Title: THE PROBLEMATIC RELATION BETWEEN REASON AND EMOTION IN HAMLET

Author(s): Eric Levy

Source: ***Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature.*** 53.2 (Winter 2001): p83. From *Student Edition*.

Document Type: Critical essay

Full Text:

HAMLET opens on a state of incipient alarum, with martial vigilance on the battlemented "platform' (act 1, scene 2, line 252) of Elsinore and conspicuous "post-haste and rummage in the land" (1.1.110).(1) For the sentries, this apprehension is heightened by the entrances of the Ghost--a figure whom Horatio eventually associates with a threat to the "sovereignty of reason" (1.4.73). In the immediate context, loss of the "sovereignty of reason" entails "madness" (1.4.74). In turn, madness is here associated with the disastrous inability to control emotional impulse (exemplified in this instance as either terror induced by the Ghost's monstrous metamorphosis at "the summit of the cliff" [ 1.4.70] or "desperation" [1.4.75] provoked by looking "so many fathoms to the sea" [1.4.77]). Thus, as formulated on the platform, the fundamental danger posed to reason in the world of the play is that it might lose sovereignty over emotion.

The concept of the sovereignty of reason over emotion derives from the classical definition, adopted by medieval Scholasticism, of man as the rational animal whose reason has the ethical task of rationally ordering the passions or emotional disturbances of what is formally termed the sensitive appetite (referred to by the Ghost as "nature" [1.5.12]) with which man, like all other animals, is endowed: "All the passions of the soul should be regulated according to the rule of reason ... " (Aquinas, Summa Theologica I-II, question 39, answer 2, ad 1).(2) Hamlet concurs, when praising Horatio "[w]hose blood and judgment are so well commeddled" (3.2.69): "Give me that man / That is not passion's slave ... " (3.2.71-72). Moreover, on other occasions Hamlet also emphasizes the need to control passion. For example, he censures both Gertrude and Claudius for improper surrender to the passions of concupiscence. He faults the Queen for allowing her "judgment" (3.4.70) to succumb to "compulsive ardour" (3.4.86). Through reference to "the bloat King" (3.4.184), Hamlet censures Claudius' gluttony. Through the epithet, "bawdy villain" (2.2.576), Hamlet deplores the King's lust. Indeed, Hamlet censures himself for succumbing, in the graveyard, to the irascible passion of anger: "But sure the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow'ring passion" (5.2.78-79). Ironically, in reacting to Laertes' excessive display of grief, Hamlet confronts a passion or emotion with which, through his own melancholy, he himself has been intimately associated, and whose influence on reason he recognizes, as when speculating whether the Ghost is "the devil" (2.2.595): " ... and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, /As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.596-99).

The emphasis in Hamlet on the control or moderation of emotion by reason is so insistent that many critics have addressed it. A seminal study is undertaken by Lily Bess Campbell in Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion. John S. Wilks, in a masterful of examination of conscience, explores "the subsidence in Hamlet of virulent passion," and notes "his accession to a renewed temperance" achieved through "chastened self-control" (139, 140). Very recently, a third critic, Jennifer Low, explains Hamlet's delay in terms of a conflict between "the role of the avenger" and the "restraint and ... reverence for the godhead in man" urged by Hamlet's "valorization" of reason in the "`What a piece of work is man' speech" (502). It should be noted, however, that Low's claim regarding the conflict between reason and revenge is contradicted by Aquinas: "Wherefore if one desire revenge to be taken in accordance with the order of reason, the desire of anger is praiseworthy, and is called zealous anger (Summa Theologica II-II, question 158, answer 2, response; original emphasis). In fact, as Aquinas notes, the notion of zealous revenge entails the law of retribution (lex talonis) sanctioned in the Old Testament: "Retaliation (contrapassum) denotes equal passion repaid for previous action; and the expression applies most properly to injurious passions and actions, whereby a man harms the person of his neighbour; for instance if a man strike, that he be struck back. This kind of justice is laid down in the Law [Exodus 21.23, 24]: `He shall render life for life, eye for eye ... '" (II-II, q. 61, a. 4, resp.).

