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Intentional Meaning in *Hamlet*: An Evolutionary Perspective

Can We Say Anything both New and True about *Hamlet*?

Can an evolutionary perspective make any difference in our study of literature? For the past fifteen years or so, the literary Darwinists have been urging that it can (Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall; Carroll, “An Evolutionary Paradigm”; Gottschall and Wilson). Some skeptics repudiate the evolutionary human sciences that form the conceptual foundation for literary Darwinism. Others suggest that even if the Darwinists are right about the evolved and adapted character of the mind, they could still contribute little or nothing to the study of particular works of literature (Crews; Deresiewicz; Goodheart; Mellard; Pinker; Seamon; Slingerland; Smee; Spolsky; Vermeule). They argue that the evolutionary human sciences deal only in general and universal concepts about broad classes of behavior, whereas the humanities, by their very nature, are concerned with subjective particularities.

Both parts of this argument are incorrect. Evolutionists deal with cultural and individual differences as well as universals, and literary scholars concern themselves both with subjective particularities and with general ideas: genres, historical trends, common themes, and literary traditions. Literary scholars register their own subjective responses to specific texts and also try to identify objective facts and formulate general explanations about those facts. There is no necessary conflict between an appeal to general ideas and close attention to the particular structure of meaning and effect in individual literary texts. If any such conflict did exist, the Marxists, Freudians, feminists, deconstructionists, and Foucauldians would hardly have been able to produce tens of thousands of essays in literary criticism. As I’ve argued recently in this journal (“An Evolutionary Paradigm” 128-32), the literary Darwinists have already produced a substantial body of good critical readings of individual texts, and more are forthcoming (Andrews and Carroll; Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall).

On grounds then both of theoretical principle and actual, historical performance, we can reject the idea that the Darwinists have nothing to contribute to the close

reading of specific texts. What precisely can the Darwinists do? What does an evolutionary reading look like? What are its characteristic features? In what way, if any, does it advance on common sense and the common understanding—what evolutionists and philosophers call “folk psychology” (Geary)? One way to approach this question is to look at an actual example. *Hamlet* is convenient for this purpose, partly because it is so important and so well known, and partly because it has already attracted considerable attention from evolutionary critics. Robert Storey, Michelle Scalise-Sugiyama, Daniel Nettle, John V. Knapp, Brian Boyd, and John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have all used *Hamlet* to illustrate theoretical principles about literature, and Boyd and Knapp have made more detailed interpretive comments on it. After outlining a model of interpretive criticism from an evolutionary perspective, I shall summarize their efforts, compare them with traditional humanist readings, and offer my own interpretive commentary on *Hamlet*.

Offer my own interpretive commentary on *Hamlet*? Adding to the thousands or tens of thousands already produced? The heart grows faint; the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, almost. What can be said about *Hamlet* within the common idiom, having no systematic recourse to extraneous theories, has most assuredly already been said. So far, the efforts to devise new readings by invoking extraneous theories—Freudian, deconstructive, Marxist, Foucauldian, and feminist, among others—have on the whole done less to illuminate the play than to elaborate their own preconceptions. Hamlet’s erotic passion for Gertrude and secret complicity with Claudius in getting the castrating Hamlet senior safely underground (Jones); Hamlet as the Phallus (Lacan); the ghost as the transcendental Signified (Adelman; Garber); Hamlet’s revolt against Claudius as a nascent impulse of proto-proletarian class consciousness (Bristol); Polonius as the embodiment of the Panopticon, peeping on everyone (Neill); Gertrude as the embodiment of anarchic feminine sexuality demonized by the Patriarchy (Adelman)—all such fancies have served as Procrustean beds, distorting the common understanding of the play. If there is a “deep structure” to *Hamlet*, we will not get to it by violating the folk psychology implicit in the common idiom. We will get to it only by developing analytic concepts congruent with the common idiom but encompassing the common understanding within a more systematic and integrated body of causal explanations. Shakespeare holds a mirror up to nature (Headlam Wells; Nordlund). So must we. By repudiating the very concept of “nature” (Jameson), postmodern theory has moved off in a direction that could not possibly advance on the common understanding.

Is it possible to formulate a set of theoretical principles distinct enough to offer real explanatory leverage but broad and flexible enough to give a just rendering of the thematic and tonal structure of the play? I think it is. We can integrate evolutionary concepts of human nature with the common understanding embodied in the best of traditional humanistic criticism. Using that conceptual structure as our interpretive framework, we can ask basic questions about the meaning of the play and provide reasoned answers. Those answers can of course have no claim to absolute validity; they are speculative, discursive, and rhetorical, not empirical and quantitative. They are not here tested and decisively falsified or confirmed by controlled experiment. They can nonetheless make claims to cogency based on common experience and the empirical validity of the concepts to which they appeal.

To generate adequate interpretive commentary from an evolutionary perspective, we must construct continuous explanatory sequences linking the highest level of causal explanation—inclusive fitness, the ultimate regulative principle of evolution—to particular features of human nature and to particular structures and effects in specific works of art. It is never enough to say, for instance, that people seek survival, sex, and status, or that artistic works depict people seeking those things. We have to be more specific both about human nature and about the nature of artistic representation. In “human life-history theory,” we now have a set of ideas that link inclusive fitness with a fully articulated model of human nature. Life history theory concerns itself with the distribution of effort across the life cycle of any given species, weighing the different portions of life effort given over to birth, growth, somatic maintenance, mating effort, and parenting effort (Hill; Hill and Kaplan; Kaplan et al.; Low, “The Evolution,” *Why Sex Matters*; Lummaa; MacDonald, “Life History Theory”). The model of human nature that emerges from human life history has numerous distinctive features: altricial birth, extended childhood, male-female bonding coupled with male coalitions (Flinn, Geary, and Ward), dual parenting, post-menopausal survival, longevity, the development of skills for the extraction of high-quality resources (Kaplan et al.), the growth of the neocortex to enhance powers for suppressing impulses and engaging in long-term planning (Hawkins; MacDonald, “Evolution, Psychology”), the evolution of egalitarian dispositions operating in tension with conserved dispositions for individual dominance (Boehm), the development of symbolic capacities enabling identification with extended social groups (Boyd, *On the Origin*; Deacon; Dissanayake; Dutton; Richerson and Boyd; D. S. Wilson; Wade), and the power to subordinate, in some degree, all direct impulses of survival and reproduction to the formal dictates of imagined virtual worlds (Baumeister; Carroll, “An Evolutionary Paradigm”; MacDonald, “Evolution, Psychology”; Mithen; E. O. Wilson).

