THE RECUSANCY OF HAMLET

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As Jane Austen would say, it is a truth universally acknowledged, even among Shakespeare scholars, that Shakespeare is the great enigma in English literature. To some extent this truth was partially covered up during the long period of Shakespeare scholarship when any discussion of Shakespeare's religion was considered taboo. But in the past couple of decades this taboo has been lifted to the extent that the theme proposed for the biennial Shakespeare Conference at Stratford in the year 2000 was 'Shakespeare and Religions'. On the other hand, so far from resolving the Shakespearian enigma, the recent weakening of the taboo has only served to bring it more prominently into the foreground of scholarly attention and discussion. And of all the plays that may be said to centre on this enigma, it hardly needs to be said that *Hamlet* is not only one among many but the one play that may be called uniquely so—as being the most problematic of all Shakespeare's so-called 'problem plays'.

But now, following the Latin Horace's recommendation, let me plunge *in medias res*, and into the middle of the play, by recalling Hamlet's probable religion, according to his university formation. For whereas we think of the story of Hamlet as belonging to early medieval Denmark, when England was for a short time tributary to the Danish king, Shakespeare's play evidently belongs to early modern England, when there was a university at Wittenberg from 1502 onwards. Not only Hamlet but three other characters in the play, his friend Horatio and his classmates who are set to spy on him, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are from Wittenberg, and from 1517 onwards this university was as noted for Lutheranism as Geneva came to be for Calvinism. This academic affiliation, moreover, isn't merely mentioned but emphasized from the outset of the play, in the second scene, no less than four times, with reference to both Hamlet and Horatio, as if to imply that of the two at least Hamlet has received a Lutheran formation. This indoctrination appears in the course of the play in his emphasis on the related themes of 'sin' and 'conscience'. As he expostulates with Polonius, 'Use every man after his desert, and who should escape whipping'? (ii.2), and subsequently with Ophelia, 'What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us' (iii.1). Of course, such sayings are not so exclusively Lutheran, but that a Catholic, even a Jesuit, might come out with them, but they do seem to express a typically Lutheran emphasis.

All this might seem to militate against my present thesis that Hamlet is a recusant, specifically a Catholic recusant. But what I wish to point out is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200013017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the contrast between his formation at Wittenberg, which might have inclined him to the new teaching of Luther, and his situation on his return to Denmark for his father's funeral. For what he finds back home in Denmark is a sudden contrast between the old order as it was in his father's time, an order to which he looks back with nostalgia, and a new order which has arisen since his father's recent death and the accession of a new king, his uncle Claudius, who has also taken his mother Gertrude to wife. Moreover, this has been engineered in his absence by the Lord Chamberlain Polonius, concerning whom the new king declares to the latter's son Laertes, 'The head is not more native to the heart,/ The hand more instrumental to the mouth,/ Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father' (i.2). In this alteration of regime, however, there seems to be nothing specifically religious, such as might afford a contrast with Hamlet's presumably Lutheran formation, but all is purely political, and more Machiavellian than Lutheran. Anyhow, in this new situation Hamlet is definitely on the side of the old order and against the new order—a situation which strangely runs through Shakespeare's plays, such as *Richard II* among the histories, *As You Like It* among the comedies, and most of all *King Lear* among the tragedies, and in all of which the dramatist's own sympathies are evidently on the side of the old and against the new.

Anyhow, it may be asked, what is 'recusant' in all this, at least in the religious, Catholic sense of the word? Doesn't it look as if Hamlet is merely against the new political regime for largely personal, rather than political reasons? He despises his uncle in contrast to his manly father, he is indignant against his mother for having allowed herself to be enticed away from his father by his uncle, and as for Polonius he regards him as just one of 'these tedious old fools' (ii.2). Yet when we look more closely, as Hamlet sets out to do with his play-within-the-play, into the consciences of these characters, we find that they have a much more tender conscience than Hamlet himself ever shows. 'The play's the thing,' he declares, 'Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (ii.2). Then he not only catches the conscience of Claudius, but he does so in such a way as to stir his deep feelings of guilt and to prompt what may well be called the most religious speech in all the plays of Shakespeare. It isn't particularly Protestant, except in so far as its Biblical content may be seen as betraying the Protestant in him, or Catholic, except in so far as it echoes the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuit Robert Persons' best-selling *Book of Resolution*. But on the basis of this speech one might well conclude that Claudius is more truly religious than Hamlet. Then, after leaving his uncle in this religious frame of mind, as unsuited to an attempt at revenge, Hamlet goes on to catch the conscience of his mother, even more effectively and practically than he did with his uncle. For as a result of his forceful urging, Gertrude is indeed 'touched to the quick' and led to a sincere

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repentance, unlike Claudius whose words, he admits,'fly up', while his thoughts 'remain below' (iii.3). In these two scenes of Act III, we might even say, Claudius and Gertrude with their religiously touched consciences become momentarily hero and heroine, while Hamlet with his vengeful designs against them becomes the villain.

