

Preface and Acknowledgements

This project was born out of frustration. The feeling ultimately began with my final years as an undergraduate at William and Mary, where, as part of a burgeoning fascination with Renaissance literature, I gained from Professor Fehrenbach and Professor Savage the beginnings of an appreciation for just how puzzling *Hamlet* truly is. Thus began my pattern of being strangely bothered by this play and of trying to exercise myself to understand it, at least to my own satisfaction. Never placing *Hamlet* at the forefront of my graduate studies, lacking the requisite bravery and patience, I nevertheless kept working sporadically on it in my mind, having from the first been tantalized with a sense that the play for all its messiness and intricacy put forth a coherent message and reflected a coherent vision. Then two things happened during my transition from graduate school to the profession. The first was my attendance at a lecture given by my dissertation director, Professor Nohnberg (“Plays behind the Play, Dramas behind the Arras: Re-writing the Tragedy of Hamlet,” University of Virginia Department of English colloquium, “Shakespeare Now Conference,” April 1996). The insights of this lecture, some of which form a basis for his magnificent foreword to this book, made a powerful impression on me, as the ideas of this great man are wont to do with anyone lucky enough to encounter them; in fact, given that his remarks on the centrality in *Hamlet* of the conflict between Catholic and Protestant forms of religiosity were hatched over a decade ago, and even well before that in previous publications on Spenser and Milton, those familiar with more recent trends in Shakespeare criticism can join me in awe of his perspicacity. To me it was a revelation to view the play in these terms, and thereafter my meditations on *Hamlet* were concentrated on finding a connection between its religious concerns and its other strands, in particular its meta-theatrical ones. The second event, my being called upon to teach the play, gave an urgency to these efforts; newly arrived at Marquette and desirous of earning my keep, I wanted not to stand before my classes and offer no thoughts other than befuddlement on so significant a matter as *Hamlet*. And so, joining those whose encouragement has been necessary for making an argument rise up from a tentative and inchoate notion about this troublesome and even intimidating play would certainly be my students. In my early days at Marquette their dedication and their intelligence motivated me to formulate at last a thesis on *Hamlet*, one sufficiently persuasive to myself and at least somewhat worthy of them; and since then, with class after class of mine having been subjected to some version of it, they have in innumerable ways challenged the idea and prompted me to shape and modify it. It is impossible to imagine this book coming into being without them.

Of course, my having convinced myself that I had finally found some perspective on *Hamlet* hardly warrants a book; and so I think it incumbent upon me somewhat to explain myself here. I do not apologize at all for writing on this topic. Do we need yet another book on *Hamlet*? Indeed we do. We always shall, for the sheer volume of work answers itself: there will always be more to say. But each study must say something different, and my claim for having done so rests most importantly on my handling of my primary and secondary sources. The experience over a few years of sharing with my students some of the basic points of the thesis led me to wonder how obvious and obsolete it might be. The more I read on *Hamlet*, the more I sensed that there might be a place for my argument, and so (emboldened by tenure) I commenced seriously to look at primary sources for how they might bear out my interpretations and at secondary ones for how they might corroborate or contradict me. I proceeded to seek publication because of what I found in each case. With the primary sources I have endeavored to show how the religious and philosophical concepts I identify were indeed available to Shakespeare; at times I point to fairly precise resemblances between a source's articulation of some idea and a specific *Hamlet* passage. This is not to argue any of my "proof texts" for actual sources of the play. But in using 1603 as a *terminus ad quem*, in restricting myself to works I construe as well known and characteristic, and in relating such works to the play as closely as possible, I have tried to demonstrate both that the trends of thought I discuss were in existence at the time of *Hamlet*, and that they do have a presence in it. The usefulness of this book will depend largely on whether I have been successful in this. It will also depend on how correct I am in presuming that few studies have advanced this thesis and that none have tied matters together in quite this way. On this presumption I must remain insecure. My notes and bibliography are intended to show my good faith effort to survey the existing work on *Hamlet* and to lay out the ways in which its prominent representatives agree or disagree with me on points large and small. But I must anticipate this effort to have entailed many and various errors. If my reader should detect in my notes any scholarship I have misunderstood, grossly oversimplified, misgrouped, or conspicuously omitted, I heartily apologize in advance, and beg indulgence. My secondary research led me to believe in the basic distinctiveness of my overall claim, of many of my individual readings, and of the ways in which I have connected my readings with each other. I can only hope it will turn out that I am not too far off in this belief, though I do sincerely acknowledge the almost certain fact that I have blundered in manifold instances.

Given the way things are at this time in Shakespeare studies and in American society, I feel I should also explain my intentions with regard to religion. The truth is that my aim is nothing other than to express my feelings about what is going on in *Hamlet*. I see Hamlet as a Catholic-minded person trying futilely to apply his world view to a deterministic Protestant universe which he at last embraces, and I see *Hamlet* as thereby registering Shakespeare's dislike of the premises of Elizabethan theology; I make this suggestion not because I think Shakespeare was Catholic or because I want him to have been so, and not because of any personal allegiance of mine to any belief system. As a Methodist I am not a skeptic out to

denigrate Christian belief by letting two of its branches expose each other's flaws, and I have an affiliation with neither Catholicism nor Reformed Protestantism. I do however find much to like about both. As a happy employee of a Catholic institution the aspirations and principles of which I admire and strive to follow, I harbor great respect for that Church. And as for Protestantism of a Calvinistic slant, many of its emphases, especially humility and iconoclasm, are appealing to me, and I dare say we in the United States could benefit in our collective consciousness from a dose of them, as we much too easily fall these days into overestimating our own capacities and into worshipping superficialities. Suffice it to say that I have no motive whatever except to interpret *Hamlet* in light of the ideas of its time as I view them.

Finally, though I have kept this project mostly to myself these last years, I have many people to thank for making possible my perseverance with it. My debts to Professor Nohnberg and to my students I have already noted, though I should certainly also note how those debts have since compounded themselves in extraordinary ways. Of these the most recent, and most incredible, is the Professor's adapting of some of his lofty thoughts on *Hamlet*—its implications for human and Western cultural psychology and for Western world intellectual history—for purposes of introducing the religious dialectic underpinning this study, and helping to frame and contextualize its argument. Utterly unprepared to accept an honor of this magnitude, I can only give him my humblest thanks. I must also mention my gratitude for the wonderful support my colleagues at Marquette have extended throughout my wrestling with this book and indeed throughout my time here. As *Hamlet* reminds us, atmosphere is all important to our well-being, and I have enjoyed a working environment that has brought out my best, as modest as that might be. Meanwhile Ashgate, in particular Erika Gaffney, has been more than generous, courteous, and helpful. And my friends and family continue to be all kindness and goodness. My long-suffering wife, Carolyn, has earned much more of a reward for all her patient understanding and painstaking benevolence than she is like to get; at least I am aware of and sorry for this injustice. To my darling children, Ella and Cal, I say not "remember me"; I instead ask that you remember us all. Do not forget: be mindful of all of us who came before.