Ironically, Low's error in pitting revenge against reason highlights therole of reason not in controlling, but in determining emotion. For the distinction between zealous or destructive anger presupposes the operation of reason in judging the object which the emotion of anger here concerns. As we shall find, though Hamlet is filled with references to the need for rational control of emotion, the play probes much deeper into the relation between reason and emotion--particularly with respect to the role of reason in provoking as opposed to controlling emotion. The result of this probing is at once a confounding and deepening of relevant Christian-humanist doctrine. Our investigation of these matters will entail both a recapitulation of that doctrine and an examination of the ways in which the play problematizes and supersedes it. But we can ease our entry into that demanding inquiry by first noting how the task of controlling emotion by reason is more obviously problematized by Hamlet and other characters in the play.

THOUGH Hamlet is linked with the vulnerability of reason to emotion, he nevertheless displays extraordinary emotional control, despite extreme provocation. This is evident, for example, when Hamlet toys nonchalantly with Polonius about the shape of "yonder cloud" (3.2.368), during the hectic interval between exposing the clumsy attempts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to probe Hamlet's "mystery" (3.2.357) and obeying the summons of his mother to her closet. Indeed, in an aside just before Polonius' exit, Hamlet privately expresses his well mastered consternation: "They fool me to the top of my bent" (3.2.375). The susceptibility of Hamlet's reason to emotion is further problematized by his delay, which he himself construes in terms of a failure to react appropriately to "[e]xcitements of my reason and my blood" (4.4.58). In an earlier soliloquy, he diagnoses his lack of response as a deficiency in the humour responsible for generating, as Jenkins explains, "bitter and rancorous feelings": "But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall" (2.2.573; Jenkins' note for 2.2.573-74).

We reach now a central paradox in Hamlet's character. On the one hand, he allows emotion to provoke him to unthinkingly violent action, as when stabbing blindly at the figure hidden behind the arras or grappling with Laertes. But on the other hand, Hamlet so little trusts emotion to prod him to action that he even invokes the opposite tactic of exploiting thought as a goad of emotion: "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (4.4.66). Here blood and judgment are to be commeddled not, as in Horatio's case, by the rational control of emotion, but by the rational arousal of emotion. Instead of disciplining emotion, here the function of thought is to excite emotion so that irrational violence results.

Moreover, in Hamlet, the moral requirement to control emotion by reason is undermined in other contexts, with the result that the relation between thought and emotion is radically problematized. One undermining context concerns the deliberately exaggerated display of emotion demanded by the "terms of honour" (5.2.242), dominant in the world of the play. In this context, to be worthy is to indulge in the conspicuous expression of emotion, "[w]hen honour's at the stake" (4.4.56). Indeed, as he admires the Player's emotionally charged recitation, Hamlet berates himself for not similarly responding to "the motive and the cue for passion" (2.2.555), with respect to the circumstances of his father's death: "Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause" (2.2.561-62). Yet, the obligation to display emotion to which Hamlet here refers ironically requires intense rational control by which the character in question can convincingly "force his soul to his own conceit" (2.2.546), for the sake of the approval his or her performance evokes. Here the notion of rational control of emotion is reinterpreted--one might almost say parodied--to entail not the ordering or limiting of emotion, as enjoined by Christian-humanism, but the deliberately exaggerated enactment of emotion.(3)

Another context in which the control of emotion by reason is ironized concerns Claudius' response to Hamlet. Just as, for Aquinas, unchecked passions are called "diseases or disturbances of the soul" (I-II, q. 24, a. 2, resp.), so for Claudius fear of Hamlet is an emotional disease from which he seeks to purge himself: "Diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are reliev'd, / Or not at all" (4.3.9-11). But whereas, in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, the cure for unchecked passion is the restraining influence of reason, for Claudius the cure for unchecked passion (in this case, fear) is not restraint, but indulgence. That is, succumbing utterly to an unchecked emotion (in this case, fear) provokes Claudius to devise, with his reason, a desperate stratagem by which, through violence, to eliminate his uncontrollable feeling: "The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, And thou must cure me" (4.3.68-70). Thus, through the use of reason, Claudius seeks to restore the proper commeddling of blood and judgment, but at the cost of enabling the unchecked "hectic" in his blood to compel his reason to concoct "desperate appliance." Here thought is directed by feeling, and devises a means of escape from insistent emotional pain.

