Moral Agency in *Hamlet*

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This brief essay asks whether moral agency is a state of mind or a mode of action or some desirable combination of the two. It presupposes that most agency talk treats agency as a good thing to have and that, moreover, agency talk attempts to respect both external actions and internal mental states. Hannibal of Carthage fighting at Cannae, and Julian of Norwich immured in her Norwich cell thinking about visions she had many years before, can both be admired as agents. Both exhibit agency in a very strong form, even though one is imposing his will directly on 70,000 Roman soldiers that his own troops will slaughter, while the other is reflecting intensively in solitude on her past mental experiences without any primary intention to communicate them to others. Hannibal and Julian in their opposed ways exemplify a highly valued, widely envied form of agency: that of someone who has found a vocation and has followed it in a way that marks the agent as exceptionally focused and effective.

Is this what Michael Bristol calls “moral agency” and asks us to think about in order to make our critical commentary on Shakespeare less dissonant with the intuitions of intelligent non-professional readers and theatergoers? They, and we too, according to Bristol, see characters as people, and respond to them emotionally in a way that has a moral dimension: “An emotional response to a fiction is in some ways a puzzling phenomenon, but it can be explained with reference to deeply held normative beliefs about what’s right and what’s wrong.” Bristol goes on to remark, with respect to moral action, that “[p]eople act with purpose, but they also act with strong second-order self-consciousness . . . [h]uman action is often less a matter of accomplishing instrumental goals than it is about maintaining the preferred narrative account of the self” (*Moral*, 4). I find this claim illuminating. I would add some-
thing Bristol does not say: that in most preferred narrative accounts of themselves people stress their own agency, even if that agency is merely what Marvell calls "making their destiny their choice." But the "agency" may at times be in tension with "morality" in ways that my examples of Hannibal and Julian raise. In an essay in Bristol's collection that is partly about Hamlet, Richard Strier argues that Shakespeare represents the relation among action, motive, and self-awareness as opaque to the human actor: "Even when it looks as if there is a straightforward motive for a character's behavior . . . it can be shown, I think, that those characters are mistaken about what they truly want" (Moral, 55, 62). Strier's examples are Hamlet's excuse to Laertes before the duel and Laertes' apparent partial acceptance of it, Shylock's description of how irrational affections govern our responses and explain his hatred for Antonio, and Iago's malignity, both motiveless and overdetermined, which sends Shakespeare to theological mysteries in an attempt to provide analogies for it. Although Bristol does not remind us of his comment in describing Strier's essay in his introduction, I wonder whether being the one who gets to describe one's own motives, even when the descriptions are morally bizarre, might not be part of a preferred narrative of self for Hamlet, Shylock, and Iago.

Now, to return to my initial paradigms, Hannibal at Cannae and Julian in her cell both doubtless are doing what they think is right. But the "agency" they exemplify seems to me different from attempts to sort out whether military conquest or mystical self-immurement are good or bad things to do. Both Hannibal and Julian are moral agents because they are morally unconventional—not constrained to do what everyone else would consider right, but committed to a set of self-devised imperatives. They follow strong preferred narratives of selfhood that do not seem dependent on what is right or wrong for everyone. People or characters who exemplify "agency" in this way may well become examples to others of relatively new ways to act, and thus become moral agents by reshaping mores.

As it happens, we have evidence that both Hannibal and Julian were examples in this way for their contemporaries. Several ancient sources record a conversation between Hannibal and Scipio Africanus that took place on neutral ground, a decade or more after Scipio attained military immortality by studying Hannibal's tactics and defeating Hannibal at Zama in North Africa. Scipio asked Hannibal who were the greatest generals in history, hoping to hear
about Scipio. Without mentioning Scipio, Hannibal named three, putting himself just after Alexander and Pyrrhus. Scipio, nettled, asked Hannibal where Hannibal would rank himself had he not been defeated by Scipio, and Hannibal replied graciously by saying that had Zama not occurred he would have ranked Hannibal ahead of Alexander. The conversation demonstrates how an exemplary life can become a moral force, shaping both the self-understanding and the actions of others.  

