially the king of Norway, but only in name. His young nephew is in charge, as we learn. Claudius asks the old king to dissuade his nephew from war.[23]

At first sight, Claudius seems to be an efficient and successful king: he tries to prevent a war with Norway and – in his next conversation – tries to prevent Hamlet from running amok. Yet, from his entrance speech on, it becomes crystal clear what kind of person the new king of Denmark is: a

17 Hamlet, act 1. II, ll. 133 – 159.
18 Greek mythology: the Titan of the Sun.
19 Greek mythology: one the bravest heroes. *Hamlet*, act 1. II, ll. 152 – 153.
20 Yet Claudius knows but too well his status and performance can never bear fruit, for they are based on usurpation and murder: fratricide no less. "Oh, my offence is rank! It smells to heaven./ It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,/ A brother's murder. Pray can I not./ Though inclination be as sharp as will,/ My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,/ And like a man to double business bound/ I stand in pause where I shall first begin,/ And both neglect." Act 3, II, ll 36 – 43. The personal mark and seal that he leaves on the kingdom is perfidious: and he is well aware of it.
21 Here again, a disruption of times and customs may be perceived. In Nordic times political and territorial issues were usually not solved by diplomacy but by the axe.
22 *Hamlet*, act 1, II, l. 31.
23 Later in the play we learn that this is Claudius' characteristic cause of action: instead of acting himself, he gets others to do it for him, manipulating them (the King of England, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes).

hustler and deal-broker, hiding behind cheerful briskness and manipulation. Hamlet is right to intuitively dislike his uncle and be concerned. Moreover, he is not the only one: Marcellus, the guard, had sensed: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (act 1, III, l. 67). As we saw above, Horatio had voiced concerns of the same nature. These premonitions hang uneasily above the scene, it is still to be seen whether the rotten reek rises uniquely from Claudius; perhaps there is more.

Claudius is depicted here as a hybrid personality between old Nordic custom (succession and marriage) and the "newfangled" ways. The killing of his brother follows the old Nordic manner of succession violence, stemming from the oral tribal tradition. Therefore, as we have seen in Macbeth, we cannot classify that violence under a codified legal system since there is no system for classification. This violence arises from legal primitivism, similar to Macbeth's. Paradoxically, he employs the relatively new tool of Renaissance diplomacy. It is clear that he is inexperienced in this role: his diplomatic mission is misdirected (the wrong power source is addressed), yet he attempts to organize the affairs of state rationally. Because he is able to manage this mission, it becomes evident that–as in Macbeth–justice and the country's protection rest in his hands, which again indicates a tribal concentration of power.

The king is not averse to favoritism: when Laertes wants to ask him a favor, Claudius' response is upfront and resolute. He will grant Laertes anything because his father is as close to the throne as hand is to heart, as he asserts (Act 1: II, ll. 42 – 47). We meet the same warm-hearted courteous and gentlemanly behavior in the next chapter in Julius Caesar when the latter entertains his friends at home. As it will turn out, both gentlemen playact to hide their behavioral and character issues in which they abound.

After having concluded these affairs, Claudius speaks to Hamlet, trying to allay his grief. Hamlet reacts surprisingly accurately and is quick-witted for someone submerged in mourning:

> Claudius: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son,
> Hamlet: A little more than kin, and less than kind.[24]

6.4 Who is Hamlet; what is he up against

As we learnt previously, Hamlet is depressed and grieving; angry and lonely (*melancholy* as Renaissance physicians would call Hamlet's *humour*), but as yet, not going through a tragic process. His emotional isolation is caused by:

– The loss of the three people he loves and trusts most: his father is dead, his mother is emotionally absent and Ophelia (his sweetheart) is obedient

24 *Hamlet*, act 1, II, ll. 64 – 65.

to her father who forbids her to consort with a member of the royal family, as he is not altogether in her league (act 1, III, ll. 115 – 135). Apart from Horatio, there is no one he can truly trust (see note with quote below).
– He feels ineffective and powerless, as he is the opposite of his warlike father.
– Hamlet shrouds himself in a defensive aura of witticisms.[25] He displays this type of quick reply (philosophically tinted or otherwise incisive) when he wants to avoid a conversation about what truly moves him.[26]

He, however, has a sharp and sensitive perception of the reality surrounding him, and he is capable of analyzing and assessing it. When he is brought to the battlements by Horatio (hoping to meet the ghost), Hamlet expounds on the present state of affairs in Denmark. Hamlet feels he lives in a barbaric culture, deprived of even the most basic forms of civilization:

25 In contrast to e.g. Macbeth, Hamlet's isolation doesn't consist of a lack of meaningful words. Words abound in his vocabulary; however they are used to emphasize his desolation and the passionate perturbations of his mind. He uses words to isolate himself.

26 Throughout the play his quick wit in his communications with others is pervasive (aggressive almost) and very successful in avoiding personal and intimate exchanges. A second strategy to evade this is acting the fool.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reporting Hamlet's behavior to King Claudius, describe it as follows:

> Rosencrantz: He does confess he feels himself distracted;
> But from what cause he will by no means speak.
> Guildenstern: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
> But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
> When we would bring him on to some confession
> Of his true state. Act 3, I, ll5 – 12.

Hamlet even makes Horatio swear not to give him away when he acts " strange". He, however, never takes Horatio into his confidence as to what is going on, thus alienating him.

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. But come;
> Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
> […]
> As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on,
> That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
> With arms encumber'd thus, or this headshake,
> Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
> […]
> Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
> That you know aught of me: […] Swear. Act 1, V, ll.168 – 182.

This heavy-headed revel[27] east and west
Makes us traduced and tax'd of other nations:
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes
From our achievements, though perform'd at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute.
So, oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As, in their birth--wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin--
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausive manners, that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,--
Their virtues else--be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo--
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault: the dram of eale
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal.[28]

6.5 The state of affairs in Denmark

Colorfully, Hamlet describes the rottenness of his fellow countrymen. He abhors their degenerate state; the stench oozes from every word Hamlet spits out; it is not only Claudius, but his entire entourage and, for that matter, all of Denmark he emphasizes; their bad habits corrupting all good they may have: "their virtues else shall in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" (ll. 33 – 35). Claudius, the court and the entire nation act like maladjusted and mentally disabled animals, as Hamlet describes it.

Are the communities of Macbeth and Hamlet similar? At first sight, the above quote could have been a Macbethian one, after a battle won: this being the traditional behavior of carousing (Viking) warriors. Yet there is a difference in the respective murky hues of darkness. *Macbeth* exudes the atmosphere of unadulterated tribal culture. In Hamlet, the darkness is otherwise defined. Instinctively, he correlates the undefined rot to the old tribal/warrior way

27 Hamlet is referring to the splurging drinking-bouts customary at the Danish court.

28 *Hamlet*, act 1.IV, ll. 19 – 41. From This….. up to and including scandal: In Q2; not in Q1 and F.
From line 25 onwards (So oft it chances…. etc.) this quote gives us a perfect example of the tragic philosophy of life, which coincides, as we can see here, with Hamlet's view of life. In other words, Hamlet is susceptible to the tragic.

of acting; by now, it sits uneasily with just about everyone witnessing it. Shakespeare sketches the first ominous signs of what is to happen when a community no longer sustains and accepts the violence of an autocratic tribal leader. However, for now, we may conclude that this society uneasily veers between elective succession, successional violence and the repugnance this evokes. As yet, there is no overt system clash and no revenge problematics.

I will come back to the former theme below and as to the latter, we are immediately served, for in the next scene, the ghost appears and it talks to Hamlet. It gives him three assignments:

– He should avenge his father (act 1, V, l. 8),
– He may not let his vengeance turn against his mother (act 1, l. 86),[29]
– He is asked to remember his father (act 1, V, l. 91).

The vengeance theme deserves some elaboration. Because of the ghost's first request, many critics have seen *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy proper, as, in fact, the Ur-Hamlet (now lost) by Thomas Kyd had been.[30] Shakespeare had allegedly taken the plot of this play and reworked it into *Hamlet*.[31] Below, I will try to argue that *Hamlet* goes far beyond the vengeance theme. I hold that it is not a revenge play at all. However, at this stage it seems to be one, however, the reader is advised to observe Hamlet and his reaction.

6.6 Hamlet's reaction to his assignments

Hamlet immediately understands the enormity of the tasks he is burdened with. He hears that his late father has been vilely murdered by Claudius, who is, as Hamlet understands now, not only a hustler, but also a usurper.

Besides fratricide, it turns out to be regicide as well.[32] With this scene, Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of his age. In Renaissance Europe, regicide is not just the killing of an individual. It has wider implications. The king is

29 The quote reads as follows: "Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught." Some critics hold that the phrase "Taint not thy mind" should be read as a warning not to sin and be dammed. This would make Hamlet a play with a Christian message. I read the quote as two coordinative conjunctions; the conditions being complementary and of the same content.

30 Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's play*, p. 158.

31 Another source, often mentioned, is the work of Saxo Grammaticus in his account of the Danish history, where we find a similar story (source: Kenneth Muir, The Sources of Shakespeare's play, p. 159).

32 Again culture and custom are, anachronistically, those of Shakespeare's time.

the embodiment of the ordered state; the head of a god-given and ordained hierarchy.[33] Kantorowicz:[34]

> [T]he legal jargon of the 'two Bodies' scarcely belonged to the arcana of the legal guild alone. That the king 'is a Corporation in himself that liveth ever,' was a commonplace found in a simple dictionary of legal terms.[35]

It was found in literature as Kantorowicz notes, giving an abundance of examples. A notable one is the following: "Francis Bacon suggested for the crowns of England and Scotland, united in James I, the name of 'Great Britain' as an expression of the 'perfect union of bodies, politic as well as natural.'"[36]

The implications for Hamlet are enormous. If he kills the present king, he kills not only a usurper, but also the (seemingly) stabilized[37] community. In the previous chapter we have seen that in Shakespeare's day the term 'tyrant' could apply to any usurper of power by force as well as to any lawful ruler who governed viciously.[38] For regicide to be just and accepted, the body politic (viz.: it's king) must be most evidently sick. Hamlet himself had – just before – analyzed the sickness and unstableness of that same body politic . This would mean that he is justified in killing the usurper, but is he really? And how can he be sure of his diagnosis?

I argue that Hamlet is very much aware of all the implications of what the ghost asks of him. In avenging his father's death, he should restore the country of Denmark to health. Since king and country are of the same body, Shakespeare seems to say, the very death of Hamlet Sr. means the destabilization of the entire country. It is in great peril. The late king's life's work had been the protection of Denmark against external enemies and the extension of the country's territory.[39] His brother, the deal broker Claudius, could very well nullify this by sending his two envoys to Norway[40] and there

33 The fact that kings and nobles were seen as embodiment of their territory is shown by the fact that they often were addressed by their territory's name. E.g.: Claudius, asking about the diplomat's negotiations with Fortinbras, the Norwegian king: "Welcome, my good friends, /Say, Valtemand, what from our brother Norway?" act 2, II, ll. 58 – 59.