Recourse to "desperate appliance," where thought conceives emergency measures to relieve emotional distress, recurs in the world of the play. Examples include first, the tentative suicide project in the "To be" soliloquy, designed to escape "heart-ache" (3.1.62), and second, the momentary despair which prompts Horatio to grab the poison'd cup: "Here's yet some liquor left" (5.2.347). Paradoxically, in these instances, by thinking about emotional pain, thought risks losing its rationality by succumbing entirely to the inciting influence of the emotional pain concerned. The ultimate example of this predicament is Ophelia whose thought, in madness, is no more than the confused cognition of emotional distress: "nothing sure, yet much unhappily" (4.5.13).

Our investigation of the ways in which the role of reason in controlling emotion is problematized in the world of the play can now proceed to direct consideration of relevant Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine. Our purpose here is first to acquire and then to apply a set of concepts which, like lenses, will allow important ideas to stand out clearly from the text so that they can be effectively analyzed.

In the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, each entity or existent tends toward an end or purpose: "Every agent, of necessity, acts for an end" (I-II, q. 1, a. 2, resp.). This tending toward an end is called inclination, and it follows the nature of the being concerned. In beings with no power of apprehension or perception, inclination is governed by inherent form. Aquinas elucidates: "some inclination follows every form; for example, fire, by its form, is inclined to rise, and to generate its like" (I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.). In beings with apprehensive powers, inclination presupposes both an apprehensive or knowing power and a corresponding appetitive power or faculty of desire. In animals, the apprehensive power involves sense perception (what Aquinas terms sensitive apprehension) and the corresponding appetitive or desiring power is called the sensitive appetite, "through which the animal is able to desire what it apprehends, and not only that to which it is inclined by its natural form" (I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.; I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.). In man, the apprehensive power is reason, and the corresponding appetitive power is the will or intellectual appetite. Aquinas summarizes these distinctions compactly: "in the intellectual nature there is to be found a natural inclination coming from the will; in the sensitive nature, according to the sensitive appetite; but in a nature devoid of knowledge, only according to the tendency of the nature to something:" (I, q. 60, a. 1, resp.).

Hence, in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, appetite (whether sensitive or intellectual) is moved by some mode of apprehension: "The movement of the appetitive power follows an act of the apprehensive power" (I-II, q. 46, a. 2, resp.). That is, inclination or appetitive movement toward an end presupposes prior awareness (whether through sense perception or thought) of the end to be approached. This point is crucial to understanding the relation between reason and emotion. For as we shall now clarify, in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm the task of reason to control emotion is complicated by its role in provoking emotion.

We take the first step toward understanding this dual role of reason with respect to emotion by noting that emotion or passion is here defined as a movement of the sensitive appetite: "Passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite when we imagine good or evil; in other words, passion is a movement of the irrational soul, when we think of good or evil" (Aquinas quoting Damascene in Summa Theologica I-II, q. 22, a. 3, resp.). Thus construed as a movement of the sensitive appetite respectively toward or away from "whatever is suitable" (Aquinas' generic definition of good) or "whatever is repugnant" (Aquinas' generic definition of evil), emotion entails an appetitive response which, to interpolate Gilson's masterful phrasing, itself presupposes the apprehension "of an object which is of interest to the life of the body" (I-II, q. 29, a. 1, resp.; Gilson, Christian Philosophy 272).(4) In the case of animals other than man, this apprehension of the appetitive object entails such faculties as sense perception and estimation (a power of rudimentary judgment). But in man, the sensitive appetite is ultimately moved by reason or the cogitative power: "the cognitive power moves the appetite by representing its object to it" (II-II, q. 158, a. 2, resp.).

