

## **All the Sallies of His Will: Indianapolis Literary Club (11/18/19)**

Among the many puzzling things that Hamlet says in the course of the longest role in Shakespeare's longest play is his late statement to Laertes when the young nobleman returns to Denmark from Paris to find his father, Polonius, dead under suspicious circumstances. He will soon discover his sister, Ophelia, driven mad.

Laertes is ready to interrupt the succession to the Danish throne by gathering forces capable of carrying off a coup d'état. He is determined to find the cause of these untimely woes and take whatever revenge may be necessary. The guilty king, Claudius, has to work hard to redirect the young man's wrath toward Prince Hamlet.

As Ophelia's body is being brought forward for burial, the distraught Laertes leaps into the grave to embrace his sister. Emerging from hiding, Hamlet, also recently returned to the kingdom from which he had been exiled, jumps in after him. The men grapple. The prince unburdens himself with a violent speech asserting his superior right to mourn Ophelia's death.

“I’ll rant as well as thou,” he boasts before they are separated with difficulty.

Declaring his right to be chief mourner, Hamlet then says to the livid Laertes: “What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever. But it is no matter.”

What part of this strange speech does Hamlet believe? There is nothing in the play to suggest a close relationship between the two men. Yet he’s saying he always loved Laertes and he seems to be offended that Laertes is objecting to this outrageous exercise in competitive grieving.

Is this an indication of the madness the King and Queen believe he has succumbed to? No, I think rather it is nihilistic and speculative and characteristic of many aspects of Hamlet’s personality throughout the play. What the prince is really saying is a counsel of despair to himself. We might paraphrase it like this: “Say that I had always loved you, Laertes. Whether true or not, that has no bearing on what we do now. Love has no significance in freely promoting action, nor has the absence of love, for that matter. That may explain my behavior toward your sister. I can’t be sure that what I consider to be my will can apply any force to whatever happens between us going forward.”

Hamlet has processed what his ex-girlfriend, drowned accidentally or by suicide, but in any case driven insane, said more simply earlier, in his absence, after wandering into court and distributing flowers she has gathered. “Lord,” she says, “we know what we are, but we know not what we may be.”

The distraught woman is saying something more than just that we can't know the future. She is enunciating in a reductive way a major theme of “Hamlet”: personal identity under the condition of not knowing whether it's largely shaped by our free will or totally outside our control. We are likely to miss this at a performance emphasizing the sweep of action in a gnarled family drama checked by the hero's reluctance, indirection, and indecision. Severely trimmed productions, like the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company's, may have this effect.

In one sense, my interpretation of what Hamlet says to Laertes should come as no surprise: From the outset, Hamlet is a doubter. The Ghost of his father, who has charged him with a mission of revenge, perhaps is not to be believed. Hamlet acts as if he believes the ghost, and as if to reinforce the point that we should also, Shakespeare has Hamlet's father appear during the Closet Scene, the tense

conversation mother and son have in Queen Gertrude's chambers after the Prince has upset the whole court with his concocted play, "The Mousetrap," interpolated into "The Murder of Gonzago," which the troupe has brought with it.

The Ghost and the charge he delivers to Hamlet represent fate — the necessity of what will be, what we are designed to do. What we are comes from our present consciousness, whose motor is the notion of free will.

The Victorian scholar A.C. Bradley asks: Why is this Shakespeare's only tragic hero who is never shown happy? I think it's because the play's main theme is the difficulty of being sure any action is freely chosen. Hamlet dwells incessantly on this difficulty, so how is even a momentary happiness possible? When he lectures his mother in the Closet Scene, he may be exercising his purpose to alienate her from her husband, but he surely must suspect that she is in too far to her settled status to change her mind. He is testing her will, which he deeply supposes is as ineffectual as his own. Dr. Samuel Johnson, an admirer of "Hamlet," rightly complains that Hamlet is more an instrument than an agent. In upbraiding his mother, Hamlet makes a strenuous defense of human agency, despite his fear that we are

instrumental in the design of something beyond us.

Instrument or agent? What are we, and what may we be? Something of both, perhaps?

Several years ago, Krista Tippett welcomed the physicist Leonard Mlodinow to her program [“On Being.”](#) As I listened on [WFYI-FM](#), I appreciated her discomfiture as the guest made the case for determinism. And here’s the crucial part of the guest’s argument that free will is an illusion: Mlodinow’s father survived the Holocaust by falsely admitting to stealing bread to avoid the threatened execution of all the suspected thieves at the death camp where the Nazis had housed them. Surprisingly, after the doomed man said, “I stole the bread,” the camp's baker took him on as an apprentice, enabling the senior Mlodinow to survive the war and to form the family that made Leonard Mlodinow possible.