34 Ernst Kantorowicz (1895 – 1963): a German (Prussian) historian of Jewish descent, specializing in mediaeval political and intellectual history on which subjects he wrote a number of thorough and well-received works. In 1938 he fled Germany to pursue his career in the US.

35 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 24.

36 Ibid, p. 24.

37 However, from Shakespeare's biography (see Appendices) we know that from the "natural signs" the average Renaissance audience could "read" the state of the country and since Horatio had duly summed up all occurrences in his comparison with Rome, they already knew that these manifestations boded otherwise.

38 Previous chapter: Robert S. Miola, "Julius Caesar Challenges the Renaissance Debate on Tyrannicide", in Social Issues in Literature, p. 95/96.

39 Extremely important and positively valued qualities for a Renaissance king.

40 The outcome of the deal with Norway is as yet uncertain.

was no telling what he would do next.[41] In other words, the elder Hamlet asks his son to secure his realm. His third request to be remembered reinforces this:

> Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.[42]

These words, spoken in sadness and sorrow by one once so powerful, are both desperate and commanding, with an intensity only the totally disenfranchised can muster. The once king tries to exorcise his powerlessness with this phrase – an incantation almost: keep me alive in your thoughts, but also keep my work alive and keep my realm well.

Considering the circumstances, this is the heftiest task. Apart from nudging the body politic to health, Hamlet is asked to keep in mind and endorse his father's accomplishments vis-à-vis the nation: he has to keep a keen eye on Denmark's (strategic) position and protect the country against invaders as his father had done (old Nordic style). Since Hamlet is – as we have seen – not at all like his warlike father and is, moreover, versed in the ideas of the Renaissance, this means that Hamlet has to change his character and his bearing considerably. It remains to be seen whether he can accomplish this inhumanly difficult task.

6.7 The task begins

Hamlet knows but too well he has to accomplish this alone. As he is also grieving, depressed, angry and of a philosophical disposition, this burden cannot but result in a vast panorama of nearly insurmountables, paradoxical by nature. Hamlet's tragic process commences. Furthermore, to add even more to his uncertainties and anxieties, he doubts the credibility of the ghost. To sum up Hamlet's plight:

- Hamlet is shaken out of his comfort zone (being not so comfortable to begin with) and burdened with an unfeasible task: called upon to avenge his father and therewith restore society to health. What is more, he has to maintain Denmark's military position – Nordic style.
- This is too colossal an order for a single person, but especially for the studious Hamlet. The command makes him feel both more ineffective and alone. Hamlet is asked to be like his father.
- It is impracticable for yet another reason: Hamlet is not a free agent and never will be. This is expressed by Laertes, explaining Hamlet's social

41 In fact, he tried to persuade the king of England to murder Hamlet; when this did not work out, Laertes was exploited.

42 *Hamlet*, act 1, V, l. 91.

status[43] to his sister Ophelia: "his will is not his own/ For he himself is subject to his birth. […] for on his choice depends / the sanity and health of the whole state."[44] Laertes can barely sound the profundity of his words. They are prophetic: Hamlet is imprisoned by his status, and on him rests "the sanity and health of the whole state."

– He feels surrounded by hypocrites and "fishmongers,"[45] of whom he doesn't trust a single person. Moreover, he doesn't know for sure that the ghost is trustworthy.[46] The only person who might help him is Horatio. However, Hamlet made him pledge a vow: not to be surprised at his future behavior. At the same time, Hamlet denies him precise insight into the motivation of this behavior, thus alienating his best friend.
– Indeed, his only weapon in this lonely struggle is his wit. This is, however, a two-edged sword. A quick wit and a ditto mind can also turn against the holder of such features.[47]

> there is nothing
> either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me
> it is a prison.[48]

This ambiguous remark is made by Hamlet while speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Denmark. Not only does Denmark feel like a prison for Hamlet, but his thought also incarcerates his thinking.

Let us join the perplexed Hamlet on the battlements of Elsinore. He decides to try and live up to his task.

> O fie! Hold, hold, my heart, /and you my sinews, grow not instant old,/But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?/ Ay, thou poor ghost, […] I'll wipe away all trivial fond records/All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past/That youth and observation copied there,/And thy commandment all alone shall live/Within the book and volume of my brain (Act 1,V, ll. 93 – 103).

Hamlet is resolved to try and be like his father both in bearing ("bear me stiffly up") and in mind ("thy commandment all alone shall live").

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43 Of course, Laertes words are spoken within the context of Hamlet's freedom to choose his spouse. Even so, Laertes' words clearly show the emblematic characteristics of kingship. The king is not just a private body, he is a public body (see also quote and text above: the king as embodiment of the state). His status setting him boundaries as absolute as the power given to him within these boundaries (cf. Claudius, Duncan and Macbeth). In other words, the king is placed in a paradoxical situation.

44 *Hamlet*, act 1, III, ll. 17 – 21.

45 *Hamlet*, act 2, II, l. 175. Fishmongers, in Shakespeare's time were notorious for their dishonesty and swindle.

46 In the medieval/Renaissance lore ghosts can be benevolent as well as coming from hell.

47 Further down we will see how this will turn out for Hamlet.

48 *Hamlet*, act 2, II, ll. 251 – 253.

Naturally, this creates an enormous tension in Hamlet's mind. Modern psychology would give Hamlet a 0% success rate if he followed this strategy. The rise of this internal tension in Hamlet runs parallel to the tragic course of the plot: we will see Hamlet change from an indecisive youth into full-blown Renaissance royalty, fully using the prerogative coming with it: the execution of violence. Its use is not prompted by personal whim or temper (as with Macbeth), but expressive of his plan to save Denmark. Here then, we observe a different type of violence.

The message that his uncle might be a smiling villain (as the ghost disclosed), making his mother pernicious, fills Hamlet with disgust and loathing.

> That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
> At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark
> […]
> The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right![49]

To play for time, he decides to play the fool; he needs to think it all over.

> His adoption of the pretense of madness may well have been due in part to fear of the reality; to an instinct of self-preservation, a fore-feeling that the pretense would enable him to give some utterance to the load that pressed on his heart and brain, and a fear that he would be unable altogether to repress such utterance.[50]

as Bradley remarked. Earlier in the same book, he observes:

> Hamlet [is] highly intellectual by nature and reflective by habit. [He] may even be called, in a popular sense, philosophic […], being also a 'good' man, show[ing] accordingly, […] a sensitive and almost painful anxiety to do right. And though [he] fails […] the failure […] is rather connected with [his] intellectual nature and reflective habit than with any yielding to passion.[51]

Wilson Knight typifies Hamlet's state of mind as extremely melancholic and cynical.[52]

> Hamlet's soul is sick. The symptoms are horror at the fact of death and an equal detestation of life, a sense of uncleanliness and evil in the things of nature; a disgust at the physical body of man; bitterness, cynicism, hate. It tends towards insanity.

49 *Hamlet*, act 1, V, ll. 109 – 110 and ll. 190 – 191.
50 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 96.
51 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 63.
52 G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 22.

However, "[t]he disease is deeper than his loss of Ophelia, deeper than his mother's sexual impurity and his father's death. [...] the thing itself is ultimate, beyond causality."[53] Wilson Knight identifies "Hamlet's disease as mental and spiritual death."[54] Death being the true theme of the play, as Wilson Knight gives us.

Friedrich Schlegel characterized this typical Hamletian theme as: "a maximum of spiritual despair."[55] Victor Lange translated Schlegel's enunciation as follows:

> There is no more perfect representation of the unresolvable disharmony of the human mind – the true subject matter of philosophical tragedy – than the infinite discrepancies between thought and action in Hamlet's character.[56]

Lange goes on paraphrasing Schlegel's words:[57]

> 'Philosophical' tragedy disturbs without resorting to a vision of relief, it unsettles without catharsis; indeed , its main object is to produce in the audience a philosophical state of doubt and unrest. The modern poet – this is Schlegel's central if not altogether original thesis – recognizes the inevitable alienation of the mind vis-à-vis nature and does not, and cannot, in his work transcend a situation which in its essence is tragic; his main effort must, therefore, be directed not at aesthetic reconciliation, but at making the inescapable conflicts between nature and mind articulate and transparent.[58]

Weitz's view on *Hamlet* is far more sanguine. He emphasizes (with Tillyard[59]) the importance of the tone of the play:

> the tone is life-enhancing […]. That is, the quality of the sheer love of life, of being alive, is shared by all, including the melancholic Hamlet. […….] In effect, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows us that man lives, questions, affirms, doubts, and dies. The rest is silence.[60]

All of the above interpreters tackle a part of *Hamlet's* essence. I will now briefly go into their arguments. I do not agree with Wilson Knight when he argues that the play's main theme is death. Indeed, death is an important theme in

53 Ibid., p. 23.
54 Ibid. p. 28.
55 Friedrich Schlegel, *Seine prosaischen Jugendschriften*, p. 109.
56 Victor Lange, " Friedrich Schlegel's Literary Criticism", p. 291.
57 Coleridge was of the same opinion. He posits that in Hamlet we see an "enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it." Bradley holds (p. 84) that "the Schlegel-Coleridge theory […] is the most widely received view of Hamlet's character."
58 Ibid., p. 291.
59 Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 63.
60 Morris Weitz, Shakespeare, Philosophy and Literature, pp. 32, 33.

any tragedy, but it is not its quintessence. Going through a tragic process entails destruction, the facing of the ultimate (often death) and the unspeakable; however, above all, it induces us to weather and survive these aspects of our sublunary existence. And that, of course, ties in with Knight's remark about the fact that life's diseases are beyond causality. Life either is or is not and tragedy urges life to be.

Of course, when Schlegel asserts that in Hamlet we see a maximum of spiritual despair, he is right. However, when he states there is no catharsis, no escape in *Hamlet*, he is wrong.

Weitz comes close to the vitalist interpretation of Hamlet, emphasizing the importance of the life-reverberating tone of Hamlet.

Below, I hope to show how Hamlet's process through despair into convalescence (disregarding even his death – as did Macbeth as a matter of fact) takes place. It is not only a personal convalescence, it is the restoration and renovation of a nation into a nation-state; in view of this thematic, Hamlet does not fail in the end – consequently, I disagree with Bradley.[61] Hamlet's isolation and loneliness not only stem from despair as to the task at hand; I would suggest that an important aspect might also be the fact that he has no role models to speak of in bringing his country to health and a viable form of government. It has never been done before.

Some time must have passed after this last scene, because, by this time (we are picking up the story in act 2, II), it is a well-known fact that Hamlet of Denmark is, to say the least, weird (act 2, II, ll. 163 – 170).