All these features together entail distinct motives, emotions, dimensions of personality, and forms of cognition that have a bearing on literary meaning. To link human nature with literary meaning, we have to recognize that universal, species-typical characteristics form a common framework for understanding. Individual and cultural differences define themselves as variations on the basic, universal patterns of human nature. In recognizing the importance of a common framework, we implicitly conceive of the arts as communicative media. Consequently, we think of individual artists and readers as centers of consciousness, capable of formulating and understanding intentional meanings.

A comprehensively adequate interpretive account of *Hamlet* would take in, synoptically, its phenomenal effects (tone, style, theme, formal organization), locate it in a cultural context, explain that cultural context as a particular organization of the elements of human nature within a specific set of environmental conditions (including cultural traditions), register the responses of audiences and readers, describe the socio-cultural, political, and psychological functions the work fulfills, locate all those functions in relation to the evolved needs of human nature, and link the work comparatively with other artistic works, using a taxonomy of themes, formal structures, affects, and functions derived from a comprehensive model of human nature. In practical terms, of course, there is only so much one can do in a single essay. With respect to *Hamlet*, I shall concentrate on motives, personality, and emotions but take in as many other aspects as I can manage without losing the focus of my interpretive argument.

Previous Evolutionary Commentaries on *Hamlet*

Storey (131-35), Scalise-Sugiyama (“Cultural Variation”), and Boyd (“Literature” 18-19) all comment on Laura Bohannan’s essay on *Hamlet*. (Oddly, though writing several years after Storey, making many of the same points, and using sometimes nearly identical phrasing, Scalise-Sugiyama does not cite Storey or include his book in her bibliography. Boyd cites both Storey and Scalise-Sugiyama.) Bohannan is an ethnographer who in the sixties lived among the Tiv, a non-literate Nigerian tribal people, and recorded their ways. She told them the story of *Hamlet*, and they responded volubly, commenting on the play, criticizing the actions of the characters, and interpreting the events in accordance with their own customs and beliefs. For instance, the Tiv do not believe in ghosts, so they assumed that Hamlet’s vision of the ghost was the result of witchcraft, in which they do believe. They felt it was wrong for Hamlet to seek revenge himself instead of asking for help from older relatives. Marrying a deceased brother’s wife is obligatory for them, so they see no reason for Hamlet to be upset by Gertrude’s remarriage. Bohannan emphasizes

all the little ways in which the Tiv read the actions of the play in the light of their own ethos, which they mistakenly regard as universal. She concludes that literary meanings are not universally available.

The three evolutionists who respond to Bohannan all counter this conclusion by emphasizing the many quite basic ways in which the Tiv understand the play much as we do or as Shakespeare's contemporaries did, and they all three formulate "biocultural" propositions reconciling the idea of human universals with the idea of local cultural variations. The Tiv, like everyone else, understand narratives with protagonists pursuing goals such as seeking revenge, making alliances with friends, evading or fighting enemies, uncovering deceit, tricking others, feeling passions such as anger, grief, and contempt, negotiating the rules of ethical codes, avoiding incestuous relations, and either succeeding or failing in their efforts. All of this is part of "folk psychology" and communicable in the common idiom, even in translation. Moreover, relatively superficial differences of cultural ethos are not unintelligible to any people cosmopolitan enough to have registered that their local customs and beliefs are not necessarily universal.

Boyd includes consideration of Bohannan as only one of several topics in his essay ("Literature"). After giving a general exposition of "biocultural" theory, he takes up *Hamlet* as a particular case to illustrate how various features of the theory could bear on a reading of a specific literary work. Boyd formulates no comprehensive interpretive thesis for the play. Instead, he provides a catalogue of possible topics of analysis that could be applied to any work and illustrates them with application to *Hamlet*. He discusses the predominance of negative emotions in Ekman's list of seven "basic" emotions (13), comments on revenge and justice as evolved dispositions (13-14), gives an exposition of "cost-benefit" analysis and applies it to the problem of catching and holding the attention of an audience (14), uses cost-benefit analysis to frame a consideration of using familiar dramatic materials and providing novel twists (14), uses the idea of minimal ontological violations—violating realism—to explain the interest in supernatural phenomena such as ghosts (14-15), argues for the evolutionary basis of a preoccupation with individual differences in persons (15-16), points to "Theory of Mind" as a category relevant to the dramatic interest in reading the motives and beliefs of others, taking *Hamlet* as an especially intense instance of such interest (16-17), discusses the way emotion guides decision-making (Damasio) (17-18), and concludes with revisiting the question of the Tiv and the tension between local cultural practices and universal forms of behavior and cognition (17-18). All these analytic categories are no doubt relevant and useful, but until they are put to work as part of a whole interpretive

argument, they are like the materials and tools assembled at a building site before the actual construction begins.

Boyd argues that an evolutionary reading need not be “reductive” but can be, in contrast, “expansive” (*On the Origin 2*). To call a reading “reductive” is to say that it is crude and narrow, that it leaves out too much of what is really important. And yet, all theory and all interpretation aim at legitimate “reduction.” We try to reduce the multifariousness of phenomenal surfaces to underlying structures. We identify key causal principles in complex phenomena such as wars and economic developments. In commenting on literary works, we identify central themes and dominant tonal qualities. Without such efforts at reduction, all commentary would be lost in diffuse detail, like the waters of a flash flood sinking without trace into the sands of a desert.

In “What Happens in *Hamlet*?” Daniel Nettle makes a bold effort to produce a framework for adequate interpretive reduction. Despite the title of the essay (alluding to J. Dover Wilson’s book), Nettle actually says next to nothing about *Hamlet*, specifically. Like a substantial portion of the essays produced thus far in evolutionary literary studies, his essay is a theoretical prolegomenon to interpretation. He works through the basic theoretical problem of reconciling universals and specific cultural configurations, invokes Aristotle on the principle of goal-oriented action as the heart of drama, and then identifies four elements of analysis for cataloguing plays: two motives (mating and status), and two outcomes (success and failure). Comedies are successful mating games, tragedies unsuccessful status games (71-72).

