

John E. Curran, Jr. *Hamlet, Protestantism and the Mourning of Contingency: Not to Be.*

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In *Hamlet, Protestantism and the Mourning of Contingency: Not to Be*, John Curran argues for Hamlet's developing sense of restricted possibilities and meaningless action. In a play that "very much concerns itself with the painfulness of the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism" (3) — and where that Protestantism can be an extraordinarily numbing Calvinism — Hamlet's own evolution mirrors that painful transition. (Fifty years ago, Rebecca West wrote in *The Court and the Castle* "The pessimism of *Hamlet* is indeed extreme. It is Calvinist in its allegation of total depravity.")

The Hamlet of the play's first four acts is largely, for Curran, a man who perceives limitless possible outcomes; because of contingency there can be no single way that anything must turn out. But Hamlet and the world around him change, so that in act 5 variable possibilities are lost. Things will be one way, whatever a man might do, and one way only. The transition carries Hamlet, not from being a Catholic to being a Protestant, but from understanding things in a Catholic way to understanding them in a Protestant way. There is great loss of joy in this change.

Hamlet's "vision of the individual person as at least potentially a king of infinite space," as he asserts to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in act 2 (in the First Folio though not in the 1604–05 quarto), "is menaced by the notion of utter

powerlessness and utter fixedness" (2) and finally crushed by it. "Contingency," a word that necessarily occurs often in Curran's argument, "had indeed been a staple of Catholic thought, spanning Scholastic, humanistic, and counter-Reformation discourse, and Calvinistic Protestantism consistently defined itself against what it saw as popery's fatally mistaken faith in humanity's powers" to determine its ends. In this regard, he quotes Aquinas's *Summa*: "[I]t is in the nature of some things to be contingent. Divine providence does not therefore impose any necessity upon things so as to destroy their contingency" (9). The opposing view is argued by Theodore de Bèze, whose work *The Pope's Canon* was published in English in London in 1584: "Free will is the heresie of Aristotle, & all those which make it the buckler of the faith," and with extreme concision by Thomas Rogers a year later: "Predestination is not conditionall, but certaine" (10). Curran summarizes the controversy and shows its dismal consequences in England at the time of the composition of *Hamlet*: "This contrast pits an old and optimistic vision of God and humanity against a pessimistic newer one which, for all its novelty and pessimism, was nevertheless in the time of *Hamlet* officially established [in England] as the truth; hence Hamlet's repeated attempts to apply the former vision are everywhere doomed to failure, as he himself glimpses with his bad dreams" (11).

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy perfectly illustrates the early attitude of the prince. In it, he "tries in a Catholic way to assume that he has options open to him that are real, and consequently to view forms of not-being as potential forms of being. That is, he tries to believe in the truth of the Not to be: what is currently not in existence is nevertheless truly alive with possibility" (25). What is not may in fact be what is not yet. "The Not to be is attractive to Hamlet because it signifies his true and real capacity to be and do and become anything" (26).

Although the Calvinist attitude is not entirely triumphant until the final act, "[s]igns of no turning back" and therefore of inevitable single outcomes appear much earlier — indeed, are always present — for example in "Hamlet's killing of Polonius [which] kills any possible chance of his not becoming the common revenger" (193). Even earlier, in telling Hamlet, unequivocally, to revenge his father's murder, "the Ghost signifies not limitless potentiality but the single, utterly certain, and devastatingly simple eventuality of the play's world" (64). The major turning point for Hamlet, the event that separates his before and after, is the sea voyage, which falls, as it were, between acts 4 and 5. The earlier Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be"; the later Hamlet, speaking to Horatio of the "special providence in the fall of a sparrow," concludes that speech (in the 1604–05 quarto though not in the First Folio) with "Let be" (the fifth "be" in the short speech). He means, Curran writes, "Let the Be come on and make of me what it will; the search for possibility is hereby declared concluded" (202). It is a difference as sad as it is compelling.

If I have a caveat about *Protestantism and the Mourning of Contingency*, it is Curran's tendency to use *Protestantism* and *Calvinism* as synonyms. Richard Hooker, after all, was as thoroughgoing a Protestant as one could be and yet hugely

antagonistic to Calvinism. In *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594), he writes, “To choose is to will one thing before another. And to will is to bend our souls to the having or doing of that which they see to be good.” To choose one way is to effect one kind of result, and to choose another way is to produce something very different. Meaningful choice seems to me the ally of “not to be.”

Of several recent studies of Catholic versus Protestant in Shakespeare (books by Clare Asquith, Peter Milward, and others), Curran’s is the most subtle and persuasive, in part, perhaps, because his purpose is to show how Hamlet reasons and perceives the world, and what strains of thought and belief that reasoning and those perceptions are akin to, not that Hamlet is one thing or another. Still less does he assert that William Shakespeare himself was *x* or *y*. Early on, however, he states his conviction “that certain aspects of Catholic doctrine were sufficiently attractive to Shakespeare that he felt their loss, and that he was unsympathetic toward the conclusions about God and humanity to which predestinarian Protestantism necessarily leads us” (5). That seems modest enough.

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