When a group of travelling actors arrives at Elsinore castle (Act 2.II), he receives them in a most friendly way and even rehearses some pieces from a play about Troy with one of them. After they have left, Hamlet ponders upon his motives and position. It is one of the rare occasions that Hamlet finds himself quite alone.[62] And only when he assumes to be unattended, can he speak his mind. Thus, he starts: observing that now he is, indeed, quite alone.[63]

Hamlet compares himself to the players: these people are capable of showing emotions like grief or mourning, shedding tears even for non-existent persons. Whereas Hamlet feels confined within his mind, while his cause is anything but fictitious:

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61 I do agree though, with Hamlet being highly intellectual and reflective.

62 As Jan Kott remarked in his *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (p.60), there is no genuine privacy at all in Elsinore castle: "At Elsinore castle someone is hidden behind every curtain." Hamlet must have been aware of that fact; indeed, he plays with it, when he stabs "the rat" (being Polonius) behind the curtain in his mother's boudoir. In other words, his loneliness is of a mental nature. The constant physical presence (visible or not) of distrusted others, just emphasizes his mental solitude.

63 In the early phase of the play Hamlet only feels safe to speak honestly while being alone. Only from act 5. I onwards is he capable of opening his mind to Horatio.

Now I am alone.
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
[…] and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her?
[…]
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. 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 the nose?[64]

His self-created defense has grown into his prison. He realizes this and concurrently, he concludes that, by now, relieving his feelings in words only is by no means an adequate response to his predicament or an effective strategy towards solving his problems any longer. To "unpack my heart with words,/ And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,/ A scullion! Fie upon't foh!"[65]

Hamlet decides to change the plot of the actor's play to observe Claudius' reaction: this way, he hopes to gather more evidence for Claudius' crime (act 3.III, ll. 599 – 606). Immediately after this (even before the play is enacted), Hamlet falls precipitately into a tragic crisis and produces his famous monologue, hitting rock bottom:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream:[66]

64 *Hamlet*, act 2, II, ll. 551 – 578.
65 *Hamlet*, Act II, 2, ll. 588 – 590.
66 *Hamlet*, Act 3, I, ll. 58 – 67.

Hamlet's mixture of disgust[67] – his aversion to evil as Bradley[68] calls it -; his inability to communicate and the tragic understanding that he is the only one able to bring Denmark back to health, is too much to bear. Bradley remarks that Hamlet must have been not far from insanity;[69] he almost breaks under the burden. The only thing stopping him is his fear of the unknown. He goes on:

> ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause:
> […]
> 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.[70]

In the second part of this quote, Hamlet describes how he has, up till then, lost his appetite for action. This only adds to his disgust (now being disgust at his own thoughtful disposition, negatively put down as cowardice) and repugnance.

> Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to any kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse. […] And the action required of Hamlet is very exceptional. It is violent, dangerous, difficult to accomplish perfectly, on one side repulsive to a man of honour and sensitive feeling, on another side involved in a certain mystery.[71]

Bradley here gives an accurate description of Hamlet's tragic crisis (without calling it thus).

From the onset, Hamlet had realized the enormity of his plight; in the "to be" monologue, Hamlet phrases that by now it fully hits home to him that it might also entail a full turn in his existence: he might even stop being. Here he, for the first time, takes this possibility in both hands and looks it in the face. Also, in all honesty, expressing his existential anxieties. The universality

67 At the present situation.
68 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 89.
69 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 96.
70 *Hamlet*, act 3, I, ll. 67 – 90. Some scholars hold that Hamlet, in this speech, voices the fear for hell. However, there is no hell in this speech, only the fear for what may come after death. In my opinion this is a universal and existential fear, not to be attributed to a particular religion.
71 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 98.

of his feelings makes Hamlet into a character we can understand and identify with. Moreover, it makes him dear to our hearts. In his speech, ethical considerations are absent. He, the prince, and no doubt versed in etiquette, ethics and desired and correct behaviour, is entering the realm of the ultimate where no ethics hold. What we witness is the fear coming with non-existence. Life and non-life are deconstructed to their bare quintessence. Here, tragic existentiality[72] is born in Hamlet. He undergoes it, contemplating the unspeakable: his primeval *angst*, his fears, his despair. These are thematized here.

The 'to be' speech is uttered some minutes before he meets Ophelia. The meeting is arranged by Polonius and the king (who both shuffle behind a tapestry hastily)[73] to see how Hamlet will react to Ophelia's presence; Polonius quickly pushes a book into Ophelia's hands, urging her to pretend to read.

If a man is in a tragic existential crisis of the above proportions, one would say he is in dire need of human compassion and consolation. What, however, does the utterly ignorant Ophelia do? She gives him back the love-trinkets[74] Hamlet had given her before, adding: "Their perfume lost,/ Take these again, for to the noble mind/ Rich gifts wax poor when givers proves unkind./ There my lord."[75]

Ophelia's small but meaningful gesture pushes Hamlet over the edge: by rejecting him, she magnifies the position he is in. And Hamlet can do nothing but push back as violently as he can with the weapon he knows best: his verbal fervour:

> If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for
> thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,
> thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery,
> go, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool;
> for wise men know well enough what monsters you
> make of them.[76]

72 Tragic existentiality (as also described in the previous chapter) pertains to the quintessence of life and decease of the individual human being; this essence being devoid of normative hierarchy of whatever nature. I would describe it as the concept that expresses our ultimate primeval needs. It should be noted that this type of tragic existentiality is unrelated to whatever philosophical school or movement.

73 Two clowns hurriedly stumbling over each other with, metaphorically speaking, their feet too small in their shoes too big.

74 NB: this is one of the few initiatives of Ophelia's own accord (apart from going mad and drowning herself). Even Polonius hadn't ordered her to do this. This little scene marks the utter lack of human understanding and communication in a heart-rending way. Now Hamlet exists in the outer voids of the tragic universe.

75 *Hamlet*, act 3, I, ll. 98 – 101.

76 *Hamlet*, act 3, I, ll. 137 – 142.

Hamlet's words are effective; they utterly shatter the naive Ophelia: "And I, of ladies most deject and wretches, […] O woe is me,/ T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"[77]

6.8 Modelling a stateman's profession

Let me revert back to our theme at hand: a tragic system clash between oral tribal laws of succession and the wish to change them. In Act 1, Denmark is depicted as a tribal society; Claudius uses one of the traditional modes of succession (the Nordic one of succession violence). We had also noted that there was an undefined sense of unease about this among the bystanders (the population?). Change was in the air; however, no one was able to channel it into viability. It was clear, however, that the old ways no longer satisfied. The next issue to arise was the problem of implementing something new (and nobody knew as yet what that something had to entail), and who by? The only (improbable) candidate being an insecure young man whose only tools are his Renaissance education and his exceptional verbal abilities. He has, however, no military power at his beck and call, moreover, he is not in the least militarily inclined. On the contrary, he is theoretically and philosophically predisposed. He does not realize that precisely these traits are his strength.

Well then, what exactly did the theory of governing and politics entail in Shakespeare's time? In the previous chapter, I discussed the rules for the deposition of tyrants and non-functional royals. In the next chapter, I will return to this issue and consider the various forms of government that may have been familiar in Shakespeare's time: those of republic and kingdom. But how did they think about statesmanship, the craft of legislation and politics?

Francis Bacon published "The Advancement of Learning" in 1605. In it, he set about developing a scientific method of research and discovery. He also paid attention to the art of governance and politics. As yet he did not offer a fully worked out system with a theoretical foundation to what he called the science of politics. First of all, it was a fledgling science[78] and secondly, it was a dangerous and slippery business as too much frankness might antagonize the (as yet autocratic) sovereign.[79] He described the political (and legis-

77 *Hamlet*, act 3, I, ll. 159 – 164.

78 Machiavelli's *The Prince* was printed in 1532 and Hobbes' *Leviathan* did not appear until 1651.

79 His prudence did not much help him. A public and influential figure such as Bacon had many (resentful) enemies. He fell out of grace in 1621: he was stripped of Lord Chancellorship and brought to the Tower on cooked up charges of corruption. He was one of the great driving forces of the Enlightenment. (Source: P. Rossi, *Bacon, Pionier van de Wetenschappelijke Methode).*

lative[80]) fields in practice. "His profound belief in the possibility of learning in politics reflected the intellectual climate of his day."[81] The play *Hamlet* reflects this vapidity and precarious legal void; as yet, few courtiers/politicians[82] knew exactly what their jobs entailed. And if they knew, they were extremely prudent as to how far they could voice their opinions, stretch their operating range and influence legislation (I bring to mind that during Henry VIII's reign all Lord Chancellors had come to a grim end). And even though she ruled with wisdom, Elizabeth I was autocratic, as Henry VIII had been.

What definition does Bacon give us of this line of work and what practical support? Tsukada gives us the Bacionan description of content:

> What did Bacon accept as being the proper subject of political inquiry? He was clear about what was political and what was not. In "The Advancement of Learning", Bacon defined 'science civil and politic' as 'the doctrine of conjugation of men in society,' contrasting it with morality. (Works 111, p. 428). Besides *science civil* and *politics*, Bacon used other words such as *policy* and *civil knowledge* to mean the science of politics. The difference between morality and policy rests on the fact that the former 'propoundeth to itself the framing of internal goodness' while the latter 'requrreth only an external goodness.' (*Works*, p. 455) Politics was concerned with externals, and the promotion of man's interior life did not belong to the province of the political.[83]

This rings undeniably Machiavellian tones.

The practicalities with which the Baconian toolbox for true statesmanship was filled were the following: wisdom of behavior, wisdom of the business on hand and wisdom of state.[84] Wisdom of behavior consisted partly, as Tsukada[85] has it, of prudence. The statesman had to master the art of prudence. Which is, of course, what Hamlet starts with, using as tactics his playacting.[86] Precisely this is what Bacon also advises: "The courtier or

80 The sovereign in Shakespeare's days was in charge of legislation and justice. Tsukada quotes Walter Raleigh's *Maxims of State*: "The prince himself is to sit sometimes in place of public justice, and to give an experiment (sic) of his wisdom and equity, whereby great reverence and estimation is gotten; where, for better performing of this princely duty, some special causes may be selected, which may thoroughly be debated and considered upon by the prince in private, with the help and advice of his learned counsel, and so be decided publicly, as before is said, by the prince himself." Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 32.

81 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 29.

82 In Shakespeare's days a politician was always both statesman and courtier.

83 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 30.

84 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 31.

85 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 28.

86 Bacon published " The Advancement of Learning" in 1605 and *Hamlet* was performed in 1601/02. It might be wishful thinking on my part to say that Bacon came to his conclusions after having seen *Hamlet*, but the thought remains. Seen in this light it is not so strange

political actor should constantly play the role cast for him by changing times. He cannot afford a consistent and uniform character."[87]

Hamlet shows he has wisdom of behavior (his playacting and prudence), he has knowledge of the business (he knows that Claudius is a murderer and he has acquired the Renaissance knowledge in university as we may assume). As far as these points he must be considered to be up to the job.