Understandably, Tippett wondered how her guest could believe his dad’s admirable action was determined. Without free will, stepping forward to say “I stole the bread” would mean nothing, wouldn’t it? His boldness in risking personal annihilation was freely chosen and admirable, wasn’t it?

Mlodinow's answer was wise, if inevitably unsatisfying to his host and probably most of her listeners. Still, it provides an insight that can be applied to the protagonist of "Hamlet." He told Tippet that his father's heroism revealed himself, and that was a sufficient source of meaning: "His decision is no less heroic if it is based on who he is," Mlodinow said of the false confession that turned out well for his father and enabled the physicist's very existence.

What a display of courage means, in sum, is that you are the kind of person who would make a courageous decision. You imagine you could have chosen otherwise, but you didn't. It may have been determined that you would act as you did.

Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it this way in "Self-Reliance": "I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being....Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions."

"Hamlet can seem an actual person who somehow has been caught inside a play, so that he has to perform even though he doesn't want to," writes [Harold Bloom](#). I want to revise that: the character's actuality is an illusion generated by the author's

investment of so much philosophical scrutiny into the human predicament. Hamlet is close to us in our most unsettling thoughts. And it's true that as a dramatic hero, he is forced to perform, testing the mystery of human consciousness. As capacious as he may seem, the Prince is an elaborate machine of immense, three-dimensional charm for dramatizing the root dilemma of human action and thought: determined or free? All the sallies of Hamlet's will are rounded in by the law of his being; he hates that, and feels he must probe that in others.

It must have occurred to Shakespeare to have his hero use the feigned madness found in the play's sources not as a ruse for protecting the prince from his wicked stepfather, but as a trick to test everyone around him on their susceptibility to external control. It's an explanation worth exploring. Shakespeare's first astute critic, the aforementioned Dr. Johnson, truly finds in Hamlet's crazy pose "no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity."

The "antic disposition" (Hamlet's phrase) is thus a device of less use in the revenge assignment than it is an excuse to probe a vexing dilemma: How will I know what course I'm free to pursue, if it's possible that whatever I do may only express who I really am,

the person who I am willy-nilly destined to be? Are others like me in this, or will they push back and change before my eyes, or confirm what I already thought about them?

Hamlet vacillates from the start on his specter-ordered mission. Can the Ghost of his father be trusted? Hamlet quickly tells his fellows on the battlements at Elsinore, "It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you," but later entertains the thought that the apparition is the devil. So does the circumspect Horatio, who signals his skepticism about ghosts on entering the ramparts when he answers the watch's question, "What, is Horatio there?" by muttering "A piece of him."

The Prince's resolve to "sweep to my revenge" is repeatedly checked in ways he can't understand himself. He meditates several times on the paralyzing nature of thought and its relentless power to inhibit action. As late as his final soliloquy, in Act 4, he frets: "I do not know / Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do' / Sith I have cause and will and strength and means / To do it."

Hamlet knows that his mind allows him immense scope (a favorite Shakespearean word), but he suspects that nothing he may try is freely the product



of his will. "O God," he says, "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space — were it not that I have bad dreams."

What are those bad dreams? Images of the realization that the will is irrelevant, powerless — and that being bounded in a nutshell is a metaphor for the human condition, once free action is truly seen as being of no account.

Much of Hamlet's peculiar behavior is a way of testing other characters, starting with Polonius, the royal counselor and father of Hamlet's putative beloved, Ophelia. The Lord Chamberlain's entrapment in the role of nosy top adviser, schooled in listening and agreeing, is mocked in the dialogue about clouds and their perceived resemblance to animals. Polonius' long practice as a conniving yes-man runs true to form. Hamlet's first test of someone else is thus a lark. Those tests that remain will sorely test the prince as well.

Polonius has also accepted tacitly that Hamlet is indeed reading a satirical description of old men like himself when he interrupts the Prince's browsing in a book. There is little redeeming skepticism in the over-the-hill counselor, so Hamlet wants to assess how much Polonius' behavior is determined by the

need to believe in Hamlet's antic disposition. Totally, it is soon evident. Polonius bears an overload of what Mlodinow calls "confirmation bias," the tendency to select the parts of mixed evidence that confirm what we already believe.