I am highly sympathetic to the ambition behind Nettle’s effort—the desire to discover the elements of “deep structure” in literary texts. The effort itself, though, I think a failure, for two reasons. First, there are too few elements invoked to account for the range of possible human concerns. And second, Nettle considers only the motives of the characters, leaving out point of view, and thus leaving out the meaning that both characters and authors invest in actions. Nettle’s only interpretive comment on *Hamlet* suggests the kind of “reductiveness”—almost comical—that can result from such premature theoretical reductions. “Status games—negative outcome represents the quintessential tragedy (“all tragedies end with a death”). Hamlet not only loses his kingdom to his uncle but is killed too” (71). Losing a kingdom and getting killed happen also to Richard III and to King Lear. And are we then to see these three plays as just variants on a simple theme of seeking status? That description comes closest to *Richard III*. It leaves most of *King Lear* unaccounted for, and seems altogether peripheral to the protagonist of *Hamlet*. Thwarted political ambitions are the least of Hamlet’s concerns. They are scarcely mentioned until

nearly the end of the play (“He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother, / Popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes, / Thrown out his angle for my proper life,” V. ii. 64-66, emphasis added). In his first soliloquy (“O, that this too too [solid] flesh would melt,” I. ii. 129), Hamlet concentrates on his mother’s disloyalty to her dead husband and on the contrast in quality between his uncle and his father. In the scene before he leaves for England, after watching Fortinbras’ troops pass by, Hamlet berates himself, again, for failing to act. “How stand I then, / That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d, / Excitements of my reason and my blood” (IV. iv. 56-58). No mention of thwarted ambition.

Reducing all human concerns to sex and status leaves out survival itself as a motive (smuggled in to Nettle’s one comment on *Hamlet* but not part of the analytic scheme). It also leaves out all positive sociality, eliminating the interplay between impulses of dominance and impulses of affiliative, cooperative sociality. It thus leaves out reciprocity, the sense of justice, and the revenge that flows from violated reciprocity. It leaves out all kin-related motives, filial bonding, parental love (thus leaving out the heart of *King Lear* and everything in *Hamlet* that flows from outrage at a murdered father and corrupted mother). And finally, it leaves out the imagination itself, the need, so clearly dominant in *Hamlet*, to achieve an adequate interpretive understanding of the events in which he is embroiled. Nettle himself evidently has some sense of how much his effort at reduction has left out. He observes that “the human mind is structured in such a way that domain-specific schemata about kinship, love, competition, and cooperation are easily evoked” (73). Yes, indeed. Why not include them then in the effort at schematic reduction to basic principles? Rather than answering this question, Nettle formulates an open-ended escape clause: “There is no desire here to reduce the complexity and shifting nature of dramatic meaning” (73). Well, yes, there is such a desire, and the desire is wholly legitimate. It just fails to achieve its purpose.

Among all the extraneous theories that critics have used to interpret *Hamlet* over the past century, Freudian Oedipal theory has been overwhelmingly the most influential, embedding itself not just in the tradition of written interpretations but also in performance. Always on the lookout for novelty, Laurence Olivier dramatized Hamlet’s supposed Oedipal impulses in the closet scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, and that theatrical device then took on a life of its own, replicated in numerous productions for stage and screen (for instance Franco Zeffirelli’s with Mel Gibson as Hamlet and Glenn Close as Gertrude, and see Knapp, “Family Games” 194-95). One of the chief early triumphs of evolutionary psychology was the revelation that Freudian Oedipal theory is quite simply mistaken (Degler;

Easterlin; Scalise-Sugiyama, “New Science”). Humans, like all other mammals, have evolved mechanisms for avoiding incest. Particular cultural conventions codify those impulses in ways that admit of some variation. For instance, some cultural codes, like that of the Tiv, allow or even require a man to marry his deceased brother’s wife. In other cultural codes—like that to which Hamlet and his father subscribe—this particular bond is felt to be incestuous. Some variation, but within very limited bounds. No cultural code allows sexual relations between parents and children. In all known cultures, when such relations occur (almost always fathers abusing female children), they are condemned as immoral and criminal. Hamlet himself gives no evidence, in any remark he makes, that he himself has any sexual desire for his mother. One could impute such desire only on the strength of an extraneous theory that presupposed its universality. Since this particular extraneous theory is false, imputing the desire to Hamlet is utterly arbitrary. It goes beyond the play, and beyond human nature. The whole Freudian tradition—with all its derivative postmodern forms—holds a distorting mirror up to the play.

John V. Knapp is among the first of the new psychological literary theorists to recognize just how centrally important the modern findings on incest are for literary study (“Family-Systems Psychotherapy”). For a century now, psychological literary criticism has been in thrall to the false ideas of Freudian psychology, and to the Oedipal theory at the very center of those ideas. In seeking to provide an alternative to the Oedipal scheme, Knapp invokes “family systems therapy” (FST). This is clinical theory, practical in purpose, oriented to the dynamics among family members. A guiding idea in the theory is that individuals should not be looked at alone but in relation to other family members. In clinical practice, this idea can of course be useful. As a concept in literary criticism, it can also be useful, but like all preconceived analytic ideas must be used with care, letting the explicit evidence of the text give the necessary prompts as to which concepts are most relevant. In his interpretive critique of *Hamlet* (“Family Games”), Knapp seems to me to go beyond the evidence of the text. Operating on the basis of assumptions derived from FST, he supposes that the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet senior was in reality deeply flawed, and in pursuit of this thesis, he casts substantial doubt on the image of Hamlet’s father that we derive from Hamlet himself.

If there were serious hidden conflicts in the marriage of Hamlet’s parents, Gertrude’s disloyalty would not be so shocking as it is. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet dwells on his parents’ evidently reciprocal devotion, and the ghost of Hamlet’s father affirms that he was devoted to Gertrude. In the closet scene, Hamlet upbraids his mother for her shallowness and sensuality, and she affirms the justice of his

rebuke. Nor is she merely swayed temporarily by the force of Hamlet's rhetoric. Later, speaking only to herself, she gives passionate voice to her feeling of shame and guilt.

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
 Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss,
 So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
 It spills itself in fearing to be spilt. (IV. v. 17-20)

To palliate the guilt, to adopt an even-handed, clinical stance, in which Claudius, Hamlet senior, and Gertrude stand all on a moral par, is to diminish the tragic scope of the conflict, reducing it to a messy family squabble. Hamlet, Hamlet senior, and Gertrude all three register the moral significance of her disloyalty. (Even Horatio murmurs at the unseemly haste of the remarriage.) Hamlet speaks clearly and explicitly about the moral implications of Gertrude's o'er hasty marriage to Claudius:

Such an act
 That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
 Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
 From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
 And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
 As false as dicers' oaths, O, such a deed
 As from the body of contraction plucks
 The very soul, and sweet religion makes
 A rhapsody of words. (III. iv. 40-48)

A chief theme in the play is the nature of the human, the difference between humans and animals of a lower order. Hamlet's mother has hastened with bestial lust to incestuous sheets. A beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer. As Boyd observes, humans alone "can focus our minds altogether on particular events of the past. . . . Most animals cannot afford *not* to attend to their immediate environment and cannot easily reason beyond it" ("Literature" 9). Humans have a unique capacity "to think beyond the immediate." Hamlet concurs:

What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unus'd. (IV. iv. 33-39)

From Hamlet's perspective, Gertrude's behavior is literally inhuman. Overlooking her wanton self-degradation—a degradation that she ultimately confesses even to herself—takes us outside the structure of intentional meaning in the play.