The wisdom of the state entails the following:

> [T]he more comprehensive problem of how to maintain and control the state with a certain vision, as compared with the second part, which deals with the problem of adaptation to a given order. Here, the knowledge not only of the actualities of politics, but also of certain fountains of justice, are needed.[88]

Further down, we will see whether Hamlet is able to master this type of wisdom.

Thus far we may safely conclude that Shakespeare meticulously depicts the (political and legal) actuality of his day in *Hamlet*, despite the fact that the drama is set in the 11th century. This, of course, can only be successfully accomplished by a genius.

Another question in view of the present thematic is whether Denmark, at this point (we are in act 3, Claudius pretending to be an efficient ruler and Hamlet revving up to bring his country back to health), is a nation in accordance with Renan's theory. When we look at Denmark, we meet a community in turmoil, too much so to be able to act with a collective will to make this community work. Therefore, I would rather say that Denmark is perhaps a nation on the make, but by no means a nation according to Renan. As to the state part, there is something of an attempt to organize action in the form of Claudius' attempts at diplomacy, but no structured diplomacy as we know it. Therefore, at this point Denmark is neither state nor nation.

We will return to Hamlet, who, from now on, sets his course. Immediately after the scene with the poor Ophelia, another Hamlet seems to emerge. Out of his despair, his *angst* voiced in the 'to be' speech, his resolutions seem to be born. They are characterized by a different engagement with the situation. A realization that the familiar coping mechanisms no longer work and that he has to engage with the situation, the self and the community in another way altogether. The first signs of an attitudinal change become apparent in Hamlet.[89]

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that some (among whom Friedrich Nietzsche) came to think that Shakespeare was in fact Bacon which is – as has been proven – not correct.

87 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 33.

88 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 36.

89 In *Macbeth* I have expounded upon the difference between nihilistic despair and tragic despair. In *Macbeth* the tragic despair is even more marked than in *Hamlet*, the latter, of course, being a tragedy of a more reticent and philosophical character.

Hamlet opens up to Horatio, truly communicating again to his trusted friend:

> Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
> As e'er my conversation coped withal.
> […]
> Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
> And could of men distinguish, her election
> Hath seal'd thee for herself;
> […]
> Give me that man
> That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
> In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
> As I do thee.[90]

He shares his course of action (with regard to the modified play the visiting actors are about to play) with Horatio and asks him to help him detect guilt in Claudius' face.

Then the king and his retinue enter the hall to watch the play. Hamlet asks Polonius whether he had performed in theatre in his university years. Polonius answers: "I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me." Whereupon Hamlet retorts: "It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there."[91] This is the second reference to *Julius Caesar*, the play I will discuss in the next chapter. Why does Shakespeare refer to Julius Caesar here? Of course, the easy explanation is that he is getting the laughs with the self-indulgent doltishness of Polonius. Besides referring to *Julius Caesar*, this also foreshadows Polonius' death in a similar way in the following scene, which is beyond funny and gives the remarks a prophetic charge and increases the tension within the play.

Polonius here exposes himself as a snob and quasi-intellectual, knowledgeable as to the latest topical developments. He is the bombastic Lord Chancellor and the caricature of a statesman. Not only in his death does he resemble the one to whom he refers, but also by his character and manner (as we will see in the next chapter). We meet this type of courtier in Bacon. This is how Tsukada describes Bacon's observations:

> Offices and places increased in proportion to the expansion of the central administration, promoting the ambitions of the courtiers. As a result, the court became an arena of struggle for royal favour, office, place, and patronage. Thus in and beyond the court, politics erupted and pervaded as a form of activity centering around the quest for competitive advantage. Bacon was profoundly knowledgeable about the actualities of court politics. The following description vividly illustrates

90 *Hamlet*, act 3, II, ll. 52 – 72.
91 *Hamlet*, act 3, II, ll. 102 – 105.

> the situation of court involvement in the vortex of artifices. 'others seek to wash away their own vileness and evil consciences by accusing others ; others make way for the honours and wishes of their friends by traducing and calumniating their opponents; while others get up stage plots and a number of the like fables against their enemies. These are the machinations of servants who are of a more dishonest nature.'[92]

This description, so befitting Polonius, is one more indication of the chaotic process of a nation-state under construction. It has not finished by far. To describe the present situation in summary:

- Polonius' actions and personality are characteristic of the stage of development the country is in.
- Polonius is not only Hamlet's foil, but points ahead to the role played by Julius Caesar in the said play: how are we to read his character?
- Without knowing it, Polonius touches upon the thematic further worked out in *Julius Caesar*: how to build a nation-state (and perhaps more importantly, how not to).

We return to the performance of the play. When Claudius sees the plot changed by Hamlet, he angrily breaks off the play. Hamlet is asked to see his mother in her chambers. Hamlet goes off and soliloquizes: Soft! now to my mother./ O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever/ The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:/ Let me be cruel, not unnatural:[93]/ I will speak daggers to her, but use none".[94]

Hamlet here cautions himself not to lose sight of a course of action fitting his temperament and character. In other words, he cannot but have found a way of dealing with his situation that is in accordance with who he is; not copying his father's attitude (which was his resolve just after having met the ghost), but choosing his own way. It is a tone markedly different than the despairing and anxious words of an earlier Hamlet (being totally at a loss and forlorn). Hamlet has become a man with a plan.

On his way to his mother's closet, he passes Claudius, who is praying and performing his religious duties. Hamlet draws his sword, but refrains: he will not send his father's murderer to heaven, while his father is still wandering the spheres, waiting to be avenged.[95] This instance is important for the follow-

92 Tomiharu Tsukada, "Court and Politics: Bacon's Political Thought", p. 29.

93 He will not be unnatural, meaning: he will not do anything against his nature.

94 *Hamlet*, act 3, II, ll. 381 – 385.

95 Shakespeare here refers to a persistent religious (Roman Catholic) custom: one had to be fortified by the Holy Church before dying; otherwise one would go to hell or purgatory (as had happened to Hamlet's father). Claudius (in the middle of his religious duties) would go to heaven if killed at this point in time. This would not be the desired effect of his revenge. The fact that Shakespeare here refers to a religious rite doesn't make Hamlet a Christian play or Shakespeare a Christian author. Just as it doesn't make him a sorcerer when he writes about witches, ghosts and witchcraft. Shakespeare merely appeals to

ing reason: Hamlet is capable of postponing violence. This is a very first (and still embryonic) indication of controlled and restrained violence, based on reason, as wielded by a real state (it is one of the characteristics of type 2 violence).

In his mother's room, he sits his mother down: "You shall not budge./ You go not till I set you up a glass/ Where you may see the inmost part of you."[96] His mother cries out. Polonius, behind the curtain, thinks she needs help and yells. Hamlet reacts promptly and effectively; no trace of the former doubting and hesitating Hamlet is seen here. He thrusts his sword through the arras, crying: "How now, a rat?"[97] Hamlet had thought it was the king: "Is it the King?"[98] When he learns it is but Polonius, Hamlet reacts:

> Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
> I took thee for thy better: take thy fortune;
> Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.
> [and to his mother:]
> Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down,
> And let me wring your heart[99]

Hamlet clearly assumes the stature of a king. He decides over his mother's posture and demeanor; what's more, he decides over life and death (in this case: over Polonius' death[100]), without remorse or second thought. Hamlet has indeed fundamentally changed. He is in full control of the situation instead of being its victim. As I remarked above, Hamlet is (or spoken with more deliberation: definitely on his way to becoming) Renaissance royalty and using the violence prerogative coming with it. I argue that he uses this violence within the framework of his salvage plan for Denmark. Without much ado,

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commonly observed or believed specters or rituals, Christian or not. There are several other allusions to Christianity in *Hamlet*; his remark that "heaven hath pleased it so,/ To punish me with this and this with me" (act 3, IV, ll. 156 – 157). These cursory remarks do not suffice to make the tragic message of *Hamlet* a Christian one. Also: the allusion to Wittenberg, where Hamlet studied is insufficient proof. The more so because some scholars hold that Shakespeare allegedly stayed within the Roman Catholic faith; if so, he would never have alluded to such a heretical university. I again point to the fact that the University of Wittenberg was founded in 1502 and this play is set in the 11th century.

96 *Hamlet*, act 3, IV, ll. 18 – 20.

97 *Hamlet*, act 3, IV, l. 23.

98 *Hamlet*, act 3, IV, l. 25.

99 *Hamlet*, act 3, IV, ll. 30 – 34.

100 Indeed, when Hamlet cried out *a rat*, he expected to kill his uncle. He, however, doesn't falter or show remorse for one minute when he discovered it was Polonius he had stabbed. He does, however, *regret* (which is in a different register than remorse altogether) the death of Polonius ("For this same lord/I do repent", act 3, IV, l. 175 and "I must be cruel only to be kind", act 3, IV, l 180), but there is no trace of guilt or shame. Hamlet had indeed entered the universe of tragic existentiality, that paradoxical twilight zone, where despair or ethics no longer hold.

Polonius is treated as collateral damage[101] by Hamlet, who continues his conversation with his mother.

I here anticipate the next chapter where Brutus[102] does not realize the vital importance of having to defuse not only the leader but also his immediate entourage. Hamlet demonstrates greater skill at statesmanship by doing so. The murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must be seen in this same context. The latter event has the additional quality of self-defense. I will return to this below as well as to the question of how it is possible that, before the king is murdered, Hamlet already realizes that he must get rid of his confidants as well: the Shakespearean reversed time and space aspects of this play.[103] For these reasons, I anachronistically appreciate this type of violence as state-controlled (type 2) violence.

Again, Hamlet uses the weapons he is best at: his wit and his sensibility in sounding people correctly. Hamlet lashes his mother mercilessly with his words – as he had done with Ophelia. There is, however, a notable difference in Hamlet's attitude towards the two ladies. With Ophelia his vitriolic sarcasm was meant as protection: Hamlet was not yet recovered from his shattering tragic crisis himself and, on top of that, he had to endure Ophelia's inane but for Hamlet heart-rending action. His conversation with his mother, however, is meant to confront her and make her recognize and own her actions. Hamlet, verbally ornate as he is, succeeds. She says: "Oh Hamlet, speak no more!/ Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,/ And there I see such black and grained spots/ As will not leave their tinct."[104] However, Hamlet persists and goes on. Even the ghost has to interfere to remind Hamlet of his second assignment: do not harm your mother while avenging me. After the ghost's admonishment, Hamlet moderates his tone. With more restraint, he advises her to live more purely and to assume virtues – if she cannot bring herself to truly be so (act 3.IV ll. 150 – 160).