But now we come to the main witness to Hamlet's Catholic recusancy, and that is the ghost of his father, representing the old order. Not only is he in his son's admiring memory 'a man, take him for all in all', and in contrast with his despised uncle 'as Hyperion to a satyr' (i.2), but now he is a ghost, he describes his present condition as 'Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,/ And for the day confined to fast in fires,/ Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away' (i.5). In other words, he is a Catholic ghost, confined in the 'prison-house' of purgatory, but with the hope of being eventually purified by fire so as to partake of the happiness of heaven. What is more, what he regards as 'most horrible' in the manner and moment of his murder is the fact that he was 'Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,/ Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled'—that is, without having had the opportunity of receiving the 'last sacraments' of viaticum (or 'housel'), penance ('appointment') and extreme unction ('anealing'), on which Catholics, not Protestants, laid special emphasis in preparing for the moment of death. This Catholicism of the ghost is further underlined when, after his disappearance, Hamlet utters the unique oath 'By St. Patrick', with reference to the famous cave in Ireland known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, which is described in Holinshed's Chronicle for Ireland, based on an account written by the future Jesuit Edmund Campion. On the other hand, one might question the validity of the ghost's religious allegiance, considering that a Catholic ghost would hardly appeal for 'revenge'. That is rather the characteristic of a Pagan ghost such as arose in Elizabethan times from the bloody tragedies of the Roman Seneca. And then there is the implicit contrast drawn by Marcellus in the opening scene between the gracious season 'Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated' and the appearance of a ghost who dominates the action of the play with his 'questionable shape' (i.4).

Then, if the identity of the ghost is to be doubted, what remains of Hamlet's 'recusancy'? There still remains, I answer, the presence of another, parallel family, that of Polonius with his son Laertes and his daughter Ophelia. Once we see Hamlet's Denmark in terms of Elizabethan England, there can be little doubt as to the identity of this Lord Chamberlain with the long-term Lord Treasurer (appointed as such in 1572), Lord Burghley, who died in 1598, well before the dramatist set about his composition of *Hamlet*. In addition to the similarity of names (with the B of Burghley pronounced in the Welsh manner as P, and the name duly Latinized in the Renaissance manner), we may point to the penchant of Polonius for spying and his favoured method of finding directions by

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means of indirections, as well as his insistence on finding 'Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/ Within the centre' (ii.2). Then, too, we have his long-winded advice to his son Laertes, reflecting the similar advice of Burghley to his son, as well as the latter's long-winded style of writing and his increasingly doddering, fussy senility in old age. Further, in view of Burghley's opportune use of the Puritans against the Catholics, both in controversy and in Parliamentary proceedings, we may see this as reflected in his family as they appear in the third scene. Here they are all offering moral advice to each other, first Laertes to Ophelia, then Ophelia back to her brother, till their father enters and gives his 'commonplace' advice to Laertes, before giving a piece of his more practical mind to poor Ophelia.

But then, I may be asked, how does this Puritan moralism square with Laertes as a student of Paris university, which was in those days known to be Catholic? Yes, but Paris was also notoriously the university of John Calvin as well as of St. Ignatius Loyola, and it was from Paris that the most violent anti-Jesuit tracts were published which Burghley arranged with the Puritans to be translated into English to greet the first English Jesuits on their arrival in England in 1580. Subsequently, when Laertes returns to Denmark on the news of his father's death, he is characterized as a typically Puritan hot-head, dubbed 'young Charbon the Puritan' by the Clown in *All's Well That Ends Well* (i.3), who behave 'as the world were now but to begin,/ Antiquity forgot, custom not known' (iv.5). So, too, the Puritans were opposed to all 'the relics and rags of Antichrist', and they are described in *Timon of Athens* as 'those that under hot ardent zeal would set whole realms on fire' (iii.3), identified by Dr. Johnson as the Puritans of that time. In this very scene, however, there is a marked contrast between brother and sister, though the brother is aggrieved on account of his sister's lapse into madness for their father's death. For whereas the one seems to have become a militant Puritan, according to Calvin's own heart, the other seems to have reverted to a childhood Catholicism, to judge from her snatches of song on pilgrimages to Walsingham and/or Compostela and her pious prayers for the dead—both practices frowned upon by the new religion. Moreover, the outcome of this family tragedy for Hamlet, on his providential return to Denmark, is a renewal of his love for Ophelia, which has remained in doubt since her too dutiful obedience to her father, on the one hand, and the final duel between himself and Laertes, as it were between Catholic and Puritan.