In animals, the passions of the sensitive appetite are imperious: "Thus animals before some pleasant object, cannot help desiring it, since they are not masters of their inclinations, and so we say with St. John Damascene, that they do not act, but are being acted upon" (Gilson, Philosophy 286). But, in man, the rational animal, the will (or intellectual appetite), as a higher power, can choose whether to yield to the passionate impulses of the sensitive appetite. Aquinas' famous example of the sheep and the wolf will illustrate:

For in other animals movement follows at once the concupiscible and

irascible appetites [the two aspects of the sensitive appetite]; for

instance, the sheep, fearing the wolf, flies at once, because it has no

superior counteracting appetite. On the contrary, man is not moved at once,

according to the irascible and concupiscible appetites, but he awaits the

command of the will, which is the superior appetite [and which is itself

moved by reason]. (I, q. 81, a. 3, resp.)

But in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, reason not only controls emotion but also provokes it. The role of reason in provoking emotion appears most clearly in the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of sorrow, a passion which Aquinas generically defines as "pain ... which is caused by an interior apprehension" [or act of mental awareness] (I-II, q. 35, a. 2, resp.). Aquinas distinguished two kinds of pain--outward and inward. The first is sensory; the second (which causes sorrow) is mental: "outward pain arises from an apprehension of sense, and especially of touch, while inward pain arises from an interior apprehension, of the imagination or of the reason" (I-II, q. 35, a. 7, resp.). Since outward pain is apprehended by the senses (a faculty which all animals possess), while inward pain is perceived by the mind (the distinguishing attribute of man), inward pain is more intense than outward: "inward pain surpasses outward pain ... because the apprehension of reason and imagination is of a higher order than the apprehension of the sense of touch" (I-II, q. 35, a. 7, resp.). That is, the greater intensity of inward pain, in comparison with outward pain, results from the fact that, unlike outward pain, inward pain is not a sensory, but a mental event. Construed as a feeling, inward pain is registered in the heart: "And I am sick at heart" (1.1.9). But it is equally to locate inward pain "in the mind" (3.1.57); for without thought (i.e. the operation of reason or imagination), there is no inward pain.

IN Hamlet, thought or interior apprehension not only engenders inward pain (as postulated in the Aristotelian-Thomist system), but tends also, as we have seen, to brood on the need to terminate that pain. Indeed, in referring to Hamlet's inward pain, Claudius foregrounds precisely such preoccupation: "This something settled matter in his heart, / Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus / From fashion of himself" (3.1.175-77, emphasis mine). Yet, in this example, unlike the "To be" soliloquy, Claudius' plot to kill Hamlet, or Horatio's snatching of the poisoned cup, the implied means of escaping inward pain entails not desperately conceived action ("desperate appliance") but eventual understanding, through sustained mental effort ("his brains still beating"), of the pain felt. A similar emphasis on the need to understand inward pain appears in Hamlet's allusion to his melancholy: "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth ... " (2.2.295-96). In contrast to the Aristotelian-Thomist dispensation where inward pain results from thought, Hamlet's inward pain provokes him to focus his thought on understanding inward pain in order to eliminate it. But ironically, insofar as inward pain, by definition, derives from thought, the only way to eliminate the pain is to recognize and consequently change the mode of thinking which causes it. That is, to understand inward pain is to understand how thought contributes to it.

There are several instances in the play which concern the recognition and suggested modification of a mode of thought causing inward pain. The first involves the advice, proffered by Claudius, that Hamlet recognize that his "unmanly grief" (1.2.94) derives from "a mind impatient, / An understanding simple and unschool'd" (1.2.97), regarding the inevitability of death. The second instance occurs in Hamlet's second soliloquy, when he eliminates inward pain derived from thought by suddenly noting and then abandoning the mode of thought engendering the pain. Here Hamlet abruptly interrupts a humiliating train of thought alleging his own cowardice in not dispatching the loathed Claudius:

This is most brave,

That I...

Must like a whore unpack my heart with words

And fall a-cursing like a very drab,

A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh!

About, my brains. (2.2.578-84).

A third instance occurs in Gertrude's closet, when the Ghost commands Hamlet to distract Gertrude from the "amazement" (3.4.112) of seeing her son discourse to the vacant air: "Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" (3.4.113-14). A fourth instance of the recognition and subsequent modification of thought causing inward pain concerns Hamlet's misgiving prior to duelling with Laertes. After dismissing his feeling as "a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman" (5.2.211-12), he dispels the emotion altogether by thinking of the encompassing design of "providence" (5.2.215).