While Hannibal’s agency commanded massive contemporary attention, Julian’s was largely private until she disclosed it in two versions near the end of her life. It is an interesting, quasi-Derridean question whether she would have had the same agency without leaving textual versions of her visions and her meditations on them for posterity to read. Nonetheless, she seems to have been at least locally exemplary independently of authorship. Margery Kempe went to Julian for a consultation about her own visionary experiences in the same year Julian wrote down the earlier text of her visions, which Margery is unlikely to have been able to read. So Julian was known in Norwich as a visionary before she published, and Margery, like Scipio, came to Julian in part to have her own mode of moral agency validated by someone who falls into the category of an expert in this particular mode, like the “elder masters of known honor” Laertes wants to consult before accepting Hamlet’s weird quasi-apology in the lead-up to their duel (5.2.246). Obviously Julian would not be affecting us now had she and Margery not left textual traces of their mental states, but in terms of the sought-after sense of laboring in one’s vocation Julian would still be an agent—bounded in a nutshell but counting herself king of infinite space, as it were, because she has good dreams.

Given that Hamlet is my central object of inquiry here, it is also relevant that part of advice concerning visions that Julian gives Margery involves single-minded acceptance of vocational gifts, for Margery records Julian saying that “a dubbl man in sowle is evyr unstabyl and unstedfast in al hys weys. He that is evymor dowtyng is lyke to the flood of the see, the whech is mevyd and born abowte wyth the wynd, and that man is not lyche to receyven the gyftys of God.”

In Hamlet the vocational clarity exhibited in the lives of Hannibal and Julian is more honored in the breach than the observance. Most characters are to double business bound, and they exhibit both the instabilities and the failure to receive God’s gifts that
Julian notes. The play is preoccupied with agency, both moral and non-moral, but also preoccupied with susceptibility to the moral power of others, whether that power consists in filial obligation, ideology, or physical violence.

For Peter Holbrook, the central human task dramatized in *Hamlet* is the struggle to find and become oneself. Holbrook argues that the possibility of true selfhood is an essential human freedom that Shakespeare celebrates to a preeminent degree. He finds it a disconcerting feature of our critical moment that the cultivation of free selfhood is not recognized as a central goal of literary reading and teaching. "The lack of interest in recognizing Shakespeare as a poet of freedom is connected, it seems to me, with the contemporary cultural Left's reluctance to commit to freedom generally." Holbrook sees the allegiance to freedom in *Hamlet* in Hamlet's claims about that within which passes show:

Hamlet is popular because he draws attention to a private, inaccessible part of ourselves—reminds us that my social identity never captures the authentic me. This notion contradicts waves of speculation about the nature of the self since the "Theory" explosion in the humanities of the 1960s and after, which attacked the common-sense notion of a "self" existing outside the linguistic, cultural and social networks, that, for Theory, conditioned or created "subjectivity." (*Individuality*, 57)

Here Holbrook sounds like Bristol, who presents interest in moral agency as an attempt to align Shakespeare with the responses of the common reader. Bristol repents past theory-driven attacks on "the common-sense notion of a 'self'." Engaging non-specialist readers who, in response to Shakespeare, offer "intuitions about Shakespeare's characters, about his genius as an author, about the universality of his insights," Bristol comments that

If I respond to their remarks by telling them that there are no characters in Shakespeare's plays, that the self doesn't exist, that Shakespeare wasn't an author, or that universality is a perverse and dishonest ideological construct I can generally expect them to politely change the subject. They feel put down, but they also think that I'm doing it on purpose to make myself feel more important. (*Moral*, 11)

Both Bristol's "moral agency" and Holbrook's "freedom" are ways of talking about human possibility designed to honor what Bristol calls "vernacular intuitions" about Shakespeare.
Julia Lupton also thinks of Hamlet as a person striving for self-realization and sees this as at the core of our attachment to him:

Hamlet is doubly lonely: trapped by the secrecy and questionable legality of the Ghost’s commandment, and isolated still again by the subjective terror of his own resistance to revenge. Yet this double loneliness—so definitive for the Hamlet that we know and love—is nonetheless from the beginning circled by a fellowship of friends who lighten and lessen this isolation.7

For her, the small group of friends Hamlet binds with a collective oath after speaking with the Ghost, and even Ophelia in her thwarted past attempts at an independent relation to Hamlet, constitute a possibility of a horizontal politics that moderates the terrible vertical imperatives imposed by the Ghost. She identifies horizontal politics with Hannah Arendt, vertical politics with Carl Schmitt, and works her way into her treatment of *Hamlet* by meditating on Schmitt’s discussion of the play as a reflection on James I’s absolutist ideas about kingship. Lupton sees Schmitt and Arendt as united in a similar awareness that she sees in contemporary terms: “both [Schmitt and Arendt] were early critics of what Foucault would call ‘biopolitics’—the absorption, economization, and technocratic management of every aspect of human life under the increasingly administrative functions of the state, whether in its social-democratic or its totalitarian manifestations” (“Elections,” 69). Holbrook would rather read and write about literature without using “biopolitics” as what Kenneth Burke calls a “God-term,”8 but Holbrook clearly agrees with Lupton that contemporary neo-liberal regimes of assessment, self-regulation, and group-identity reduce the differences between dictatorship and democracy:

Not to mince words, then, my claim is that our current social and cultural circumstances make fascism, or some form of authoritarianism, a likely future for us. How depressing therefore that the Left, the traditional opponent of tyranny and defender of liberty since Milton, has (at least in its theoretical wing) relinquished the language of individuality as so much sentimental and ideological claptrap. (*Individualism*, 65)

Lupton uses many current God-terms, but her interest in political theology is also a wide-ranging effort to take seriously Jewish and Christian commitments to the inherited God who lies behind God-terms. Like Holbrook, though less pugnaciously, she sees literature
as a repository of currently undervalued possibilities for enhanced individuality and freedom. She takes a complex view of social constraints on selfhood, but her focus on the intimations of democratic politics in Hamlet leads her to a powerful redescription of Hamlet: she raises the possibility that at the end of the play Hamlet institutes "a different kind of principality, becoming ... the initiator of the chance for constitutionalism" (Thinking, 90).

Lupton provides a conditional account of the freedom of a Hamlet who, in dying, votes for Fortinbras but makes Horatio his moral executor: for Lupton, "two types of the friend ... one a commissarial dictator in the line of Schmitt ... the other a public speaker and deliberator in the line of Arendt" (Thinking, 95). Half a cheer for democracy. But Lupton continues, "Although Shakespeare leaves Denmark in the hands of Fortinbras, he leaves Hamlet's story with Horatio, who in turn leaves it with us. The rest is not silence." (Thinking, 95) Lupton concludes by suggesting that for us, the "rest" involves a struggle for meaningful political selfhood: "we are enjoined rather to continue to essay matters of ongoing interest: to think with Shakespeare about the shapes, origins, costs, and limits of political community" (Thinking, 95).

Holbrook sums up his reading of the end of Hamlet much less equivocally: citing Nietzsche and Winnicott on the unsatisfactoriness of a life of mere reaction to stimuli:

Hamlet, for much of the play, can be described in these terms. But by its end he has dropped the role of Righteous Avenger, which of course never suited him. He has acquired that freedom from rancour and resentment that for Nietzsche constituted health. ... He is no longer entranced and made sick by a paternal idol. So long as Hamlet felt his purpose on earth was to avenge his father he was full of self-loathing ... At the beginning, and throughout much of the play, Hamlet wishes himself different ... [b]ut by its end this is no longer true. He has become himself. His task was never to imitate his father or act as his father's instrument. This is a profound liberation and it is why Hamlet, notwithstanding the waste it portrays, is a great drama of individuality and one of the most inspiring stories ever told. (Individualism, 90–91, quoting Nietzsche, Twilight, 53 and Winnicott, Home, 39)