How do we get to that intentional meaning? Daniel Nettle invokes Aristotle's belief that "the aim or purpose of the protagonist is the most important aspect of a tragedy," and he cites Brunetière's claim that "what we ask of the theatre is the spectacle of a *will* striving towards a goal" (69). These phenomena are clearly central to human experience and to social monitoring, but *Hamlet* gives evidence of how limited they are in characterizing the total structure of meaning in specific literary works. If Hamlet's only "goal" were to kill Claudius, there need have been no play. After the ghost speaks to him, he could simply have walked directly to the chamber in which Claudius, taking his "rouse," deep in his cups, suspecting no harm, would have been easy prey to a swift thrust of the rapier. Achieving a specific practical goal is clearly not adequate to account for Hamlet's motivation. All the less, then, will it account for what motivates the play as a whole. What was Shakespeare getting at?

One of the best critics of the 19th century, William Hazlitt, observes that Hamlet is more inclined "to indulge his imagination in reflecting upon the enormity of the crime and refining on his schemes of vengeance" than on putting them "into practice." Hamlet's "ruling passion is to think, not to act" (84-85). Thinking, not acting, is what mostly happens in *Hamlet*. Hamlet sometimes thinks about why he does not act, and berates himself for not acting, but more often, he is just thinking—about the fickleness of women and the perfidy of men, about the purpose and techniques of drama, about mortality, the transience of life, eternity, and the human condition. Generalizing from this feature of Hamlet's character, the evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides ascribe a symbolic value to the play as a whole. They declare that both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Hamlet* "are focused on an evolutionarily ancient but quintessentially human problem, the struggle for coherence and sanity amidst radical uncertainty" (19). The problem is quintessentially human because only humans are massively detached from the narrowly channeled behavioral promptings of instinct. For humans alone, the world does not present itself as a series of rigidly defined stimuli releasing a narrow repertory of stereotyped behaviors. It presents itself as a vast and potentially perplexing array of percepts, inferences, causal relations, contingent possibilities, analogies, contrasts, and hierarchical conceptual structures. The human mind is free to organize the elements of cognition in an infinitely diverse array of combinatorial possibilities. It is also free to make false and dangerous connections among ideas, to stumble into confusion, uncertainty,

doubt, perplexity. The cognitive flexibility that is a peculiarly human attribute and that has so much adaptive power—does so much to increase inclusive fitness—also has dangers and costs that are peculiar to the human condition. Hamlet exemplifies both the mind's power and its vulnerability.

The interpretive formulation put forward by Tooby and Cosmides bypasses the important but limited concern, *What is the protagonist's goal?* In place of this question, they tacitly pose a larger, more important question, *What is this play about?* That is, what are its chief themes and motivating concerns? To what pressing human issues does it give imaginative form? What is the full scope of its meaning and effect? Their answer to such questions is right, I think, as far as it goes, and not just right but powerful, astute, incisive. Still, it does not distinguish between *Alice in Wonderland* and *Hamlet*. Clearly, then, it must be heavily qualified. Tooby and Cosmides describe the symbolic implication of the play at a level so high that it leaves out almost everything specific about the characters, circumstances, and emotional qualities in *Hamlet*. The circumstances Hamlet must confront in Denmark are not the same as those Alice must confront in *Wonderland*. A murdered father and a salacious mother are not part of Alice's situation. Moreover, Alice's personality is very different from Hamlet's, and not nearly so well developed. As Tooby and Cosmides perceptively suggest, Hamlet and Alice share a certain giddy sense of struggling for coherence and sanity, but otherwise the emotional qualities of the two works are very different. The challenge, then, is this: to connect Hamlet's struggle for coherence and sanity with an argument about the organization of the features that distinguish *Hamlet* as a particular work of art.

Hazlitt, Bradley, and Darwin:

The Great Ideal Movement or the Indelible Stamp?

The best of traditional humanist criticism—literary criticism before the postmodern era—can be conceived as the finest articulation of the common idiom. Singling out Hazlitt and A. C. Bradley as representative figures in the humanist tradition should raise few skeptical eyebrows among Shakespearean scholars. Hazlitt was writing early in the nineteenth century and Bradley early in the twentieth. Both assimilate the insights of their most astute predecessors and add something particular and valuable of their own. Both their books on Shakespeare have been steadily in print, and Bradley's book *Shakespearean Tragedy* has sold over half a million copies. Hazlitt and Bradley get to much that is true and important about the play. Consequently, by qualifying, elaborating, or correcting their ideas, a critic can offer some genuine advance on the humanist heritage of insight and wisdom about the play. To this group of humanist critics, I shall add Darwin. His insight into *Hamlet*—registered

indirectly but unmistakably in an allusion to a climactic rhetorical moment in his own writing (the conclusion to *The Descent of Man*)—provides a clue to the limitations in Bradley's interpretive thesis about the play.

Hazlitt and Bradley both adopt what Northrop Frye would call the "low mimetic" approach. That is, they view Hamlet as if he were a real person. But they also take him, and the play he is in, as symbols of a general human condition. As Hazlitt puts it, "the distresses of Hamlet are transferred, by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him we apply to ourselves, because he applies it to himself as a means of general reasoning" (81). Echoing Aristotle on the superiority of poetry to history, Hazlitt declares that "this play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history" (80). Hamlet, then, as Hazlitt sees him, is a *representative man*. Representative of what? The characterization, though long, merits full citation:

Whoever has become thoughtful and melancholy through his own mishaps or those of others; whoever has borne about with him the clouded brow of reflection, and thought himself "too much i' the sun"; whoever has seen the golden lamp of day dimmed by envious mists rising in his own breast, and could find in the world before him only a dull blank with nothing left remarkable in it; whoever has known "the pangs of despised love, the insolence of office, or the spurns which patient merit of the unworthy takes"; he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparition of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering near him like a specter; whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought; he to whom the universe seems infinite, and himself nothing; whose bitterness of soul makes him careless of consequences, and who goes to a play as his best resource to shove off, to a second remove, the evils of life by a mock representation of them—this is the true Hamlet. (80-81)

Everything about this description seems correct, but still it falls short in both generality and particularity. Tooby and Cosmides characterize Hamlet as symbolizing an evolutionarily ancient condition, something permanent and universal. Hazlitt of course does not generalize that far. His evocative description of Hamlet's personality and condition is far more detailed than the interpretive account given by Tooby and Cosmides, but it is not quite so particular as it might be. Hamlet has become thoughtful and melancholy, Hazlitt suggests, "through his own mishaps or those of others." Ah, but this case is common, and if common, why seems it so particular to Hamlet? Why does he feel an inner torment that passes show? The word "mishaps"—there's the rub. Murder and incestuous levity in the nuclear family are not mishaps; they are crimes and sins; sources of psychological trauma very different from mere accident. They engage guilt, shame, and outrage; they disturb the very foundations of emotional organization in their victims.