The implications of the relation between inward pain and thought can be deepened by reference to the "To be" soliloquy. The great irony of that speech concerns "the pale cast of thought" (3.1.85). Hamlet castigates thought for inhibiting the implementation of an enterprise (suicide) designed to eliminate inward pain. But as the examples just cited suggest, the proper means of allaying inward pain is not recourse to "desperate appliance" (Claudius' term), conceived by thought under the influence of emotional pain, but modification of the mode of thought creating that pain. Further consideration of the "To be" soliloquy will clarify this point. For according to the "argument" (3.2.227) there presented, "to be" involves inevitable and varied modes of "heart-ache" (3.1.62) which problematize the value of life, and make death seem more appealing. In this context, to restore value to life--to make life worth living for its own sake, and not merely for the sake of avoiding the ills in death "we know not of" (3.1.81)--is to adopt a mode of thought which does not maximize inward pain.

A further problem arises with respect to preoccupation with inward pain. In the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, inward pain seeks relief through outward expression; for without such release, inward pain intensifies:

Tears and groans naturally assuage sorrow ... because a hurtful thing hurts

yet more if we keep it shut up, because the soul is more intent on it; but

if it be allowed to escape, the soul's intention is dispersed as it were on

outward things, so that the inward sorrow is lessened. This is why when

men, burdened with sorrow, make outward show of their sorrow, by tears or

groans or even by words, their sorrow is assuaged (I-II, q. 38, a. 2,

resp., emphasis mine).

But recourse to outward expression for the relief of inward pain can subject its audience to tremendous strain and can moreover, if sufficiently forceful, become inflammatory. A relevant example concerns the emotional upheaval provoked by the deliberately exaggerated display of emotion demanded by the theatrical imperative dominant, as earlier noted, in the world of the play: "Make mad the guilty and appal the free, / Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed / The very faculties of eyes and ears" (2.2.558-60). Another example concerns Hamlet's false madness. Through it, he gives unrestrained vent to inward pain regarding moral corruption, regardless of the shattering effect of his words on his auditors. Indeed, Ophelia becomes the primary victim of such onslaught: "O woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.162-63). This circumstance gives deeper meaning to Claudius' alarm regarding Hamlet: "Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow / Out of his brows" (3.3.6-7). On the level now under consideration, the thinking process which appears to "grow out of [Hamlet's] brows" does constitute a hazard. For the inward pain produced by this thought demands outward expression which, in turn, threatens its witnesses (such as the impressionable Ophelia) with emotional devastation.

Yet, Hamlet's thinking process also has positive implications. For through it, on many occasions, he moves beyond the mode of thought causing inward pain. The most remarkable expression of positive development in Hamlet's thinking concerns his frequent association with a higher power of intellection than that which mere thinking can achieve. For example, on hearing from the Ghost the secret of Claudius' crime, Hamlet responds: "O my prophetic soul" (1.5.41). Later, when Claudius hints of "purposes" of which Hamlet is ignorant, Hamlet responds: "I see a cherub that sees them" (4.3.50, 51). This situation implies the inverse of the Freudian notion of the unconscious. For here the crucial

level of mental activity operates, not beneath conscious awareness, but above it. In other words, Hamlet's cognitive activity recalls what the Augustinian epistemological tradition (continued in High Scholasticism by St. Bonaventure) calls illumination, wherein a higher power of rationality informs or illumines a lower one, enabling it to know that which is beyond its proper power of intellection.

The relevant point for us here is not that the play dramatizes the Augustinian notion of illumination, but that Hamlet himself is repeatedly associated with mental awareness that exceeds his own unaided cognitive powers. Indeed, Hamlet himself associates the Ghost with the provoking of "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (1.4.56). The ultimate consequence of this aptitude to transcend the limitations of unaided thought concerns Hamlet's release from emotions caused by uncertainty regarding the future.