Holbrook's Hamlet attains self-realization; Lupton's Hamlet is poised in a complicated way between exemplifying political freedom and voting for statism. But both Holbrook and Lupton present a Hamlet who achieves meaningful agency amid a set of impera-
dies that, as Holbrook says, "never suited him," and as Lupton says, have confined him in "a double loneliness" that helps us love him.

Has Hamlet revised his preferred narrative of himself by the end of the play? Early on, we love Hamlet for the loneliness Lupton describes, which leaves us a role to play as admirers of wonderful qualities lost on most of his interlocutors, and also on Hamlet. We also love Hamlet for his responsiveness to opportunities for friendship and play and thought and riposte, an intense, sometimes frightening alacrity in taking up what life presents and doing something with it. That something is most often, as I've argued elsewhere, some form of reflective moral portraiture: Hamlet's enormous expressiveness takes the form of making others see what in his view they are doing, and sometimes doing it violently back to them. But though he flirts with a complete commitment to theatricality—"would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses in my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players?" (3.2.273–76)—his preferred narrative of the self is too closely wound up in his nobility and its consequences it to be summed up as being morally theatrical. Hamlet wants above all to exemplify nobility, to project disappointment with the ignobility of those around him and to reward with noble affection those who are not disappointing. By being noble he hopes to bring about a nobler world amid deep dismay at the ignoble state his immediate environment has fallen into. This concern shapes the question he asks over and over: whether it is nobler to take violent action that may compromise his own nobility by having ignoble consequences (and will also almost certainly result in his own death), or to put up with the pain of enduring an unsatisfactory relation to his world in which no opportunities for noble agency present themselves. He also reacts with extremity when his nobility is questioned, especially by those he cares about:

OPHELIA    Take these again, for to the noble mind
            Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
            There, my lord.

HAMLET    Ha, ha! Are you honest?

(3.1.101–4)

Compare Hamlet's "tow'ring passion" (5.2.80) when Laertes, whom Hamlet has just described to Horatio as "a very noble youth"
(5.1.224), both blames and devalues Hamlet in a more extreme version of Ophelia’s comment that he has proved an unkind giver:

O, treble woe
Fall ten times treble on that cursed head
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense
Deprived thee of!

(5.1.246–49)

As to Ophelia, Hamlet’s violent anger at being devalued or misunderstood by his noble contemporaries here takes the form of discursive parodic portraiture: “‘Swounds, show me what thou’lt do. / Woo’t weep? Woo’t fight? Woo’t fast? Woo’t tear thyself? / Woo’t drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?” (5.1.227–29). But, as with Ophelia, he also believes Laertes to be part of a horizontal generational community with ties that should outweigh or at least mitigate Laertes’ hatred: “What is the reason that you use me thus? / I loved you ever” (5.1.292–93). In Ophelia’s case, Hamlet’s anger must partly be disappointment that she has not heeded a coded message to her to look through his madness and trust his affection:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.

(2.2.116–19)

Hamlet may turn rapidly from love to murderous contempt, as he does with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but he reiterates the kinship in nobility he feels towards Ophelia and Laertes as often as he does his love for Horatio: “I loved Ophelia” (5.1.272), he says by her grave; “I have shot my arrow o’er the house / And hurt my brother” (5.2.241–42), he says to Laertes before their duel. As Strier points out, Laertes appears to mean it when he responds by saying “I will receive your offered love like love” (5.2.249; Moral, 57).

One mode of moral agency is exemplarity marked by imitative attention from others. Before his madness, says Ophelia, Hamlet represented “the noble mind.”

The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,
Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form,
The observed of all observers . . .