This is where Bradley comes in. He assimilates the Romantic tradition that includes Hazlitt, but he adds to it two important elements: an acute emphasis on the trauma of Hamlet's mother's self-degradation, and a brilliant clinical analysis of Hamlet's depression. Previous critics had of course acknowledged that Hamlet was distressed at his mother's behavior, and previous critics had used the vocabulary of "melancholia" to describe his mental state. To my knowledge, no critic before or after Bradley has gotten either of these topics so clearly into focus as central features in the psychological organization of the play, and no critic has delineated them with the lucid precision and fullness Bradley brings to them. Citing the first soliloquy and deducing from it "a sickness of life" and "a longing for death," Bradley asks why. "It was not his father's death." That was a matter of common grief. Nor was it "the loss of the crown," which is not even mentioned in the soliloquy. "It was," rather, "the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature." Hamlet is "forced to see in her action not only an astounding shallowness of feeling but an eruption of coarse sensuality, 'rank and gross,' speeding post-haste to its horrible delight." The experience is "devastating," producing "bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature. His whole mind is poisoned" (117-18).

On the level of the common idiom, Bradley's description of Hamlet's state of mind, and the cause for that state, could not, I think, be bettered. Bradley takes Hamlet's own statements at face value, and Hamlet is, after all, overwhelmingly the dominant voice in the play, the voice that most commands attention and respect. Hamlet sees into the heart of his mother and uncle, quickly pins Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to his display case of duplicitous courtiers, fools Polonius to the top of his bent, and wins the admiration of Ophelia, the intimate regard of Horatio, and the respect of Fortinbras. More, in his soliloquies, Hamlet displays a power of meditative intelligence that remains a touchstone for most literate people. We can guess around Hamlet, supposing that we know better than any intelligence embodied in the play, but the play itself offers us no good alternative to his perspective, and efforts to guess around Hamlet—in the various modern theoretical schools—have on the whole made a poor showing. Part of Bradley's wisdom and skill as a critic derives from his good sense in knowing when to accept intentional meaning for what it is worth. In the case of *Hamlet*, as the canonical status of the play attests, it has a worth on which academic inventiveness is not likely to improve.

In revising Bradley's interpretive thesis, then, I shall not be disputing his diagnosis of Hamlet's malady. I shall only be locating this diagnosis within a more modern and more adequate explanatory context. Where I take issue with Bradley, I

take issue precisely because, in formulating his interpretive thesis, he disconnects the symbolic meaning of *Hamlet* from the specific character of the “pathological condition” (125) he himself so astutely describes. Like Tooby and Cosmides, Bradley thinks the play exemplifies “a tragic mystery inherent in human nature,” but he does not locate that mystery in the context of human evolution. Instead, he locates it in the context of idealist metaphysics—the “Schlegel-Coleridge type of theory” (125):

Wherever this mystery touches us, wherever we are forced to feel the wonder and awe of man’s godlike “apprehension” and his “thoughts that wander through eternity,” and at the same time are forced to see him powerless (it would appear) from the very divinity of his thought, we remember Hamlet. And this is the reason why, in the great ideal movement which began towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy acquired a position unique among Shakespeare’s dramas, and shared only by Goethe’s *Faust*. . . . *Hamlet* most brings home to us at once the sense of the soul’s infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring. (126)

The essential character of “the great ideal movement” is that it ascribes a transcendent power and significance to thought. The Absolute is *Nous*, transcendental Mind, detached from all biological constraint, a universal presence, first cause and unmoved mover. Accordingly, in this climactic formulation of his interpretive thesis, Bradley forgets all about truant mothers and clinical depression and instead becomes fixated on the “divinity of thought.” In some vague, mystical way, thought is infinite but also, since it is the cause of all things, the cause of “doom.” Perhaps Bradley means that because we can conceive infinity we are also aware of death, but then, consciousness of death is not the chief source of Hamlet’s distress. Indeed, he looks to death as a release from suffering. In any case, Bradley seems to have in mind more than an awareness of death. He has disputed the Schlegel-Coleridge argument that Hamlet is hampered from acting because he over-thinks his possible options, but he still attributes Hamlet’s powerlessness to “the divinity of his thought.” Dressed in Bradley’s skillful rhetoric, the juxtaposition of divinity, helplessness, infinity, and doom is all mildly impressive, in an abstract, idealist sort of way, but it would be hard to say what it means, and it fails to connect in any concrete way to the particular circumstances of the play. Like the extraneous theories of the postmodern era, it does less to illuminate the play than to articulate its own preconceptions.

Bradley’s idealist interpretive thesis is out of harmony with his own best insights. As he himself says, Hamlet’s problem is not just that he thinks too much. His problem, first and most importantly, is “the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother’s true nature” (117). In echoing Hamlet at the end of *The*

Descent of Man, Darwin gets the right relation between man's god-like intellect and his too, too solid flesh:

We must acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (2: 405)

Darwin echoes Hamlet's diction and captures the very cadence of Hamlet's speech in his first conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (II. ii. 303-08)

(For commentary on the web of allusions in the conclusion to *Descent*, see Carroll, *Evolution* 256-58.) For both Hamlet and Darwin, the enigma here is not the self-defeating character of an involuted, transcendental Reason, but rather the tension between the mind, able to soar free in its inquiries, and the pull of the flesh. That pull makes itself felt not just in mortality, the common doom, but in the thousand shocks flesh is heir to. The one shock that does Hamlet the most damage is delivered by his mother, but conflict is built into the very nature of life. Natural selection is a struggle. More are born than can survive—that is an integral piece in the logic of selection. In sexually reproducing species, males and females share fitness interests but also have conflicting individual interests. Parents must make choices between effort devoted to survival and to mating and effort devoted to parenting. Parents and offspring share some fitness interests but in other interests diverge. The same principle applies even to siblings; and it applies to all individuals who form parts of social groups. We need not look to hermetic processes of thought to uncover tragic mysteries in the human condition. Man's lowly origin provides more than sufficient material for conflict that can lead to tragic outcomes.