Everything I have so far mentioned concerning Hamlet's religion and his possible recusancy may be said to amount to little more than circumstantial evidence. But I have been keeping my principal argument up my sleeve till the end, namely his central soliloquy, 'To be, or not to be' (iii.1). True, this speech has so little relevance to its immediate dramatic context that it may easily be omitted by an impatient producer without any harm done to that context. In itself, too, it is from first to last—unlike Hamlet's

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opening soliloquy, 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt!' (i.2)—wholly abstract and impersonal, till at the end the hero at last notices the heroine and exclaims, 'Soft you now!/ The fair Ophelia? Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remembered'. Yet such is the genius of Shakespeare that what seems merely marginal to the main plot is central to his deeper preoccupation—according to what is said of Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure,* 'His givings out were of an infinite distance/ From his true-meant design' (i.4). At first, the speech seems to be merely metaphysical, a contrast between being and non-being, but once Hamlet defines his terms, they descend to the physical level, but still sufficient to put off the two eavesdroppers, Claudius and Polonius—the level of being as suffering 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', and the level of non-being as doing, taking up 'arms against a sea of troubles'. Then, without further developing this contrast, Hamlet distracts the attention of his hearers, whether on stage or in the audience, whether spectators or readers, by raising the hoary problem (going all the way back to the Book of Job) about death and the grave. But, we may ask, to which members of his audience would this contrast be more applicable than to the Catholic recusants, who were already implicated in Essex's rebellion of 1601—faced as they were with the dilemma of whether to go on enduring the unendurable of the present persecution or to take up arms as the Earl of Essex was inviting them, and as some of them went on to do in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605? On the one hand, they had the example of Laertes' no-holds-barred approach, 'To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!/ Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!/ I dare damnation' (iv.5). But on the other, Hamlet is more hesitant owing to his feeble voice of conscience, which (he says) 'does make cowards of us all', and owing to which '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' (iii.1). There we may recognize echoes both of Robert Persons' *Book of Resolution*, which was essentially aimed at confirming Catholic readers in their resolve to refuse attendance at the new Protestant services, and of the 'enterprises' variously led during the 1580s by the Duke of Guise in France and King Philip of Spain, which may be said to have failed because of what Hamlet calls 'some craven scruple/ Of thinking too precisely on the event' (iv.4). There precisely we have, in Hamlet's precise words, the recusants' dilemma—to which I dare to say the dramatist himself has no solution to offer, other than that which he dramatizes in Hamlet, namely that of doing nothing, of coming to no decision, since even not to do so is one answer, that of Job-like patience. And it is this answer he goes on to dramatize more amply and more effectively, in *King Lear*, as it went on to be presented to recusant audiences in North Yorkshire during the winter months of 1609–10.

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Then, what, I may be asked, is my final conclusion about 'the recusancy of Hamlet'? Does he, or does he not, represent the Catholic recusants of Elizabethan England during the last years of the old queen's reign? Everything in his dramatic setting and in his wider religious background seems to point to a muddle, with a Lutheran formation and a political situation in which the old order is opposed to a new one, such as was even then taking place in Shakespeare's time. Then whatever may have been the fascination of Luther's ideas, when it came to practical politics in Elizabethan England, it wasn't just a matter of Luther v. Rome, but rather of Machiavelli v. English tradition and Catholic Christendom. Then not only Hamlet, but also and much more Shakespeare was all on the side of the medieval past, the good old days of merry England, and against the new, the modern, the forward-looking Protestant establishment represented not only by Lord Burghley with his son the newly created Earl of Salisbury, but also by Sir Francis Bacon, soon to take the old place of Sir Thomas More as Lord Chancellor.

P.S. What I speak of as 'the Protestant establishment' under Queen Elizabeth goes back to the dying years of Henry VIII and his last wife Catharine Parr, and to the tutorial system arranged by that lady for the royal children, under the direction of Richard Cox, subsequently vice-chancellor of Oxford and bishop of Ely. At the heart of this system was Sir Anthony Cooke, whose daughters Anne and Mildred were married to the two originators of Elizabeth's religious policy, Sir Nicholas Bacon, as Lord Keeper (and father of Sir Francis Bacon) and Sir William Cecil, as secretary of state, then Lord Burghley and Lord Treasurer. They were all from Cambridge university, as were also Sir John Cheke and Roger Ascham, also tutors to Edward and Elizabeth. Among them it is interesting that Catharine Parr and Sir Anthony Cooke took their ideal of a household academy from that of Sir Thomas, as recommended by Erasmus in one of his most influential letters. Thus it may be said, ironically, that the Catholic More is in part responsible for the success of Protestantism in England, though it has to be emphasized that the 'reformation' in England from the time of Henry VIII onwards is more political than religious, and sustained by the ideas rather of Machiavelli than of Luther.

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