HAMLET AND CHANCE

An Address at Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, 27th January 2008-03-10

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At the end of *Hamlet,* in the space of perhaps two minutes of stage time, four people die. The Prince's mother Queen Gertrude; her husband the king Claudius; also the brother of Hamlet's beloved, Laertes, all speak their last words. Hamlet is the last to die. Although he has suffered a mortal injury, he still has a little more to say. But he can hardly get the words out. He speaks in grammatical fragments, and barely finishes a sentence. At this point he addresses the audience, perhaps more directly than at any other time in the play, as it were coming out of the stage and into the theatre, as if to us here perhaps even in this chapel, not an inappropriate place, on a winter's evening between epiphany and candlemas, to meet a ghost or to face eternity. 'You that are pale, and tremble at this chance' Hamlet says to us, 'that are but mutes or audience to this act', he begins; – he could tell us a story – if he had but time – but then Hamlet stops in mid sentence. Death is catching up with him. He cannot sum up his life, or understand his own death, in a single speech, not even in a Shakespearean soliloquy, the most perfect literary mode for such an address ever invented.

Just one word, then, he can get out in time to explain his life and death, and that word is 'chance'. I am not sure the word seems quite right to us. Is it chance that has brought Hamlet to this pass? Does he live, or more to the point, does he die, by chance? The King at one point seems to say so, and even lays a bet on Hamlet losing his sword-fight with Laertes. He stakes six expensive barbary horses on it; and he offers generous odds. In the *Times Literary Supplement* a couple of years ago, a Shakespearean scholar decided to calculate these odds with a novelist, a poker player, an expert on the mathematics of probability, and an Olympic swordsman. Claudius rates Laertes at 4-1 on; Hamlet thinks he has a sporting chance. But it turns out that Claudius is not a horse racing gentleman, and has no intention of wagering anything. He has made sure of Hamlet losing: he has sharpened the blades which should be left blunt for a duel, and just to be certain, he has put venom on the tips. And being specially risk averse, he has also put to one side a poisoned cup for Hamlet to drink. Hamlet does not die by chance: this is premeditated, finely tuned, meticulously

executed murder. Claudius, with what we might call neurotic perfectionism, has arranged to kill Hamlet three times over.

Except that things do not go according to plan. Gertrude takes the cup and drinks, and in the scuffle of the swordfight, Hamlet and Laertes swap swords, and so both receive a killing blow. It is at this point, apprehending the full enormity of what has happened, that Hamlet finally is spurred into doing what he has been promising to do throughout the play, and kills his uncle; and learning a lesson from his uncle, he makes sure by killing him twice, with both sword and poisoned cup. It makes for a shock ending, some people feel a slightly schlock ending, cheap thrill and trashy melodrama, blood all over the stage. The Elizabethans liked this kind of thing, we are told. Yet in this hammiest of revenge endings we come face to face with a most metaphysical conundrum. Hamlet at last in killing Claudius achieves full human agency. He is in control of his own destiny, he seizes his moment, he defines himself by taking unilateral action. And yet at the very same point he loses his life, through a series of events entirely outside of his control, coincidences haphazardly heaped together, a conspiracy compounded by a mistake compounded by an accident. He is the victim of a freak set of circumstances. He calls this process, not unjustly, 'chance'.

Looking for a text where Shakespeare quotes from the Bible seems a good place to locate a sermon on Shakespeare, and I have chosen the Geneva Bible translation as it is the one Shakespeare seems to have read and almost certainly owned. Conventionally, the world of *Hamlet* and the world of the Bible seem metaphysically far apart. Why then, as we heard in the two readings just a moment ago, does Hamlet in his very last speech before the play's catastrophic dénouement quote from the Bible? 'There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow', he declares, alluding, as every member of his original audience must have known, to the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?' What does Hamlet mean by quoting from Jesus? It is not an easy speech to interpret; it is not even clear in places what Shakespeare's text is, and editors have disagreed as to what the exact words are; the line has been exposed to as much commentary as some of the hardest places in the gospels. Yet we can perhaps get the gist. Hamlet is trying to understand what the pattern is, in the events of his life, and how to come to terms with that. He is beset with questions about what is to come, how things will end. And he cannot know the answer to these questions, as no one can. So his response, at this point, is to let things come, come what may. '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.' Since no man knows anything of the moment of his leaving of the world, no man should have any thought to the time of his leaving. So be it: 'let be'. That last cadence, 'let be', so close to the liturgical use of that curious Hebrew word 'Amen', sums up the sense here: we do not understand, but we accept what befalls us, this is the life that has been given to us. 'The readiness is all.' Hamlet is ready to die, if need be.

Such at least is the point Hamlet seems to have reached before his last scene. And here the language of the gospel seems appropriate. Indeed Hamlet gives to this an even more precise theological language: he invokes the idea of a 'special providence'. Yet will this language and this idea quite answer for the action that follows? Many spectators and readers of the play feel not. Indeed for some, this is exactly the point of the juxtaposition of Hamlet's speech about providence and what is yet to come. This is his final irony: just when he comes to terms with his existence, existence gives him one last stab in the back. His life ends about as unprovidentially as it can, in inexplicable, unforeseen, accidental violence.