(3.1.153–57)

Hamlet's madness destroys this noble exemplarity. His direct moral interventions after Act 1 are dismissed by their targets because, they say, he is mad. Imitating the way others treat him, he drains his own mad actions of moral significance in his self-exculpation to Laertes:

What I have done
That might your nature, honor, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness.

(5.2.227–34)

Strier comments on the strange view of individual agency and responsibility contained in this passage. He does not see it as possibly actuated by Gertrude's request in the odd little Q2-only intrusion of a Lord to verify Hamlet's acceptance of the duel and set the scene for it:

LORD The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to
Laertes before you fall to play.
HAMLET She well instructs me.

(5.2.204–6)

Hamlet's "gentle entertainment" not only obeys Gertrude, but imitates her. Hamlet sharply distinguishes Hamlet-in-madness from Hamlet-as-he-really-is just as Gertrude did at Ophelia's burial:

This is mere madness,
And thus awhile the fit will work on him;
Anon, as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.

(5.1.287–91)

Gertrude shows her resistance to an earlier injunction of Hamlet's: "Lay not that flattering unction to your soul / That not your trespass
but my madness speaks” (3.4.152–53). Hamlet wants to be thought mad by Claudius and Polonius, and he wants those toward whom he is trying to behave nobly to recognize he is telling them something real about themselves. But not only can he not have it both ways, he cannot have it either way. Where Ophelia sees “a noble mind . . . here o'erthrown / . . . blasted with ecstasy” (3.1.153, 163), Claudius recognizes that “what he spake, though it lacked form a little, / Was not like madness” (3.1.166–67) and determines to send Hamlet to England.

Unlike Hannibal with Scipio and Julian with Margery, Hamlet never has retrospective conversation about his mode of agency. He leaves that for Horatio to initiate and for us to continue. We are left with several possible views. He has, in ways Lupton illuminates, exemplified various possibilities of elective participation in human political community. He has, as Holbrook argues, come to exemplify free self-acceptance, embracing himself as himself rather than another. In part this acceptance may, as Strier suggests, stem from ceasing to care about the motives he is supposed to have, or ceasing to be haunted by a specter of human beings as rational actors, accepting that moral agency always involves rash message-shuffling in the intersubjective fog generated by agents who cannot know their own purposes. But one consistent feature of Hamlet’s behavior is his commitment to a personal narrative in which he remains nobly and generously expressive, reflecting back on others their failures in this regard. It is in act 5, when he has both committed himself rashly to a determinative course that sets a deadline for action, and has left the outcome to providence, apparently resolved only to behave like himself in whatever situation he finds himself, that he seems able to view his life with something like the admiration we feel for it. We see the Hamlet of act 5 as having achieved moral agency because for the first time he seems to embrace his moral power over us and see himself with some of our affection. He has been an agent throughout, but only in act 5 does he give himself credit for speaking his own truths, and it is here that he attains the kind of exemplary moral agency that we find, at extremes of human action Hamlet never embraces, in Hannibal and in Julian.11

Holbrook and Lupton celebrate Hamlet as an agent of personal freedom and of the possibility of democratic agency. Yet, while agreeing with them, I have stressed his preoccupation with nobility, an anti-egalitarian value, however generous Hamlet is in mirroring the merit he finds in different social stations. In my view,
Hamlet’s princeliness is part of what Holbrook and Lupton admire and mobilize in the cause of contemporary democratic politics. This paradox may tell us something about the moral agency of old works in new times.

Notes

3. For a Renaissance contrast between Hannibal and Scipio as agents, see Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, trans. and eds., The Portable Machiavelli (New York: Penguin, 1979), 132.
9. In Shakespearean Pragmatism I claim that Hamlet discovers reflective moral portraiture as his preferred mode of agency when he decides to use a play to catch the conscience of the king.
11. My thanks to Alan Engle for useful discussion of Hamlet and to Mike Bristol for masterful editing.