As only Hamlet sees the reappearance of his father's ghost and even speaks to him, Gertrude thinks her son is raving mad. Hamlet asks her not to let Claudius know that he is "but mad in craft."[105] Gertrude, however, expressly expounds her opinion on Hamlet: "mad as the sea and wind when both contend/ which is the mightier."[106] Claudius decides to ship Hamlet off to

101 Hamlet acknowledges his act without further ado, drags Polonius from the scene and has done with it: "I will bestow him, and will answer well/ The death I gave him. So, again, good night./ I must be cruel to be kind." Act 3. IV, ll. 160 – 162.

102 I will go into the comparison between Hamlet and Brutus in more detail in the next chapter.

103 Reversal of action sequences is sometimes used in theatrical and movie productions. In my opinion Shakespeare here uses a reversal of time, cause and result as a means of showing the mental state Hamlet is in. I am in agreement with Wilson Knight about this aspect of the play. Further down I will come back to this important issue.

104 *Hamlet*, Act 3, IV, ll. 78 – 81.

105 *Hamlet*, act 3, IV, l. 190.

106 *Hamlet*, act 4, I, ll. 6 – 7.

England at the first opportunity available. Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to watch Hamlet closely during the voyage. He also gives them sealed documents for the king of England,[107] requesting him to kill Hamlet.[108]

Just before he embarks for England, Hamlet sees young Fortinbras' army march by for Poland. Hamlet ponders upon Fortinbras' resolution to act,[109] wavers and decides to be more resolute. Fortinbras, the young and tender prince, is prepared, even for "a straw of land"[110] to fight for honor and kingdom.

Some time passes while Hamlet journeys to England. In Denmark, Ophelia breaks down mentally. Laertes comes back from France (full of fury and keen on taking revenge on Hamlet for the dead of his father) and public unrest stirs Denmark ever since Polonius' death. Claudius sighs:

> O Gertrude, Gertrude,
> When sorrows come, they come not single spies
> But in battalions. First, her father slain:
> Next, your son gone; and he most violent author
> Of his own just remove: the people muddied,
> Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers,
> For good Polonius' death;[111]

Meanwhile, Hamlet's ship has been attacked, but Hamlet manages to board another ship and he is brought back to Denmark. When he comes ashore, he arrives at a grave site where two workers are digging a grave. When he identifies Yorick's[112] grave (plus skull) Hamlet ponders upon the transience of existence. Hamlet realizes that there is no escaping

- temporality,
- the implacability of the life/death cycle; more specifically, the outright arbitrariness with which you are cast into (and out of) temporality as well as into (and sometimes out of) a certain station in life.
- the paradoxical theme of the continuity of life beyond the individual's temporality.

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107 The text says: "if my love thou hold'st at aught -/ As my great power thereof may give thee sense,/ Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red/After the Danish sword", (ll. 61 – 64). Shakespeare could refer to the Danish invasions in Britain during the second Viking age (11th Age). Since Claudius mentions the yet fresh cicatrices, it was most probably Hamlet Sr. that took the English to task. Another feat of arms of the late king.

108 *Hamlet*, act 4, III, l. 60.

109 Q2 is the only edition in which this monologue can be found.

110 *Hamlet*, act 4, IV, l. 26.

111 *Hamlet*, act 4, V, ll. 75 – 81.

112 The late king's jester. Hamlet had known him well.

> Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
> O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
> Should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw![113]

This is the third reference to the following play to be discussed. Although the pressure in Hamlet's text is tangible, it is devoid of the despair and the forlorn quality of the 'to be' speech. Hamlet is, as it were, revving up to come into action. He, markedly, places relativity into the framework of continuity and emphasizes the worth of life as a continuing process. The emphasis on the continuation of life prevents Hamlet from becoming nihilistic.

Moreover, in naming and analyzing both the conditionality and the continuity of the human life cycle, Hamlet places himself in the midst of as well as above these processes. Of course, fathoming and grasping them is a prerequisite to be equal to a task such as Hamlet's, viz.: to set to right the 'something rotten' in the state of Denmark and keep it safe.

In the previous chapter, I touched upon the topic of the legitimacy of killing or ousting a king/leader:[114] When was a person or party justified in doing so? This was, inter alia, permitted if the king had come to power illegitimately. Since Claudius had killed his brother and subsequently had covered this up (Hamlet Sr. had supposedly died in his sleep), and given the fact that Hamlet was called upon to act as the royal savior[115] of his country the type of violence he used could be seen as a state controlled one; state controlled *avant-la-lettre*.

After having spoken with the ghost, Hamlet had come to realize that obeying it most probably meant his death; now he ponders upon the continuity of life after death. Wilson Knight is right when he identifies death as a main theme in *Hamlet,* however, it is not *the* theme. It's subject is the continuation of life, as long as Hamlet's story shall be told. I will come back to this important theme below.

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113 *Hamlet*, act 5, I, ll. 75 – 81.

114 To be worked out further in the next chapter.

115 Anyone intending to overthrow a government (and succeeding) may avail himself of such an argument: pretentiously presenting himself as the predestined savior of the country. We should carefully distinguish this from Hamlet's position. The royal title is not predestined, but either hereditary, elective or acquired by the turmoil of successionary violence (as a matter of interest: these rather volatile and unstructured ways of succession, in themselves, are another indication of a community that has as yet not matured into a nation, leave alone a nation-state). Moreover Hamlet is called to his task against his will and initially totally unable to answer the call. Finally Hamlet acts in the Shakespearean sphere of the reversed time/space imagery; the house of mirrors and paradoxical events par excellence as I will explain below. Compare this to e.g. Robespierre (Reign of Terror, France, 1793 – 1794) demanding to be treated as the preordained Supreme Being and the difference becomes crystal clear.

Hamlet does not suffer from any metaphorical blindness.[116] On the contrary, he is very sensitive to his surroundings and he is an apt interpreter. Yet, initially, he had not been capable of monopolising and claiming for himself the position that came with his royal birth[117] and making Denmark stable and safe. He faltered under the burden. And yes, it takes time to successfully accomplish his Herculean labour. He has to go through his tragic crisis, find himself a unique monarchical identity *and* practice *and* gain strength, both mentally and physically. Some interpreters hold that Hamlet is a play of procrastination and sloth,[118] as it takes Hamlet four acts to come into action. I argue that Hamlet is exceedingly rapid, seen in the light of what he is up to. Moreover, the play is set outside our chronological timeframe. This issue also, will be discussed below.

Hamlet's developmental process is metaphorically represented by his practicing the rapier time and again[119] and, in the end, winning from Laertes, the renowned sword-fighter.

I agree with Schlegel (referenced above) and Posner (referenced below) when they call *Hamlet* – I paraphrase – a play of thought. I would add: in the sense of mental growth (Posner) – starting with disgust, then despair and ending in total self-sufficiency and with a stately individuality, moreover, an individual caring for his community; about to completely renew it. I will come back to this theme further on in the text.

When Hamlet sees Ophelia's funeral[120] pass, he and her brother Laertes get into a squabble as to who mourns her the most. Hamlet openly confesses that he had loved Ophelia. In this scene, no trace of depression can be detected within Hamlet; indeed, he has, by now, a clear sense of who he is and what he stands for. He is Hamlet the Dane, worthy son and successor of Hamlet the King – yet not his copied image – and taking things in hand in his unique way:

116 I will come back to this theme when discussing Brutus in the next chapter.
117 Making him a good candidate to be elected as the next king.
118 I will revert back to this issue in the evaluation.
119 *Hamlet*, act 5, II, ll. 205 – 209.
Horatio: You will lose my lord.
Hamlet: I do not think so. Since he [Laertes] went into France, I have
Been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds.
Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my
Heart; but it is no matter.
120 She had drowned, most probably committing suicide.

This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.
[… to Laertes]
For, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear.[121]

In a next scene, Hamlet tells Horatio the circumstances of his voyage back to Denmark. He recounts how he had out-tricked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, sending them to their deaths.[122] Hamlet here (as he had done before when killing Polonius) shows no remorse or hesitancy and demonstrates the same type of violence.

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow:
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.
Horatio:
Why, what a king is this!
Hamlet:
Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon--
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage--is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
n further evil?[123]

6.9 The completion; the execution

Hamlet shows his true colors. He is open to Horatio[124] concerning his purpose. He regally dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They should die; they are not near his conscience. What does Hamlet mean by these words? Above, I discussed the necessity of defusing Claudius' entourage. Therefore, I deem this act justified under the circumstances. Now let us have a closer

121 *Hamlet*, act 5, I, ll. 253 – 260.
122 He had exchanged Claudius' original letters for the English king with others, ordering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths instead of Hamlet's.
123 *Hamlet*, act 5, II, ll. 58 – 72.
124 As we saw in the previous scene, he had been open with regard to his feelings towards Ophelia!

look at what they do not mean, after which I will probe the self-defence and time aspects of the deed.

- They do not bear witness of Hamlet's nihilism as we have just ascertained that he is passionately committed to restoring Denmark to health again.
- Neither can we say that Hamlet here testifies to cruelty and/or bloodlust. He is too matter-of-fact about the killings.
- They do not testify to lust for or abuse of power. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths are just necessary (referenced above and below).
- These acts are not committed out of panic or despair; again, Hamlet is being level-headed about the demise of his two former friends.
- It is not a direct active self-defence as the two could finish their journey.

However, there is no denying that this act is an act of violence. How should we understand this? Hamlet knows that he will almost certainly die himself, fulfilling his task. His death, brought about within the scope of this task (saving Denmark from Claudius – and therewith from the old ways – and giving it a new system of justice), is the ultimate[125] violence, committed against Hamlet by Claudius. At this stage, it has not as yet happened, but in a reversed[126] way, the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern results from this ultimate act of violence (because of Hamlet's prior knowledge of his own death[127]). For surely, if Hamlet had not had to fulfil his task, their deaths would not have been imperative; nonentities that they were.

Apart from these arguments, the elimination of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as the stabbing of Polonius, show shrewd and strategically wise statesmanship as argued above. The three of them are bombastic nullities, but they are nullities from Claudius' camp.

Now, as to the second issue: what does Hamlet mean with his words? Literally, it means that he does not have these deaths on his conscience and he is dead right about this, for it is not he that signed the death warrant, but Claudius. Moreover, it was a death warrant ordering his own murder. Hamlet just changes the names in the letter. This is an act of self-defense; however, in my opinion, the explanation goes far deeper, especially in a tragedy of this magnitude.

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125 As in last and most brutal. It is not a single death: also Gertrude and Laertes fall victim. In this sense it is a killing spree, caused by the evil genius of Claudius. The latter is killed by Hamlet. With it Hamlet not only fulfils his task, but, within the scope of the violence paradigm, restores Denmark to health. After which the violence dies down.