Attachment and Loss: An Evolutionary Perspective on the Psycho-symbolic Significance of Mothers

Hamlet could have been a romantic comedy—we see the spoiled remnants of a love story in Hamlet's relation to Ophelia. Or it could have been a heroic tale of princely valor, as in *Henry V*. Fortinbras, in his extemporaneous eulogy, says that Hamlet "was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal" (V. ii. 382-83). Of that too, we see only the spoiled remnants. From the first moment we overhear Hamlet in his solitude, all such worldly concerns have faded into

nothing for him. All normal motives and pursuits seem to him “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” (I. ii. 133). His father’s murder, when he learns of it, enrages him, but before he knows his father was murdered, he is already deeply disturbed, so disturbed that he yearns for death. This is the psychological core of his condition. If the play as a whole has large symbolic significance—and most assuredly it does—the symbolic meaning must in some fashion spring from Hamlet’s relation with his mother. That much the Freudian critics get right. Where they have gone wrong is in following Freud’s false lead in supposing that all relations between mothers and sons are neurotic (Daly and Wilson 107-21; Degler 245-69; Scalise-Sugiyama, “New Science”). Hamlet wishing for death in his first soliloquy is not Everyman articulating a universal human condition—a condition of illicit longing and repressed impulses for incest. He is any man for whom the springs of feeling have been fouled at their source.

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin speculates that all positive social feelings originate, phylogenetically and ontogenetically, in the bonding between mothers and infants (1: 80). That insight lay dormant for a century until John Bowlby made it the cornerstone in the modern evolutionary understanding of human emotional development (Dissanayake; Easterlin). Bowlby adopts an ethological, evolutionary perspective on mother-infant bonding and associates it with a crucial insight from psychoanalytic theory: the formative influence of childhood experience on adult life. The mother-infant relation is distinct from the sexual (Bowlby, 232), but it can have a major impact on the quality of sexual relations later in life. If mothers are absent, abusive, or emotionally detached, their children can have severe difficulty in forming healthy affectional bonds in other relations, sexual or social, and in performing effectively as parents when they have children of their own. Freudian psychoanalysis has been attractive to literary critics in part because it gives access, in however distorted a manner, to the continuity of emotional experience in individual identity.

The evolutionary understanding of attachment has fundamentally altered the false Freudian idea that there is no natural, healthy human condition. Healthy bonding between mothers and infants is essential to emotional well-being. Failed bonding or traumatic separation leads to emotional dysfunction and, in its most severe forms, to psychiatric illness, especially to clinical depression (Bowlby; Whybrow 246; Wolpert, 58-59, 89-90, 96, 148-49). Illness is defined precisely as a deviation from a healthy, “normal” state. Hamlet says his wit is diseased, but even more, his heart is diseased. One of the most important motifs in *Hamlet* is a motif of disease: pestilence, contagion, infection, decay, filth, rot, sores, ulcers,

cancers, foul odors, and rank fluids (Spurgeon, 10-14). If the play has symbolic import beyond the literal plot—if it taps into deep forms of experience not limited to the peculiar circumstances of a fratricidal uncle and a mother making a hasty and degrading remarriage—that symbolic import consists largely in a condensed representation of corruption in the emotional nucleus formed by the relation between mother and child.

Hamlet's Depression

Bradley's description of Hamlet's diseased mental state gives evidence that even a hundred years ago depression was fairly well understood on the phenomenal level. Bradley, at least, understands a good part of it, and he makes use of his insight to give a cogent explanation for the one chief feature in *Hamlet* that has puzzled critics for centuries—why Hamlet delays in killing Claudius:

[Melancholy] accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction. For the *immediate* cause of that is simply that his habitual feeling is one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included,—a disgust which varies in intensity, rising at times into a longing for death, sinking often into weary apathy, but is never dispelled for more than brief intervals. Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to *any* kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse; its response is, "it does not matter;" "it is not worth while," "it is no good." (121)

This is half the story of depression—the "anhedonia" or absence of positive affect. The other half of the story is the predominance of negative affect—anguish, horror, and despair. Bradley absorbs that part of the story into his description of anhedonia. In the modern neurobiological understanding of depression, this is a mistake. We now know that emotion is not a unitary polarized phenomenon extending from "bliss" at the positive pole to "despair" at the negative pole. The emotional circuits regulating positive and negative emotions are in fact separate and distinct. In milder forms of depression, one or the other circuit can be activated much more strongly than the other. The "blahs," a general sense of indifference and distaste, can occur without any active sensation of anguish. Conversely, anxiety, guilt, and emotional pain can occur independently of apathy. In the most severe forms of depression, including the worst phases through which Hamlet suffers, the negative and positive emotional circuits are both compromised.

By uncovering the causal mechanisms of depression, modern research has confirmed one of Bradley's chief insights—that depression is not a normal, healthy reaction to adverse circumstances. It is "pathological," a malfunction or breakdown in an adaptive system, like diabetes, heart disease, or stroke (Kramer; Phelps; Whybrow; Wolpert). The brain's positive and negative emotional circuits

function as a homeostatic system. This system (the “limbic” system) is designed to respond to good things (elation) and to bad things (alarm, flight or fight), and then to return eventually to normal. The depressed brain gets stuck in stress mode. It fails to readjust. More specifically, danger or threat stimulates the hypothalamus to produce a signal to the pituitary to send a signal to the adrenal glands, just over the kidneys. The adrenal glands secrete cortisol to produce fight or flight reactions. Prolonged stress for vulnerable people results in a “stuck switch.” The adrenal glands continue to pump out cortisol, damaging the brain, killing neurons, shrinking the hippocampus, stressing other organs, and producing the typical affects of depression. The neural circuits mediating positive emotionality—circuits engaging the nucleus accumbens and activating the dopamine reward system in the frontal cortex—shut down, producing anhedonia, and consequently a loss of motive and interest. The neural circuits mediating negative emotionality—engaging the amygdala and activating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis—go into overtime, producing chronic anxiety and anguish (Barondes; Casey; Davidson et al.; Gotlib and Hammen; Kramer; Lam; Mondimore; Nierenberg, Dougherty, and Rosenbaum; Phelps; Robinson; Solomon; Styron; van Praag, de Kloet, and van Os.; Whybrow; Wolpert).