Discussion of this topic must begin with further consideration of Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine. According to Aquinas, inward pain which is caused by the apprehension of an unforeseeable evil or source of harm is called anxiety: "because [they] cannot be foreseen ... future misfortunes are feared, and fear of this kind is called anxiety" (I-II, q. 42, a. 4, resp.). Another name for this type of inward pain is perplexity: "anxiety which weighs on the mind, so as to make escape seem impossible ... is also called perplexity" (I-II, q. 35, a. 8, resp.). The first scene of Hamlet dramatizes a world charged with precisely this kind of anxiety or perplexity, with respect to "the omen coming on" (1.1.126). Here, that which is unforeseeable pertains to "future misfortunes" (to requote Aquinas' term), which are independent of the mind, and can be neither anticipated nor deflected by it. But the most celebrated expression in the play of anxiety or perplexity regarding the inability to escape future misfortunes is the "To be" soliloquy, which concerns the inward pain caused by apprehending the inevitability of "outrageous fortune" (3.1.58). In that soliloquy, anxiety or perplexity (in the Thomist sense of these terms) regarding future misfortunes in life is compounded by anxiety or perplexity regarding future misfortunes in death: "For in sleep of death what dreams may come" (3.1.66).

Yet Hamlet moves toward a way of thinking which deals differently with unforeseen circumstance. Whereas in the "To be" soliloquy the apprehension of unforeseen circumstance is the cause of anxiety, Hamlet later in the play makes awareness of unforeseen circumstance a cause of emotional delectation, as when relishing the challenge of outwitting a cunningly unpredictable adversary: "O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.211-12). Moreover, when Hamlet accepts the challenge to duel against Laertes, awareness of unforeseen circumstance affords Hamlet emotional peace ("Let be" [5.2.220]), after a brief registration of anxiety or "gaingiving" (5.2.211), as we have seen.

THE process we have just analyzed, whereby one emotional state is converted into its contrary (here, anxiety converted into peace) is crucial in the development of Hamlet. Indeed, such transformation is perhaps the most profound result of the intense thinking process that "doth hourly grow / Out of his brows" (3.3.6-7). In this context, the proper relation between reason and emotion depends not only on the rational control of emotion by reason, as in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, but also on the conversion of negative emotion (inward pain) by altering or overcoming the way of thinking causing it.

In the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, the dominant principle regarding the proper relation of emotion to reason is moderation or the disposition to choose the mean between contrary extremes or excesses: "virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate" (Aristotle 14-15). Hence, according to Aristotle, "the appetitive element in the temperate man should harmonize with the rational principle ... " (Aristotle 15-16). Aquinas concurs: "it pertains to the perfection of man's good that his passions be moderated by reason (I-II, q. 24, a. 3, resp.). Hamlet endorses this doctrine, as when he exhorts Gertrude to curb her lustful passion for Claudius ("Refrain tonight" [3.4.167]) or when he commends Horatio's ability to commeddle "blood and judgment" (3.2.69). In fact, in referring elsewhere to Claudius' incontinence, Hamlet even seems (though this cannot be proven) to allude to a passage from the Nichomachean Ethics: "When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage" (3.3.89, emphasis mine). For here the words, "drunk asleep" echo those with which Aristotle designates the incontinent man who, by acting without reference to reason, is "like the man who is asleep or drunk" (14, 15).

But, as we have seen, with respect to Hamlet himself continence is ultimately associated with the role of reason not in moderating emotion (as Aristotle emphasizes), but in transforming it. This distinction is epitomized by the contrast between Horatio and Hamlet--in one, reason and emotion "are so well commeddled" (3.2.69); in the other, reason transforms emotion through altering the "pale cast of thought" which provokes it. The Aristotelian-Thomist notion that, as Dadlez puts it, "cognitions are necessary constituents of emotion" underpins this process of transformation in the play (17).

Perhaps the most spectacular instance in the play of thought provoking emotion concerns Hamlet's stratagem to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.601) through performance of a drama which duplicates the crime of which the Ghost has accused him. In Thomistic doctrine, conscience is construed as "nothing else than the application of knowledge to some action," and as such can provoke powerful emotion, such as remorse (I-II, q. 19, a. 6, resp.). Claudius' reaction after watching a truncated performance of The Murder of Gonzago is a case in point: "O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven" (3.3.36).