This is why, we say, that *Hamlet* the play is a tragedy, and why such a story could not appear in the Bible. Shakespearean scholars cannot resist the temptation to feel here that their text is somehow the better for this, that there is in the Christian Bible some element of comfort that is denied by tragedy. Christianity will not allow of the truly tragic, it is said; God would not allow it. Myself, I wonder at such points if I am reading the same book. The Bible has never seemed to me a particularly comfortable book, however full it is of words of comfort. Even when the Book of Common Prayer proffers the 'comfortable words' just before the consecration in the Communion Service, these are not words that come easily, or without cost, or without risk. And the message that Christ brings in Matthew in the passage recalled by Hamlet is distinctly uncomfortable: 'Think not that I am come to send peace into the earth: I came not to send peace, but the sword'. The very hairs of our head are numbered, Jesus says, a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our father knowing. But such a reassurance comes on a knife-edge of existential uncertainty: the father who is able to save is also the father who is 'able to destroy both soul and body'.

Hamlet's biblical quotation, therefore, perhaps brings with it more than we bargained for. Yet we can at least agree, surely, that when Hamlet attributes the hopeless helter-skelter series of blind coincidence of his final scene to the action of chance, he goes beyond any explanation that exists in the Bible. There is no chance in the Bible. God, as someone once

said, does not play dice. At this point, though, we might stop to consider what we mean by 'chance'. Loosely, we use the word all the time to mean something that happens randomly, that has no apparent cause. Yet most of the time, when we say that something happens by chance, we know when we think about it that it is not really the result of 'chance', strictly understood. When I say that I had a chance meeting with somebody, when I think about it I know that what appears to have no cause has a variety of causes, only they are not immediately apparent to me. Randomness, strictly understood, is easy enough to define but very difficult to understand. It means a situation where several outcomes of a process are equally likely. In real life such situations are clearly rare. Our main models for understanding chance nowadays come instead from quantum physics and from the mathematics of probability.

There are some rather better physicists here than me, and the ghosts of some other pretty good ones too, and I will not venture further into this territory. But in the time that Shakespeare was writing, such definitions of chance did not yet exist. The first serious calculations of probability theory only came into being a couple of generations after *Hamlet*. When Hamlet attributes the end of his life to the action of chance he means something less precise and more mysterious. And while it is almost true, it is not quite accurate to say that 'chance' does not appear in the Bible, in the translations that were being made into English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet bread to the wise, nor also riches to men of understanding, neither yet favour to men of knowledge', the preacher says in Ecclesiastes, chapter 9 in the Geneva Bible Version of 1560, revised in 1587; 'but time and chance cometh to them all'. And the preacher continues, in words that speak volumes for Hamlet, 'For man doth not know his time'. I do not think it is a coincidence; for Shakespeare has surely been reading Ecclesiastes as well as Matthew in the speech that has been read so beautifully for us: 'That that hath been, that is now; & that that shall be, hath now been'.

There is then, a small place for chance in the Bible after all. Indeed, if we go back a little further in the history of the English Bible, we find in the earliest sixteenth-century translator, William Tyndale, fourteen references to chance. Even more wonderfully, we find several uses in Tyndale of the word 'luck'. The Israelites, he says, and I think we agree with him, have 'evil luck' in the Book of Judges. In a marvellous phrase in Genesis, he describes Joseph as 'a lucky fellow'. These translations were retained up to the Bishops' Bible of 1568.

But then something interesting happens. Here luck runs out. Every instance of 'luck' and its cognates, 'lucky', 'luckily', 'good luck', 'evil luck', are excised totally from the many editions of the Geneva translations, a prohibition reinforced by King James's translators and not lifted until the New English Bible. For four hundred years, from 1560 to 1960, there is no luck, good or bad, to be found in the English scriptures.

The reason may seem obvious enough: the Calvinist obsession with predestination. I am not sure when the doctrine of predestination was last preached in Trinity chapel; but around 1600 every third or fourth sermon you or Shakespeare were likely to hear would have been on this subject. I am not about to revive the tradition, but I do want to suggest that something was lost in the suppression of luck from the Bible, something that Shakespeare in *Hamlet* was thinking about quite carefully, and something we can still learn from. In Tyndale, and even in a few places in the Book of Common Prayer – where, if you look hard enough, there are three references to 'good luck' – there is still the sense that the Christian life can quite properly be held to contain elements of the unexpected, the unlooked-for, perhaps even the uncanny. The coming of luck into one's life is unpredictable, contingent, in the way that the human body, its motion and its experience, is contingent. In this sense, it may be that Hamlet choosing to describe his own end as the action of chance, may have more to do with what he earlier calls 'providence' than we realise. The Calvinist note in the margin to the Geneva text of Ecclesiastes insists that God's providence has nothing to with chance: the future is already known. But Hamlet asserts the idea of 'special providence' not because he knows the future but precisely because he does not. However, nor is he saying that what is happening is chance in the sense that is random or uncaused. Things don't just happen; they fall into place by a motion that he can hardly understand. At the end of the play, he asks himself how much luck we think we can humanly live with? How much luck should we live with, in order to live a life that has meaning and value? But further than that, he has to let things be. And however far apart the subsequent history of the concept of chance has come to seem, at some level in the late sixteenth century it was still possible to recognize luck as one of way of understanding God's part in the world. The radical fragility of every human life is that it does not know its own end in advance. Joseph is 'lucky' in the sense that he might as easily not have succeeded. He is lucky in the way meant by the Hungarian Jewish composer György Ligeti, who, just before he died in 2006, said beautifully of his own life, in which as a young man he survived the holocaust: 'Somehow I am still living today, by a

mistake, by chance'. In Tyndale and perhaps in Shakespeare grace is like that, it is something that involves luck. Calvinist theology struggled to overwhelm this desperate possibility, and strove to prove that luck has absolutely nothing to do with grace. Yet luck, in some unfathomable divine sense, might have everything to do with it.