Shakespeare depicts in *Hamlet* a pathological condition—a mood disorder that in our current culture would be treated with anti-depressant medication or electroconvulsive therapy. The intuitive psychological power that Shakespeare displays in depicting this condition is just one more piece of evidence supporting the legitimacy of the canonical status he holds. He holds that status not because he articulates patriarchal values or flatters British imperial pride, but for two chief reasons: his extraordinary verbal genius and his penetrating psychological insight.

But is *Hamlet* just a study in clinical depression? Bradley rightly raises this question, and rightly gives a negative answer to it. “It would be absurdly unjust to call *Hamlet* a study of melancholy,” though “it contains such a study” (120). What makes the difference between a study of melancholy and *Hamlet*? The other parts of Hamlet’s mind and personality—his intellect and character. “A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extended so widely through its world the disgust and disbelief that have entered into it. But Hamlet has the imagination which, for evil as well as good, feels and sees all things in one. Thought is the element of his life, and his thought is infected” (119). Again, Hamlet is not Everyman. He is one particular man, but a man with faculties that enable him to give his particular condition the broadest representative scope, to generalize from his condition to the

human condition, and thus to give a habitation and a name to a major phase of human experience. Not all men and women have profoundly disturbed emotional relations with their mothers; not all men and women fall into severe clinical depression. But all men and women are vulnerable to those threats, and that vulnerability provides the basis of common understanding that makes it possible for most readers to feel with Hamlet, to empathize, to identify vicariously with his plight.

Analyzing Hamlet's Personality: The Five-Factor Model

Critics of *Hamlet* have given many good impressionistic accounts of Hamlet's personality. Using research developed over the past few decades, we can now systematize these common-language observations within an empirically established set of categories. These categories converge naturally with the common idiom, and indeed through one line of research they have derived directly from the common idiom. The "lexical" approach to personality begins with combing dictionaries for every term that has some reference to personality or temperament. The idea is that if a feature is sufficiently important to affect social interactions, it will become embedded in the common idiom. The categories that emerge from the lexical approach can be correlated with our understanding of human life history and can be causally linked with underlying neurobiological processes (A. Buss; D. Buss; Costa and McCrae; John et al.; MacDonald, "Evolution, The Five Factor Model," "Life History"; Nettle, "Individual Differences," *Personality*; Pervin and John; Smits and Boeck; Wiggins). By locating Hamlet's personality within the current model of personality, we can get a better sense of the relations among the specific features of his personality, the circumstances of his life, and his emotional reactions. We should thus be able to give a more complete and adequate account of the thematic and tonal structure of the play to which Hamlet gives his name.

Personality researchers have reached consensus that within the Germanic language group (English, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages, etc.) and other language groups as well, there are five major factors of personality: Extraversion/introversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience. These five factors have emerged consistently from independent research teams using diverse methodologies. *Agreeableness* signals a pleasant, friendly disposition and a tendency to cooperate and compromise, versus a tendency to be self-centered and inconsiderate. *Extraversion* signals assertive, exuberant activity in the social world versus a tendency to be quiet, withdrawn and disengaged. *Conscientiousness* refers to an inclination toward purposeful planning, organization, persistence, and reliability, versus impulsivity, aimlessness, laziness, and undependability. *Emotional Stability* reflects a temperament that is calm and

relatively free from negative feelings, versus a temperament marked by extreme emotional reactivity and persistent anxiety, anger, or depression. *Openness to Experience* describes a dimension of personality that distinguishes *open* (imaginative, intellectual, creative, complex) people from *closed* (down-to-earth, conventional, simple) people.

When we speak of “human nature,” we focus first of all on “human universals,” on cognitive and behavioural features that everyone shares. We typically use personality, in contrast, to distinguish one person from another—for example, a friendly, careless extravert in contrast to a cold, conscientious introvert. In reality, personality factors are themselves human universals, integral parts of our common human nature. Each of the five factors has a common substratum. Individuals differ only in degree on each factor (Costa and McCrae; Nettle, *Personality*). The underlying commonality in Extraversion/Introversion is the necessity to engage in some way with an external environment—the “approach” part of the basic “approach-avoidance” mechanism that links human reactive impulses with those of every species, even amoebas. Agreeableness is a measure of affiliative sociality, and since humans are social animals, most humans have some measure of affiliative sociality. Conscientiousness is a measure of any given person’s disposition for organizing, planning, and carrying through on the tasks of life. Locating present action within a temporal continuum containing past and future is part of the specifically human cognitive apparatus (Darwin, *The Descent* 1: 88-89). Without some measure of conscientiousness, a person could not function at all. Emotional Instability, sometimes labeled “neuroticism,” is a measure of emotional reactivity in the range of negative affect (the “avoidance” half of the “approach-avoidance” mechanism). Emotional reactivity varies in intensity from individual to individual, but experiencing pain is normal and necessary. Without fear and sorrow, people would have no means of registering dangers or feeling the sense of loss. The ability to experience emotional pain, like the ability to experience physical pain, is an indispensable adaptive trait. Openness to Experience registers curiosity and a readiness to absorb experience of an imaginative, intellectual, and aesthetic character. Our readiness for culture—our disposition for producing emotionally charged symbolic forms—is the single most important feature of human nature that distinguishes us as a species from all other species (Carroll, “An Evolutionary Paradigm,” “Rejoinder,” *Literary Darwinism* 197-203; Deacon 21-22; Dissanayake, *Art*; Dutton; Mithen; Panksepp and Panksepp; Tomasello et al.; Tooby and Cosmides; Wade; E. O. Wilson).

As Hazlitt, Bradley, and many others have recognized, Hamlet is both profoundly introverted and intellectual. He thus has a naturally meditative personality. He engages not directly with persons and situations but rather with his sense of them. He is conscientious and thus tormented by his own inability to function effectively. He is emotionally unstable, a trait that renders him particularly susceptible to depression—to being overwhelmed by stress, unable to cope. As a depressive, he is characteristically vacillating, indecisive, and ineffectual. In this respect, his emotional instability converges with his introversion. He is at one remove from direct action, and when it comes to action, indecisive. All of this is captured in Goethe's concise characterization in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*:

“A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without recovering his peace of mind.”
(282)

(Boyd gives a similarly concise verbal portrait of Hamlet's personality [“Literature” 18].) There remains the question of Agreeableness. Is Hamlet a nice, warm, friendly person? His admirers would like to think so. Hazlitt tries to palliate his behavior to Ophelia. I think Samuel Johnson is closer to the truth in speaking of Hamlet's “useless and wanton cruelty” to Ophelia (1011). And it isn't just Ophelia, embodiment of frail womanhood. More often than not, Hamlet is verbally caustic. He finds his vocation in witty put-downs. He delights in mocking Polonius, even after he has killed him. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths with no flicker of remorse or sadness. Quite the contrary, he exults in the success of his cunning stratagem. He tells Gertrude that he must be cruel only to be kind, but such rationalizations are common. Children readily detect the hypocrisy that so frequently lurks behind the phrase, “It's for your own good.” Add all this up, and it seems unlikely that Hamlet would score even at the average on the factor “Agreeableness.”