126 I am in agreement with Wilson Knight here, who states that: 1) Shakespeare was no great observer of the correct chronology in general (leave alone follow the Aristotelian unity of time rules; 2) In *Hamlet* everything seems to be reversed, explosively starting (instead of ending) with Claudius' first act of violence. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 42. See also Wilson Knight's remarks below on the spatial and temporal aspects of *Hamlet* .

127 In two ways: he knows he will most certainly die fulfilling his task, moreover, he had also read Claudius' letter commissioning the English king to murder Hamlet at arrival in England.

In my view, Shakespeare indicates here that Hamlet's conscience has travelled away from the then prevailing value system of those around him. Indeed, it is not even near his as he tells us. Phrased differently, here again Hamlet gives evidence of lingering in the realm of tragic existentiality, where the old values no longer hold, living in another sphere altogether. This is in line with Wilson Knight's interpretation that Hamlet has stepped out of the orbit of ordinary man. Wilson Knight holds:[128]

> Shakespearean tragedy is set spatially as well as temporally in the mind. By this I mean that there are throughout the play a set of correspondences which relate to each other independently of the time-sequence which is the story: […][T]he Shakespearean person is intimately fused with this atmospheric quality; he obeys a spatial as well as a temporal necessity.

What Wilson Knight describes as the spatiality of the play, I have termed the universe of tragic existentiality. Thus, Hamlet lives within the logic of the average mortal's temporal world as well as within the solitude of this tragic void. This state of mind corresponds to Shakespeare's leaps in time: back and forth from tribal times to Tudor Renaissance. Sometimes some timeless space in between, accentuating the uncertainty of a transitional period. As for Hamlet's state of mind, we must be well aware that in such a void, the ideal breeding ground arises for abandoning an old system that no longer works.

Therefore and despite his existential loneliness, we hear a self-confident and royal Hamlet speak, deciding over life and death. In other words, Hamlet, the tragic hero, going through his tragic process and surviving it, is up to providing the initial impetus to make Denmark, in one great effort, not only a nation but a nation-state (on which subject I will come back extensively in the next chapter). Having, at first, dissociated himself from his surroundings, spurred on by despair as he was, he now vehemently engages himself with his community, royally affirming his actions. Indeed, he intends to save the state of Denmark in its entirety from barbarity (see quote of Marcellus (act I, 3, l. 67) and Hamlet's remarks on Denmark's barbarity (act 1, IV, ll. 19 – 41) and lawlessness. This thematization saves *Hamlet* from being an unstratified revenge play (see also below).

As explained earlier in this chapter, Hamlet knows that to take on this task means his death. He confirms this knowledge again in his reaction to Horatio when the latter suggests he should not fight if he is not well. Hamlet reacts: "We defy augury. There is special provi-/dence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to /come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not

128 Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 3.

now, yet it will come–the readiness is all." (act 5, II, ll. 166 – 168)[129] Here, he reacts to a concerned Horatio who proposes to postpone the rapier fight with Laertes. Hamlet's reaction is almost unconcerned. He accepts his death, but his last words, "the readiness is all," express not resignation, but determination and a renewed energy to fight. This speech is not only knowledge of his death, but also its positive and willing acceptance. He realizes the violence (originally started by Claudius) has now reached him. Yet his increasing maturity, his philosophical inclination and intuitive intelligence give him the tools (his unique talents that also make him create new and as yet unheard of solutions for this community in turmoil) to accept this. In this respect, Hamlet is the stuff that (tragic) heroes are made of.

The finale of the play shows the rapier fight between Laertes and Hamlet. It is an impressive scene. Claudius is mercilessly exposed for the little runty man he is. His petty scheme of poisoning a sword and a chalice fails as Hamlet refuses to drink from the cup. Gertrude, however, wants a drink. Claudius desperately tries to prevent her from drinking but fails. Before the fight begins, Laertes and Hamlet make their peace:

Hamlet:
Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
[…]
Laertes:
I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive, in this case, should stir me most
To my revenge: but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof; and will no reconcilement,
[…]

129 Some scholars see this quote as further proof of Hamlet being in essence a Christian play (also see above: act 3.III, ll. 72 -73 and below: act 3, IV, ll. 156 – 157). In their explanation "providence" refers to God and the simile with the sparrow to Matthew 10:29 where it says that no sparrow will fall without God's knowledge. In this explanation the phrase on the readiness would refer to Matthew 24:44 where it says: "be ye also ready." In my opinion Shakespeare here effectively makes use of well-known Christian imagery to evoke and explain (everybody in the audience immediately would have known what was at stake here as they all knew the bible) Hamlet's state of mind.
The same goes for the words at the beginning of this scene: "There's a divinity that shapes our end, rough-hew them how we will." (act 5, II, ll. 10 – 11) This divinity is not necessarily the Christian God. It is one more example Hamlet's use of well-known imagery to indicate that he will carry out his resolution. The words should be read in context with the rest of Hamlet's speech (act 5, II, ll. 4 – 11).
I am aware of the fact that my explanation is diametrically opposed to some conventional interpretations that hold that Hamlet is deeply religious. However, my explanation does more justice to the existential universality of Shakespeare's genius. Moreover, Shakespeare, in general, kept well away from religious substantiations, since this could be dangerous. In my opinion, he just used well-known Christian imagery to make his point.

I do receive your offer'd love like love,
And will not wrong it.
Hamlet:
I embrace it freely;
And will this brother's wager frankly play.[130]

So, for Hamlet, this is a fraternizing duel, having restored communication with his old-time friend Laertes.[131] However, the dice are loaded as the sword and wine are poisoned. When Gertrude drinks the wine, she slowly starts to die. Both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded by the poisoned swords. When Laertes yells that the swords have been tampered with, Hamlet stabs Claudius, knowing he will die soon. He asks Horatio to tell his story and to tell Fortinbras he has Hamlet's "dying voice":

Horatio, I am dead;
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
[…]
O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.
[…]
O, I die, Horatio;
The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:
I cannot live to hear the news from England;
But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice;
So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited. The rest is silence.[132]

Why is it so important for Hamlet to have his story told and why does he want Fortinbras to be his successor? Let us start with the second question. In the above quote, Hamlet informs us of the fact that, had he lived, he would have voted for Fortinbras.[133] But his ambiguous words also mean: now Fortinbras will speak with my voice. In other words: Hamlet is sure that, if Horatio tells the facts of Hamlet's story to Fortinbras, the latter, the new royal and ruler in the country – will speak in Hamlet's voice and with his intentions.

130 *Hamlet*, act 5, II, ll. 172- 198.
131 Who, by the way, still plays a suspect role at this stage; however, the cardinal point here is the sincerity of Hamlet and his capability of genuine and honest communication.
132 *Hamlet*, act 5, II, ll. 337 – 357.
133 Remember that Denmark was, at that point in time an elective monarchy.

Hamlet hopes Fortinbras will do so, because he recognizes true nobility in Fortinbras; when he, in act 4. IV, had seen him pass with his army to fight against Poland over a mere scrap of land and Hamlet had pondered:

> Examples gross as earth exhort me:
> Witness this army of such mass and charge
> Led by a delicate and tender prince,
> Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
> Makes mouths at the invisible event,
> Exposing what is mortal and unsure
> To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
> Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honour's at the stake.[134]

Thus, Hamlet foresees that Fortinbras will carry on and foster the honour and soundness of state Hamlet holds dear. Life will go on and new justice will rule: "report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied." These words are laden with meaning. Here, Shakespeare again works with his customary ambiguity and diverse layers of meaning and association fields. The tension within the text is huge – Hamlet's model for another future is packed into these few lines: let those who do not know, hear the whole story (and be able to judge for themselves). But also: let there be justice for those who have none (my case providing law of precedence); Hamlet wishes a fair and just society, especially for those who have no justice.[135]

With this will and testament, Hamlet connects himself with his community and hurls his notions on another fairer judiciary[136] into the future. Preferably 'reported'. That is: publicly and officially stated, preferably in writing and this, in its turn, is an embryonic statement for a codification of law.

The first question asked in the previous paragraph ties in with Hamlet's wish. This wish, his desire to keep his story alive and meaningful is a tragic one: he knows that, after his death, the new sound status of society – this new construct of a nation-state – will rest but on a precarious balance and, moreover, on free choice in the most literal sense of the word.[137] Merely by the

134 *Hamlet*, act 4, IV, ll. 46 – 56.

135 The intense cry for fairness and a just society could also be interpreted in yet another way: it could articulate the existential primeval need for justice (in general understood by many as the implementation of natural law) but for his wish for it to be 'reported', i.e. deliberately constructed and his clearly expressed choice for a separation of powers. I will come back to the concept of natural law in my discussions on *Julius Caesar*.

136 I.e. a more honest and honourable way of dealing with justice.

137 The election of the new monarch is a choice and tragedy does not dictate, it invites (free)-choices.

grace of remembrance might a similar mistake be avoided and the freshly born nation-state be kept sound.

6.10 Evaluation

6.10.1 The leadership and Bacon's wisdom of state

In this play, Shakespeare queries the fundamentals of the then-nation-state construct: what characteristics should a ruler have to safeguard the stability of the state and on what premises should a fair system of justice be based.

As to the leadership that Hamlet has shown, above, I mentioned Kantorowicz, who has convincingly shown that the body politique and the ruler were one. Thus, the answer to the question of how the country develops from crude justice to a society with a codified law could be answered through the development of its sovereign. I will now examine if this holds for *Hamlet*.

Throughout the play, we see cross references, bearing on both the sovereign and the country as a whole. Just a few instances: the strain and ominous atmosphere in act 1, after the death of the old king; Laertes stating that the sanity of the state depends on Hamlet's fate (act 1, III); Rosencrantz voicing the fact that when a ruler dies, the country is in danger (act 3, III); Claudius sighing that when troubles come they "come not single spies, but in battalions" (act 4, V ll. 78 – 79). Claudius can hardly cope simultaneously with the country being in an uproar over Polonius' death and Hamlet's departure. Moreover, Laertes revolts. He is up to vengeance. We see that both Claudius and the country synchronously deteriorate (act 4, V ll. 78 – 79).

Hamlet changes as well. From act 3, IV[138] onwards, Hamlet has behaved in a manner totally different than before, as I argued. From act 5, scene I onwards, Hamlet in effect takes over the royal position formally held by Claudius. The latter diminishes into nefariousness. We see the country's respiration moving parallel to these developments.[139] I may conclude that this play is about the birth of a regulated nation as much as it is about the qualities a leader should have to rule such a country.