Where is Hamlet to go for evidence of free agency in human behavior? He suspects his old school buddies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, fellow intellectuals but easily led, have been thoroughly suborned by the King, and tweaks them sharply for it, mocking their inability to play upon him any more than they can play the flute. When the adventure of exile at sea on the way to England allows Hamlet to discover that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are carrying Claudius' request to the English king to have him killed, he doesn't hesitate to write a note of his own, consigning the messengers to execution.

As he tells Horatio the story, the tone is proud and free of second thoughts. Subconsciously, he has arranged a temporary truce between willfulness and destiny. Carrying his father's signet ring, Hamlet enacts his hopeless claim on kingship by sealing the note he's written that condemns his false college chums to the death that Claudius had ordered for Hamlet. They are done for, thanks to the one royal order old King Hamlet's heir will ever issue.

In traditional monarchies, the sole station in life closest to running a manifest, determined course is that of heir to the throne. Hamlet has literally put a seal on that status, though scholars tell us the Danish monarchy was elective. But as he shouts a little bit later after leaping into Ophelia's grave to grapple with Laertes: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." What can that self-identification mean? They are all Danes there, of course. Hamlet is declaring publicly a claim on the Danish throne, his by right, that he will never occupy.

With this in mind, it's not so odd that the dying Hamlet gives his blessing to the royal election of Fortinbras, ruler of neighboring Norway, whose father Hamlet's late father had defeated in battle. The young Norwegian prince has been seeking revenge ever since. But warfare is governed by something much greater than the competing wills and substantial martial powers of the combatants, as Leo Tolstoy would demonstrate for all time in "War and Peace." Destiny, whether apparent or hidden under the cover of randomness, presides over all battlefields. And to the Elizabethans, the scholar Frank Kermode reminds us, Chance is often a mask of Providence. At the end of the play, it has brought Norway a bloodless victory over its internally shattered neighbor. Not for nothing is the last line in "Hamlet" Fortinbras' "Go, bid the soldiers shoot."

“In proportion as our will declines, our belief in destiny mounts,” says [Harold Goddard](#) in "The Meaning of Shakespeare," though he is mistaken in applying this wisdom to Hamlet's growing indifference to morality. It's more all-encompassing than that. Transcending right and wrong is perhaps collateral damage when one engages such a formidable foe as the will's unyielding puzzlement.

Here's another arena in which the conflict is engaged. Early in "Hamlet," the Prince is eager to see whether what may feel like a determined course can be altered by force of will. Rising to the fore in this scrutiny is an abundance of sexual disgust.

Why does sex preoccupy him so? Adultery leading to murder, the ghost's information, is of course at the root of it. But I think Hamlet's doubts about the human command of will helps explain it. He is at one with the view of St. Augustine, summarized like this by Bertrand Russell: “What makes the ascetic dislike sex is its independence of the will. Virtue demands a complete control of the will over the body, but such control does not suffice to make the sexual act possible. The sexual act, therefore, seems incompatible with a properly virtuous life.”

To a warrior of the will like Hamlet, the abyss opens up where lust is involved. Looking down into that pit is irresistible.

If the adultery that resulted in his father's murder were enough, why does Hamlet harangue the virginal Ophelia mercilessly, then subject her to flippant bawdry as the court gathers to watch the visiting troupe's play? Yet he has roaringly commanded the demure woman to enter a convent.

And in the Closet Scene, indifferent to the fact that he has just killed Polonius by accident, Hamlet reviles Gertrude in vivid moralistic terms for her weak sensuality. When she moans "thou has cleft my heart in twain," Hamlet's imperative to "throw away the worser part of it" evokes Jesus' hard saying: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee." (One-third of an omniscient Godhead in Christian theology, Jesus is also the avatar of a ferocious free will, charging us to reject sin and seek salvation. Saint Paul, the true founder of Christianity, makes dogma of this responsibility. It's a challenge to human nature so mammoth even Hamlet can barely acknowledge it.)

He is so focused on his mom-bashing lecture that the Ghost reappears to remind him of his "blunted

purpose” — the mission of revenge that Hamlet no longer believes in. When he can bring himself to recall the body behind the arras, he speaks dismissively of it, except for this: “For this same lord, I do repent, but heaven hath pleas’d it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister. I will bestow him, and will serve well the death I gave him.” Clearly, he finds any element of free choice close to the vanishing point.