Unwittingly, Hamlet suggests another interpretation of conscience that goes beyond the Thomistic notion of right application of knowledge to some action: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50, emphasis mine). In the immediate context, Hamlet appears here to dismiss the notion of intrinsic moral value in favor of a moral relativism wherein the distinction between good and evil derives solely from the particular perspective of the agent in question. But in the context of the Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine regarding the role of reason in provoking emotion, Hamlet's remark gains deeper implications. For insofar as thinking does determine "good or bad," it also provokes emotion since, in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, good and evil are themselves defined in terms of the appetitive response which their apprehension or cognition provokes: "For the apprehension of the good gives rise to one kind of movement in the appetite, while the apprehension of evil gives rise to another ..." (II-II, q.158, a. 2, resp.). Here, by distinguishing between "good or bad," "thinking" moves the appetite, and movement of the appetite is precisely that in which emotion, as defined in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, consists: "Passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite when we imagine good or evil; in other words, passion is a movement of the irrational soul, when we think of good or evil" (Aquinas quoting Damascene in a passage which we quoted earlier).

Insofar as thinking moves the appetite and thus provokes emotion, it is crucial that thinking itself be properly ordered. The highest task of conscience in Hamlet concerns the moral evaluation not only of the objects of thought or apprehension, but also of the act of thinking about those objects. Indeed, Hamlet foregrounds this problem when criticizing his own thinking about revenge: "Now whether it be / Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th'event" (4.4.39-40). Thus, the relation between reason and emotion in the play cannot here be summed up in the Thomistic dictum, quoted earlier, that "[a]ll the passions of the soul should be regulated according to the rule of reason ..." (I-II, q. 39, a. 2, ad 1) There remains the responsibility of thought to recognize the emotional consequences of its own activity.

Notes

(1) Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins. All quotations from Hamlet pertain to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

(2) St. Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1952). All quotations from The Summa Theologica pertain to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

(3) For further discussion of the theatrical imperative in Hamlet, see Eric P. Levy, "`Nor th'exterior nor the inward man': The Problematics of Personal Identity in Hamlet" (716-19).

(4) A modern reformulation of this Christian-humanist tenet is provided by Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O'Connor eds., in Readings in Existential Phenomenology: "Feelings may be said to be that aspect of consciousness which most proximately draws our attention to our bodiliness ..." (14).

Works Cited

Aquinas, St. Thomas. Summa Theologica. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1952.

Aristotle. Nichomachean Ethics. The Basic Works of Aristotle. Ed. Richard McKeon. Trans. W. D. Ross. New York: Random House, 1941.

Campbell, Lily Bess. Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961.

Dadlez, E. M. What's Hecuba to Him?: Fictional Events and Actual Emotions. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997.

Gilson, Etienne. The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Trans. L. K. Shook. New York: Octagon, 1956.

--.The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Ed. G. A. Elrington. Trans. Edward Bullough. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1937.

Jenkins, Harold, ed. Hamlet. By William Shakespeare. New York: Methuen, 1982.

Lawrence, Nathaniel and Daniel O'Connor eds. Readings in Existential Phenomenology. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967.

Levy, Eric P. "`Nor th'exterior nor the inward man': The Problematics of Personal Identity in Hamlet." University of Toronto Quarterly 68.3 (1999): 711-27.

Low, Jennifer. "Manhood and the Duel: Enacting Masculinity in Hamlet." Centennial Review 43.3 (1999): 501-12.

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Ed. Harold Jenkins. New York: Methuen, 1982.

Wilks, John S. "The Discourse of Reason: Justice and the Erroneous Conscience in Hamlet." Shakespeare Studies 18 (1986): 117-44.

Erie Levy, having received both his M.A. and Ph.D. at Stanford University, is presently Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia. His publications include a book and articles on Samuel Beckett, as well as articles on Hamlet, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Tennessee Williams, Charles Dickens, Emily Bronte, Wilkie Collins, Christology, and self-pity neurosis. He is currently completing two books, Hamlet and the Problematics of Man and Beckett Viewed from Certain Angles.

Levy, Eric

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Levy, Eric. "THE PROBLEMATIC RELATION BETWEEN REASON AND EMOTION IN HAMLET." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 53.2 (2001): 83. *Gale Power Search*. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.

Document URL  
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA77482941&v=2.1&u=afnohs&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w

**Gale Document Number:**GALE|A77482941