

Hamlet, the Fall and Hermeneutical Tragedy

‘Who’s there?’

(Hamlet I.i.1)

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‘a truly hermeneutic universe’

(Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 3rd ed. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group) 2004, xxiii)

‘caught between the tide of determinism and the cult of the autonomous self’

(Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 1997, 94)

‘O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story’

(Hamlet, V.ii.328–33).

‘the tragedy of hermeneutical experience’

(Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1992, 179).

‘Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. [...] The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns.’

(Gadamer, 351)

The Fall necessarily impairs the hermeneutic ability of every individual born in its wake.

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The interpreting self can know – not fully, but ‘in parte’

(1 Corinthians 13:12, Geneva Bible)

a twofold condition: 'the duality of experience'

(Blocher, 95)

'I know not'

'The first corpse'

'Some vicious mole of nature'

'What art thou?'

'Pray can I not'

'Special providence'

‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends’

‘even in that was heaven ordinant’

(Hamlet, V.ii.20, 48).

‘Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is’t to leave betimes. Let be.’

(Hamlet, V.ii. 97–203).

‘the violent and punitive providence of [Jean] Calvin and even of [Lancelot] Andrewes’ ’

(Alan Sinfield, ‘Hamlet's Special Providence’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 33 (1980): 89–97.)

providence and predestination

‘perpetual gouernor & preseruer of them: and that, not by stirryng with an uniuersall motion as wel the whole frame of the worlde, as all the partes therof, but by susteynyng, cherishing & caring for, with **singular prouidēce** euery one of those thinges y^t he hath created euē to y^e least sparrow.’

(Jean Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, (London: Reinolde Wolfe & Richarde Harison), 1561.)

‘Are not two sparrowes solde for a farthing, and one of them shal not fall on the ground without your Father? Yea, and all the heeres of your heade are nombred. Feare ye not therefore, ye are of more value then manie sparrows.’

(Matthew 10:29–31, Geneva Bible.)

‘Since we are of greater value than sparrows, we ought to realize that God watches over us with all the closer care [....] What else can we wish for ourselves, if not even one hair can fall from our head without his will?’

((John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill (London: S.C.M. Press) 1961, I.17.6.)
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‘despite the worry over “wild and whirling words”
[l.v. 132], Matthew 10:29 is presented as a simple text, a
reliable confirmation of a providential order that
remains fundamentally mysterious.’

(Jesse M. Lander, ‘Maimed Rites and Whirling Words in Hamlet’, in *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage: Cultures of Interpretation in Reformation England*, edited by Kristen Poole and Thomas Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2018, 188-203.)

Horatio You will lose, my lord.

Hamlet I do not think so. [...] Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart – but it is no matter.

Horatio Nay, good my lord –

Hamlet It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

Horatio If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.

Hamlet Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence

(Hamlet, V.ii.187–97).

‘He who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care [....] thus, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong.’

(Calvin, *Institutes*, 1961, I.17.4.)

the 'foolish man' 'perishes from his own unconsidered rashness'

(Calvin, *Institutes*, 1961, I.17.4.)

‘Rashly – / And praised be rashness for it – [...] There’s a
divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we
will’

(Hamlet, V.ii.7–11).

not 'pass[ing] as rash' 'a sentence on matters unknown as [one] would on the deeds of mortal men.'

(Calvin, Institutes, 1961, I.17.1.)

‘everything seems [...] to be confused and mixed up’

(Calvin, *Institutes*, 1961, I.17.6.)

‘Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is’t to leave betimes. **Let be.**’

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Thank you!