In other words, this play is Shakespeare's tragic answer to the Mirror of Princes of the time. Machiavelli dealt with the pragmatics of leadership; the more traditional counterparts (e.g., Desiderius Erasmus and Sir Thomas Elyot – referenced in the next chapter) extolled and encouraged the ethical virtues in princes coming with the then brands of Christianity (mostly Roman Catholic). Shakespeare points out that a leader can only be a good leader when they have survived their tragic crises.[140] Only then can he have the qualities

138 The scene in which he crushes Ophelia after the latter has given him back his love trinkets.
139 See examples just above.
140 Modern day politicians – and "managers" for that matter – could take this to heart!

needed to lead and only then does he have a thorough (tragic) knowledge of himself, can he assess the situation his country is in and act effectively.[141]

If Hamlet had not been through this crisis, he never could have pulled it off and because he had, he was, in the end, more successful than his father – who got himself killed only halfway achieving his ends: protecting his country from outside enemies. We may safely conclude that Hamlet abundantly evidences what Bacon calls "wisdom of state." Shakespeare invites us to have a look at a blueprint for a true leader and a blueprint for an ordered nation-state under the[142] rule of law.

6.10.2 The nation and the separation of powers

In what state does Hamlet leave his country?
Hamlet burdens Horatio with the implementation of justice and Fortinbras with the national government. This represents a new and remarkable separation of powers. I argue that Hamlet chooses Horatio to oversee justice because the latter, despite the text showing no evidence of Horatio being a legal expert, is a kindred spirit. They studied at the same university and are imbued with the same Renaissance ideas. We may conclude that Horatio demonstrates an awareness of and vision regarding an ideal-typical state. The choice of Fortinbras as the sovereign is almost a given, since Hamlet had already expressed his admiration for this young leader. His country will certainly be safe and protected in the latter's hands.

The dichotomy in tasks might be seen as an embryonic beginning of a division of powers, but for certain, it is the beginning of a new monarchical rule with the potential to become a sovereignty under (codified) law.

Hamlet's wishes carry both the promise of a nation–united after this bloodbath–and of a state, a construct with separate legislation. It is an invitation, for as we have seen in the chapter on tragedy, (Shakespearean) tragedy never dictates; it shows and invites. It leaves innovations and improvements to the creativity and ingenuity of mankind, which has recently endured slaughter and destruction. In Macbeth, we saw, after the horrible onslaught throughout Scotland, the ending of a gruesome tradition of *sippenhaft*, and in this play, we see the first step towards the rule of law in a nation-state. These are huge accomplishments, and Shakespeare illustrates how to achieve them. They are effected by the Shakespearean violence paradigm.

141 Hobbes' *Leviathan* was still to appear (1651).

142 This, of course, does not mean that Hamlet entrust Horatio with the ministry of justice. It means the first hint at and beginning of a new way of thinking: the first contours of an independent and autonomous judiciary.

6.10.3 How are violence and values interrelated

In the chapter on tragedy I discussed the several types of violence. In the last chapter we met the tribal custom of *sippenhaft* revenge. Several critics have argued that Hamlet's main theme is the violence of revenge. Below I will go into their argumentations. But first I will embroider on the correlation between violence and values.

Since, as I have shown above, Shakespearean tragedy challenges each and every value system and governmental construct (in short: all reality constructs), and puts them to (and through) the ultimate stress test of the tragic violence paradigm in the acts 5 no ethicality[143] to speak of is left. We have seen this happening to Hamlet, at a certain point in the play, living in the lone universe of existentiality. Again, I cannot help but conclude: *Hamlet* is not written from a particular ethical stance. In act 5, when the violence dies down, what remains are our existential needs. Therefore, concepts within the ethical sphere are never advocated in Shakespearean tragedy; they are at most used as a theatrical plot catalyst.

We also concluded that all critics discussed so far in the previous chapters agree on the fact that nations are built on violence.

Well now, how can ethicality ensue from a play that essentially deals with a type of violence that only leaves us with existentialities?

In the previous paragraphs, I mentioned that the person of Hamlet and the state were one and the same body. In act 5, last scene, Hamlet articulates his testament. Since he embodies the state, what Hamlet voices here are nothing but the existential needs of a community: protection of the state and righteousness. In their finishing conversation, Horatio and Fortinbras pronounce the impetus for the practical elaboration into a(n ethical) system of these existential needs: act 5, II, ll.377 – 400. Their conversation is the result of having just witnessed a momentous tragic crisis, including an all-out slaughter. Both mourning Hamlet, they feel the need for a united effort for his wishes to materialize: his wishes given shape as a new value system. Another noteworthy point is that they speak on an equal basis and from mutually independent positions. This horizontality in positioning is indicative of an openness towards a new (or renewed) ethics. At this particular stage of the violence paradigm, the causal link between violence and value is ingrained. Indeed, Shakespeare kindly invites us to renew/improve our ethics, our constructs, after having gone through a tragic crisis based on that same tragic crisis. As said, a tragic crisis that unearths our existential needs.

As Renan already convincingly argued, a nation should preferably be a community of people living together, grounded on values. A nation best acquires these after having successfully lived through the Shakespearean

143 Ethics being, after all, just another reality construct.

violence paradigm. Hence, not only does the will to form a nation stem from the violence paradigm, but also the construction – *after* the event of the tragic crisis – of (a set of) values that suit our existential properties. From which, of course, issues the ethics of the legal system.

Intrinsically, the radical tragic violence has nothing in common with the state-monopolized violence (type 2, which is always firmly nestled within the ethical system). However, from the causal sequence just outlined, we may conclude that, ideally, a type 2 violence is also correlated with the violence paradigm; be it in a graduated way, after the tragic crisis has been digested and the improvement on the construct is being established. This state-controlled violence has a diversity of functions, but concerning the present subject, I would like to emphasize that precisely this type 2 violence is meant to rein in/suppress its radical predecessors/counterparts.

When a nation-state loses sight of this interwovenness – these interdependencies and the dangers coming with them, or the nation-state fails to distinguish between the two types (and subtypes), then its chances of surviving the next tragic existential stress test are next to nil, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The blurring of definitions is indicative of the fading away of knowledge on the diverse types of violence. Subsequently, functions, correlations and causal relationships also become less distinct. In my opinion, this development is a point of concern because in this way crucial knowledge about violence is lost. This just might entail possible dangers and weaknesses in the construct itself. I will explain what caused this blurring of demarcations in the next paragraph.

6.10.4 Violence, value and nationhood: their mutual influence

An obvious question on the topic of radical tragic violence might be: but surely some tragedies convey a certain morality, at least some critics believe so. Both comments are correct. To explain this, I refer back to the chapters on tragedy. In these chapters, I pointed out how tragic art and society mutually influenced each other: tragedy became "critical." I will concisely recapitulate the argument. When tragedy became critical,[144] both status and meaning of violence and the associated concepts of guilt and punishment changed fundamentally. In the Periclean period, violence was a matter of (divine) doom accompanied by human failure or *hybris* and in Shakespeare, a consequence of human failure (ambition, doubt, haughtiness and every conceivable variation thereof). From the time tragedy became critical, violence became the consequence of criminal

144 Roughly during Romanticism, but opinions differ. Nietzsche for instance holds that criticality of tragedy began with Socrates. Other scholars identify its start with Philip Sydney in the 16th century; examples are referenced in the chapters on Tragedy.

(or otherwise derailed) behavior or lack of knowledge. It turned (as I argued) the tragic hero from a character larger than life (and beyond the ethical system of good and evil), to a character taking the wrong turn somewhere along the line, or a protagonist being wronged by the construct.

The result of the above is that violence acquires a status within the prevailing value system and thus tragedy loses its existential message. Tragedy becomes a vehicle either for the existing establishment or for forces heralding national consciousness[145] or of forces looking for social change or religious revival.[146] Hence, in Renan's century, the century of an increased national consciousness, tragedy's violence was occasionally received as ancillary to social stability, religious doctrine or potent nationhood: a substantial meaning shift.

In itself this is perfectly acceptable, but for the consequence: we no longer sharply distinguish between types of violence; witness the example Weber gave, referenced in the first chapter.

6.10.5 The critics and the revenge aspect

Of course, I already sufficiently debunked the interpretation of most critics that the *Hamletian* theme is based on revenge. Nevertheless, it is of interest to learn what their stance is on the subject. Since revenge is treated as a given by most critics and hardly defined, I will now examine this theme along the lines of the types of revenge I identified in *Macbeth*.[147]

Given the fact that nowhere in the play can Hamlet be seen busying himself with voodoo dolls or other charms, which are characteristic of the indirect method of revenge, I will examine the remaining variants. If Shakespeare had intended to show s*ippenhaft* or psychological vengeance in *Hamlet*, the drama would have ended in act 3, for in scene I, Hamlet burns Ophelia to the ground and in scene IV, he almost (but for the intervention of the ghost) mentally shatters his mother. Moreover, in the same scene, he stabs Polonius. One would say: if this is a revenge play, then this is ample revenge: three people for the life of one, practiced in two different manners of revenge: psychologically and the s*ippenhaft* way.[148] Therefore, the argument of revenge along those lines does not hold.

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145 I bring to mind Goethe and Schiller (mentioned in the tragedy chapter) who wanted, with their tragedies, to educate their fellow citizens into a robust German nationalism (Germany became a unity only in 1871 as I mentioned).

146 For an extensive discussion of these issues: see my chapters on tragedy.

147 Just to recap the mentioned types in the last chapter: the eye-for-an-eye revenge, the *Sippenhaft* principle, psychological revenge and indirect revenge.

148 Polonius is so near Claudius's inner circle – and his right hand in affairs of state and personal matters – that it would well fit the bill for S*ippenhaft*.

I will now scrutinize the eye-for-an-eye principle. The crucial question is: does this type of revenge integrally define the fundamental issues of this play? Let us have a close look at the scene where we see this type of vengeance in practice: in act 5, II, when Hamlet and Laertes have the rapier fight. Laertes had long since wanted to avenge his sister and father, but for Hamlet, this was not vengeance at all; it was a friendly fight. And in fact, Laertes[149] too had made his peace with Hamlet before the fight (act 5, II ll. 240 – 248). What is more, just after the queen died and Hamlet was wounded by the poisoned rapier, Laertes cried out (act 5, II ll. 319 – 326) that the blades had been poisoned which means that he let slip the retributional aspect of the vengeance as well as the regaining of honour aspect, both important characteristics coming with successful eye-for-an-eye revenge.

After that, the dying Laertes articulated the following:

> He [Claudius who had just been stabbed by Hamlet] is justly served.
> It is poison temeper'd by himself.
> Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.
> Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
> Nor thine on me.[150]

I would interpret these words of the dying Laertes as follows: Claudius is indirectly the author of his own death since he had helped to poison Laertes' blade; which makes it a circuitous way of suicide and – in tragic terms – also evidence of out-of-control radical violence coming back to visit its initial author; this tragic fact is completely outside the scope of whichever vengeance. Laertes' next utterance was one of mutual forgiveness. I would say the concept of forgiveness does not go with the revenge just committed; where terms like 'getting even with' and 'I have saved my honour' would be more fitting.