So will he serve his killing of Polonius with the King’s death, or with his own? It’s almost a matter of indifference now. When all are dying in the final scene, Hamlet kills Claudius last before succumbing himself. In his culture, regicide is the ultimate challenge to the way things are supposed to be.

The mortally wounded Prince Hamlet doubles down on that violation. Hypocritically, the usurping monarch has earlier calmed Gertrude, fearful of Laertes' rumored insurrection (Act IV), with this reassurance: "There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will."

Caught up in the death-dealing final scene and acting little of his will, Hamlet has failed to "pluck out the

heart of [his] mystery,” which his creator implies is all mankind’s. Where does our freedom lie, when even the most clear-headed act may be the product of a mistaken assumption of personal autonomy?

The Prince imputes so much to nature or to heaven as determinants that his own thoughts and acts are famously given over to “a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.” Something rough-hewn is not botched or ineptly made, it should be remembered, but rather sketched out, planned or inchoate.

The more conventionally pious Horatio expresses a similar view much earlier, on the battlements of Elsinore in the first scene. To Marcellus’ “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” — the second-most famous line in the play (after “To be, or not to be”) — Horatio prophetically says: “Heaven will direct it.”

It’s significant that, as fervent a Christian as Dr. Johnson was, he recognized Hamlet’s reluctance to kill the King at prayer as just an excuse for non-action. Christian scruples never bother Hamlet elsewhere in the play, so why should they here? His spiritual depth bears an uneasy relationship to conventional religion. When he interrupts the Ghost's

revelations to cry, "O my prophetic soul!" he may really be saying, in amazement: "O my imagination!"

That considerable faculty has too much to process in Hamlet's encounter with his martially attired father, who imparts terrifying information and instructions on how to proceed. Hamlet Senior's posthumous sufferings cannot even be spoken of, he warns. On this side of mortality, how is the Prince to weigh the truth of any of this? The poet Wallace Stevens, in his essay "Imagination as Value," may be helpful here: "If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man."

If such a willed projection is indeed Hamlet's, its daring scope bumps quickly up against necessary limits in a predetermined universe. Sex is the joker in the vulnerable hand human beings are forced to play. Laertes had spoken more truly than he knew when he warned Ophelia about her strange lover: "His will is not his own." He thought he was speaking only about the lovers' difference in status, but Shakespeare knows better as he drives home his theme. Emerson speaks with his usual gnomic authority when he says: "Character teaches above our wills."



Two clotted passages in “Hamlet” substantiate my belief that Shakespeare himself wrestled with the free-will/determinism conflict. For all his virtuosity, even he could not express it clearly, maybe because it evokes the “bad dreams” that confirm Hamlet’s nutshell existence.

The first passage is the second half of a speech (Act I) about Claudius’ habit of publicizing his carouses at court with trumpet, drum and cannon. It’s “a custom more honored in the breach than the observance,” his nephew says disdainfully. The phrase is often taken to refer to *neglected* customs, rather than ones too faithfully observed that might better be retired.

But Hamlet goes on unnecessarily, in one long sentence draped over 13 lines, ostensibly talking about bad reputations. Actually he’s expressing his confusion about nature’s overwhelming influence on individual behavior. How far does that influence extend? How much power do we really have to moderate our behavior in order to remain free of gossip and scandal? The rhetoric is oddly cumbersome for Shakespeare in his major mode.

The other passage comes at the end of the Player King’s initial speech in Act 3. Probably these are among “some dozen or sixteen lines” Hamlet has

inserted in the visiting troupe's play, "The Murder of Gonzago." In that revised play, the Queen, who "doth protest too much" (Ophelia's only worldly remark) that she couldn't ever marry another if her royal husband should die, is rewarded with a tangled counterargument by the King. Her spouse seems to acknowledge the density of his reasoning by the time he arrives at this clarifying conclusion: "But orderly to end where I begun / Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown. Our thoughts are ours,/ their ends none of our own."

Hamlet embodies this contrariness, much to the exasperation of his shrewdest commentators. To Harold Goddard, he "is like a drunken man and you cannot determine where he is going from his direction at any one moment. He lurches now to the right, now to the left. He staggers from passion to apathy, from daring to despair." It is more than coincidence, perhaps, that the determinist [Leonard Mlodinow](#) titled his book-length examination of randomness "The Drunkard's Walk."