Protagonists tend to be agreeable, since readers do not readily cotton to disagreeable characters. But Hamlet never quite loses his audience, even when they flinch from his cruelty. There are at least five reasons for this. First, he is, after all, mightily put upon, struggling against crime and depravity that dwarf mere unpleasantness. Second, he pre-empts readers' resentment by being as brutally hateful to himself as he is to others. If in his accounting Ophelia is Representative Woman, fickle and false, Hamlet is himself Representative Man, “proud, revengeful,

ambitious” (III. i. 122). Third, he is a satirist as well as a protagonist. He entices the audience to participate with him in exposing folly, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, treachery, venality, sycophancy, and foppishness. He is not merely depressed. He is angry, and because he is also driven to disguise, his anger finds vent in satirical wit. *Hamlet* is not a “tragi-comedy,” precisely, but it is a very funny tragedy. Ophelia fails to see the humor in her father’s death, but most readers are irresistibly entertained by the patter of wicked puns that follow the good old man to his dinner, not where he eats but where he is eaten. Fourth, Hamlet never succumbs to mere egoism or cynicism. He is capable of filial affection, admiring friendship, and romantic love. And finally, perhaps most importantly, Hamlet’s relations to other individuals are almost incidental to his central motive—to articulate his own imaginative sense of his situation. The high moments in *Hamlet*, the moments most remembered, are the soliloquies. Even in his tirade against Ophelia, she is scarcely more than a prop, an occasion for a monologue denouncing human nature. His one bosom friend, Horatio, is merely a sounding board for Hamlet’s reflections. Hamlet speaks to himself, and we but overhear him.

Early evolutionary psychology deprecated the significance of individual differences and focused exclusively on human universals. This was a serious theoretical mistake (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 190-91, 200, 206; MacDonald, “A Perspective”; Nettle, “Individual Differences”). Moreover, it lends support to the false charge that literary Darwinism cannot cope with individual texts because evolutionary psychology concerns itself only with human universals (Deresiewicz; Smee). Individual variation is integral to the evolutionary process, and differences of personality allow individuals to occupy different niches within variable social ecologies (Harris; Nettle, *Personality*; Sulloway). *Hamlet* occupies a niche in the literary canon in good part because Hamlet’s personality makes it possible for him to define a range of emotion—morbid, unhappy, bitter, angry, resentful, contemptuous, disgusted—that touches powerfully responsive chords in his audience. He articulates his condition as a general human condition, and while that representation is not the whole truth, it is enough of the truth to fix our attention and win our grave approval.

Just How Universal Is *Hamlet*?

Tooby and Cosmides are right, I think, in declaring that Hamlet’s condition symbolizes an evolutionarily ancient adaptive problem: “the struggle for coherence and sanity amidst radical uncertainty” (19). The way that problem manifests itself, though, depends very much on cultural, historical circumstance. Hamlet could not have existed either in Periclean Athens or in medieval Europe. His mind roams

free over the whole scope of human experience, probing all questions, finding no clear answers, no firm structure of belief and value. Oedipus, in contrast, is always certain—first of his own rectitude, and then of his guilt. Socrates questions everyone else's beliefs and values, but Plato has the ideals of *The Republic* always comfortably in reserve for himself. Dante's inferno has its precise hierarchy of guilt and torment. *Hamlet* is different. Matthew Arnold registers this difference in describing Hamlet as a truly "modern" figure. In the 1853 Preface to his *Poems*, Arnold explains why he has not included in the volume his one most ambitious poem, the closet drama *Empedocles on Etna*. Though wearing ancient garb, Empedocles is a voice of Arnold's own time, expressing all the doubts and perplexities—religious, philosophical, moral, and social—that characterize the intellectual life of the Victorian period (Carroll, *The Cultural Theory* 1-37).

What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics have disappeared: the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust. (1)

Doubt and discouragement do not first appear in human experience in the 17th century, much less the 19th, but there is no age before the Elizabethan in which doubt and discouragement achieve a supreme form of articulation, and no age before the Victorian in which they come to dominate the imaginative life of a whole culture. The three great philosophical poems of the Victorian period, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Arnold's *Empedocles*, and Browning's *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, are all meditations on religious and philosophical doubt, and to this canon one can add, as an appendix, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, the collected poems of Arthur Hugh Clough, and Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. In the postmodern period, we have stopped tormenting ourselves, for the most part, with religious doubt—not because we have solved the problems with which the Victorians struggled, but because we have given up on them and have resigned ourselves to the existential conditions they still hoped to avoid. The descendants of *Hamlet* in the modern period are works such as *The Waste Land*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Waiting for Godot*, *La Nausée*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Crow*.

One can hardly imagine what Sophocles or Dante would have made of *Hamlet*, or even what Chaucer would have made of it. We have made of it one of our very few most essential texts. We have taken it to heart and made it an anthem for our own imaginative lives. By assimilating the insights of the humanist tradition to an evolutionary understanding of human nature, we can now gain a better understanding of what that choice means.

Hamlet is a long, magnificently articulated cry of emotional pain and moral indignation. Mortally hurt in his inmost feelings, Hamlet clings to an imaginative ideal of courage, honor, dignity, and chivalrous love. That ideal is embodied in a ghost—"such a questionable shape" (I. iv. 44)—and that shape is almost all that stands between Hamlet and an actual world given over to bestial indulgence, false shows, treachery, and foolishness. He is slow to act, and when he does act, he brings cataclysmic ruin to himself and most of those who are closest to him. And yet, he is not a failure. He learns to look at death with clear and open eyes, accepting the frailty and transience of life. He is sensitive enough to register our worst fears in our most vulnerable moments and still in his own person give unmistakable proofs for the nobility of the human mind.

If this is not a tragedy for all times and seasons—not the kind of thing that would fulfill the deepest imaginative needs of Sophocles, Dante, or the Tiv—it nonetheless fulfills a tragic potential originating in the basic features of human nature. Perhaps at some point, possibly centuries from now, we shall no longer regard Hamlet as one of the voices that speak most intimately to us, probing our fears, winning our fervent sympathy, voicing our outrage, making us laugh, and giving us an unsurpassed standard of meditative power. If that ever happens, we shall know that we have truly entered into yet another phase in the development of the human imagination.

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