I cannot but conclude that, although there is revenge in the play, the play cannot be characterized as having revenge (in whatever form) as a major theme.

In his *Law & Literature,* Posner too feels uneasy about pinpointing revenge as the major thematic. He finds an escape in stating that Hamlet "is not just an avenger".[151] Also, Hamlet's maturing plays a role in the unravelling of the drama's deeper meaning; Posner is, of course, right in his hesitations. When arguments are based solely on the fact that *Hamlet* is a revenge play, one has to overlook a host of evidence that it is not just the revenge issue that

149 In fact, earlier, when still angry with Hamlet, Laertes had suggested to Claudius to poison the rapier. At this point, however, he evidently had changed his mind and makes his peace with Hamlet.

150 *Hamlet*, act 5, I, ll. 333 – 337.

151 R. Posner, *Law & Literature*, p. 105.

Shakespeare conveyed, moreover, the loose ends have to be overlooked and – as Boyd[152] perceptively remarks – the fact that the revenge comes to naught.

Posner discusses *Hamlet* at some length. He notices some awkward problems within the structure of the play regarding revenge; when vengeance is considered, then the play is hackneyed, for Hamlet cannot come to make himself do it. He is a stumbler and a delayer; he is a multiple killer and justice comes at a high cost.[153] All collateral murders should not have happened if only Hamlet had been a bit more efficient. Apart from this being 21st-century efficiency thinking, it disparages Shakespeare's achievement, reduces the richness of the play and makes Hamlet into an idiosyncratic neurotic and a murderer (on top of which he is afflicted with an Oedipal complex). But "anyway a long delay is also good as long as it is filled with adventure and shipwreck."[154] This is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek observation of Posner and it testifies to his experienced authorship. It is followed by a discriminating and comprehensive analysis of the Hamletian problematics. Not only is the revenge theme analyzed, but also the 'maturing' of Hamlet is interpreted and put into perspective.

Posner on the relation between revenge and the rule of law:

> justice as vengeance is crude from a moral standpoint once one steps outside the moral framework of the vengeance system itself. Lacking differentiated institutions for making and applying rules of law, justice as vengeance cannot distinguish between culpable and justifiable or excusable injuries. Liability is absolute. The avenger is as "guilty" as the original aggressor. This feature of justice as vengeance makes the feud logical rather than pathological. Law provides both a superior calibration of punishment to blameworthiness and a machinery for public condemnation.[155]
>
> […]
>
> [A]s centralized institutions of law enforcement emerge in tandem with the nation-state, vengeance, even as refined by principles of retribution, composition, and compassion, falls out of favour. The nation-state claims a monopoly of force; so taking the law into one's own hands becomes itself a crime.[156]

Of course, I am in agreement with Posner when he posits that *Hamlet* is the foreshadowing of the codification of law at the expense of the older custom of revenge. However, when he suggests that Shakespeare critiques the custom of revenge, I disagree. Firstly, I point towards the remark by Prosser (referenced below) that revenge had long since fallen into disgrace in Shakespeare's time and secondly – as I extensively argued above – *Hamlet* is not a play

152 Refenced below.
153 R. Posner, *Law & Literature*, p. 104.
154 Ibid, p. 104.
155 Ibid, p. 83.
156 Ibid, p. 84.

centring around revenge (or its critique) but centring around the aforesaid transitions. Notwithstanding the fact that Possner also identifies this thematic, he does not identify it as *the* central thematic.

I will now discuss some other representative critics from the legal field that have commented on the revenge theme in *Hamlet*, by way of the excellent overview by Boyd.[157] In his article, he identifies two leitmotifs in *Hamlet*: firstly, Hamlet's delaying the revenge of his father for four long acts and secondly – and legally speaking, deemed even more important: the revenge itself.

Special focus is laid on the implications for the relation between private vengeance and law and the ethics of violence in a codified legal system.[158] Hamlet's delay has led to many speculations as to its precise nature.

> Literary scholars, and their legal counterparts, continue to struggle over the interpretation of Shakespeare's most famous character and the ultimate meaning of Hamlet's 'delay.' […] The play […] becomes a kind of litmus test for us all, exposing in sharp relief our relationship to the ethics of violence and revenge that reside at the center of Hamlet's 'problem.'[159]

The body of legal commentators attributes Hamlet's delay either to doubt and brooding or to Hamlet's ethical scruples on vengeance. The nature of the brooding and ethical worries varies from commentator to commentator. In Prakash Mehta ("An Essay on Hamlet: Emblems of Truth in Law and Literature", 1994), it was not so much moral doubt as the uncertainty on familial affiliation spiced even with a tinge of Oedipal conflict.

> Mehta's veers away from what many […] would regard as the central ethical problem of the play [viz. taking matters into one's own hands by committing vengeance based only on a ghost's wish] only begins to make sense upon consideration of the critic's discussion of the theme of vengeance in the play. For Mehta, Hamlet's failure through Acts I–IV is principally the failure to answer the legitimate call to vengeance.[160]

When Hamlet finally springs into action, he is restored to mental health again, as Mehta gives. Boyd continues:

> Mehta is by no means alone in viewing Hamlet's final willingness to exact revenge as indicative of the character's resolution of his 'problem' and as a sign of his

157 Richard Boyd, " 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience'": The Legal Community Reads Hamlet", in *Law, Culture and the Humanities.*
158 Ibid, p. 426.
159 Ibid, p.p. 428 – 429.
160 Ibid, p. 432.

> growth toward full maturity. Many, in both the legal and literary communities, have offered similar interpretations of the play and its hero.[161]

In this, they overlook, argues Boyd, the darker side of the problem: the private revenge of Hamlet is and stays premeditated murder, after which he continues discussing the revenge thematic in the drama. Eleonor Prosser (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 1971) embroiders on this subject, stating that both church and society during the Tudor and Stuart reign would have abhorred revenge, unisono condemning it. Even then, not a trace of the generous consideration that Mehta shows could be found for a private undertaking in the sphere of vengeance.

Some scholars, among whom are Jacobi (*Wild Justice*, 1983) and Posner (*Law & Literature*, 1988), see in *Hamlet* the transition of a society haunted by primitive revenge laws into a society with a system of codified law. "In such accounts, *Hamlet* itself enacts something of this evolution in human society."[162] Of course – and here I agree – this is *the* important outcome in the play, it being the hinge point between Macbeth's tribal society and the highly developed Roman nation-state in the next play discussed. However, this transition is not due to the protagonist's hesitation (viz., his moral doubts and scruples) tout court, but to a far more sophisticated (tragic) mechanism as I argued above.

Coming back to the delay, Boyd continues to discuss Weisberg ("Hamlet and Ressentiment", 1972). The latter offers a startling new and Nietzschean interpretation[163] of the play: since Hamlet – as an aristocrat – should have a strong character, Hamlet's delay (as Boyd has on Weisberg) is sheer cowardice and deeply rooted resentment (towards Claudius) that blocks action. Moreover, (Boyd on Weisberg again), we are in dire need of a new morality altogether, so no more Christian hampering about, as Nietzsche expostulates. I leave this interpretation without much reaction or reflection since it is a unilateral interpretation of Nietzsche on top of a limited and, in my view, deeply incomplete[164] interpretation of *Hamlet*. Weisberg is salvaged more or less by Boyd when the latter offers the following:

> In Weisberg's case, I believe his most important gesture is to posit a fundamental difference in the play between Hamlet and Claudius, between a character purportedly paralyzed by resentment and one given over fully to action. According

161 Ibid, p. 435.

162 Ibid, p. 435.

163 As I understand it, retrieved from *The Genealogy of Morals* only; without consideration for the body of Nietzsche's oeuvre.

164 Influenced more by Freud, than by Shakespeare as also Boyd asserts. However, it is a courageous and refreshing attempt to challenge the conventional revenge discourse and defy Christian theories.

> to Weisberg, Hamlet envies Claudius as the dominant Other, the strong figure who has the will to act out the very desires lodged deep in Hamlet's unconscious.[165]

Girard (*Theater of Envy*, 1961), however, holds a diametrically opposite view of Claudius and Hamlet:

> Claudius resembles Hamlet in his inability to take a prompt and healthy revenge on his enemies. The king should react more explicitly and decisively to the murder of Polonius [by Hamlet], who was, after all, his private counsellor.[166]

Girard also maintains that Claudius is less nasty than he looks, because he, too, had acted in reaction to revenge. In his argument, Girard points to the fact that Hamlet Sr. might have committed a fatal felony, whereupon Claudius had taken action. There is, of course, no textual evidence in the play to corroborate this. Admittedly, Hamlet Sr. felt encumbered with the burdens of the soul, but so did his son, who had killed nobody at that stage of the play.

6.10.6 The time argument

The time aspect was generally specified above as the delaying of the revenge or procrastination. In my analysis, I already indicated that Hamlet is not in any way delaying or frustrating the course of events; he is – in my view – exceedingly rapid since he had to save the kingdom single-handedly, is going through a massive tragic crisis, and has no one he can trust and rely on.

Now, in response, I would like to ask: what is meant by time and: how long is too long? Is time measured chronologically; is their
"too long" meant to describe "unnecessary deaths", Hamlet's increasing "madness", his "sloth", or too large a number of acts? There is no satisfactory conclusion to these queries. What Wilson Knight identifies as the spatiality of the play is captured by me as tragic existentiality. This concept does not obey chronological time; it is meant to depict a psychological timespan, more specifically, the emotional intensity of a certain timespan. This timespan can be characterized by – apart from having a certain chronological longitude – a lack of personal and mental purpose, a breach in communication with the surrounding community and an utter personal void, which makes it even more emotionally exhausting. The ultimate result[167] of having inhabited such a sphere is an attitudinal full turn as described above. This attitudinal change in itself has a certain duration that cannot be measured in terms of too long

165 Richard Boyd, "'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience'": The Legal Community Reads Hamlet", in *Law, Culture and the Humanities,* p. 440.
166 Ibid, p. 440.
167 I will come to more aspects of this emotional state later.

or too short. Furthermore, I consider such queries futile in the face of the fundamental issues Shakespeare raises; it belongs to the reality of those measuring the quality of this play by its number of commas.[168] I therefore dismiss the time aspect as a substantive thematic for *Hamlet*.

Ultimately, Shakespearean tragedies are existential and existentiality and revenge are mutually exclusive. In the next chapter, we will scrutinize our next tragic heroes and see how they handle their existential properties within their society.

168 Or, in L.C. Knightsian terminology, as substantial as the research into the number of Lady Macbeth's children. And, by the way, the historical Lady Macbeth, named Gruoch, did not have any children by her husband Macbeth at all. And, while I am at it, I want to bring to mind that it was in fact the historical Macbeth that married the wife of the one he had killed (slain in battle), as I explained in my previous chapter. And last but not least: Gaelic sources report that the historical Macbeths had a happy marriage.