The Prince is a new kind of tragic hero, for he is brought down by no idiosyncratic flaw, but a universal one. That has been acknowledged throughout the culture in allusions usually linked to the flaw of indecisiveness. T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred

Prufrock roundly declares: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.” But that sad sack’s loveless love song shares in more of the prince’s dilemma than he can bear to acknowledge. The Dane has larger problems to wrestle with and more “scope” to apply to them than Eliot’s neurasthenic antihero. Yet both Prufrock and Hamlet realize that the greatest human resources are unavailing against fate, against what has been determined for them, and similarly, against randomness. In that, they are brothers.

The danger of a highly focused will is the shriveling of human capacity and a studied blindness to fate. Franz Kafka’s mighty story “Before the Law” gives us a supplicant stopped at an outer gate, with the Law he yearns to approach no better than a distant promise. This is not the Law that kept Kafka’s ancestors together through covenant, nor the one Jesus proclaimed he had come to fulfill, but rather something like its opposite. This Law proclaims no bond with humans and no expectations of them.

The gatekeeper persuades the traveler to be patient, but will not let him enter. The man devotes his whole life to waiting, becoming enfeebled and in effect reduced to nothing other than the will to enter and

proceed toward the Law. Finally he inquires why no one else has asked to be admitted.

Here's where every reader may shudder to imagine his or her destiny when blocked from whatever is most desired. For this is where the gatekeeper leans over and shouts at the nearly deaf, nearly dead man: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."

The Law, glorious in its unreachable distance, may well be what lies past the "undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveler returns." It's whatever may be situated beyond this foreordained life that our wills compel us to ignore. In his most famous soliloquy, Hamlet identifies that prospect as something that "puzzles the will."

One of Shakespeare's modern editors notes that "puzzles" means "paralyzes." Paralysis renders action null. And the likely ineffectuality of the will is what Hamlet sets aside in favor of plain revelation of himself, to himself, when he says at last, "The readiness is all" and "The rest is silence."

The loyal Horatio then offers the play's final fragmentary prayer, pious but devoid of reference to

any deity: "Good night, sweet prince! And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Where is Hamlet's rest? It may be wherever has already been determined for him from the start. I'm not competent to assert that the latest science forces all of us to become materialists or determinists. It would be a mistake to derive certainty about determinism from studies that show internal commitment to a decision is a fraction of a second made before we are conscious of deciding.

Instinctively, we see in other people immaterial entities we call personality, consciousness, even soul. To me, being certain that other people also have the intangible quality we call free will is much more difficult, but may also be necessary in forming our notions of right and wrong and our ability to choose between them — and thus to make personality, consciousness, and soul meaningful terms.

So the convention of believing everyone has and can exercise free will seems unavoidable, because we insist on that capability for ourselves. Similarly, we can recognize conditioning, habit and temperament as shaping thought and behavior, and some of us also see heaven's hand as a major influence. But we're reluctant to inflate these causes to the end-point of asserting that they and their effects are all

foreordained, whether we identify the source as God, physics or fortune (which Hamlet tellingly personifies as a strumpet).

Maybe we haven't a prayer, after all. Emerson warns us in "Self-Reliance" that prayers are a disease of the will; creeds, of the intellect. An optimistic, even jovially creedless, view of the will sustains him throughout this seminal essay.

Emerson steers a confident course between the vagaries of will and the certainties of fate by urging the power of a strong self, incumbent upon each of us to develop. He says we have a duty to fear conditioning and conformity more than the laws of nature. Hamlet is well past having to quell such fears. But he doesn't command a self strong enough to overcome the apprehension that free will may not exist.

So "orderly to end where I begun," to quote the Player King, we have in Hamlet's brief speech after he joins Laertes in Ophelia's open grave three aspects of the problem of free will: "What is the reason that you use me thus?" gets at our universal desire to understand why we are treated the way we are, even when the obvious answer is no great mystery. Then "I loved you ever," especially when there's

insufficient evidence that's true, puts the will to love and rationalizations for it as something adequate to explain our case, even when the case is flimsy. And finally, "it is no matter" dismisses our attempts to believe in the free will of others or of ourselves after the shock of realizing that untangling words or action from what destiny or randomness decrees may be irrelevant.

Unintimidated by inexorable fate, Emerson says: "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*." The Sage of Concord continues: "I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation."

No, indeed. Still, I submit that the hypothesis of determinism was something the genius Shakespeare pondered nervously and may have recoiled from, but couldn't quite evade, in this peculiar play. To personify its enduring fascination so memorably through art may be sufficient, we are at liberty to suppose. As for my decision to conclude this exploration here... I guess it was bound to happen.

