The Fortunes of Fate in *Hamlet*: Divine Providence and Social Determination

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Fate is an embarrassing idea these days. An outdated inheritance from the ancient Greeks, who thought a pantheon of oddly human-like gods ruled the world from the top of a mountain, our word *fate* comes from the Latin *fatum*, "that which has been spoken" ("fate, n."). Fate is the inevitable and unavoidable future—destiny—as Greek mythology personified in the Moirai who determined the length and course of an individual's life by spinning a yarn on a loom—spinning a yarn, indeed. Greek tragedies often made fate the divinely decreed, unassailable end of one's life which, despite attempts to alter it, always won out in the end. "Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown," Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet* (3.2.195-96), summarizing the thesis of Greek tragedy.

This critique of fate, written in the twenty-first century by me, an atheist, could just as easily have been written by a sixteenth-century Christian like Shakespeare. Yet *Hamlet* is filled with fate, starting in the first scene. The Ghost is a "portentous figure" (1.1.108) who "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.68). Horatio compares it to omens preceding Julius Caesar's death, "precurse of feared events, / As harbingers preceding still the fates / And prologue to the omen coming on" (1.1.120-22), then asks the Ghost to foretell the future, "if thou art privy to thy country's fate" (1.1.132). These passages bookend the story of Young Fortinbras' campaign against Denmark, which culminates in the final scene of the play. Symbolically, the armored Ghost in the first scene points forward to the national, military tragedy of the last scene even if, more literally, the Ghost points backward

to Claudius' crime against King Hamlet. Oddly, Shakespeare characterized the Ghost as Prince Hamlet's "fate": "My fate cries out" (1.4.81), he howls, following the Ghost into the unknown. What does that mean? How can a Ghost pointing to the past be "fate"? For starters, the revenge the Ghost assigns to Hamlet is a dooming of sorts. The catastrophe that ends the play is the outcome of the Ghost that begins it.

Any sense of fate in *Hamlet* comes into tension, however, with two concepts. First, fate clashes with *will*, as with "our wills and fates do so contrary run." Will is not only the first name of the author (a pun exploited in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*), but also the trait Hamlet repeatedly, intensely displays. Understood as "that faculty or function which is directed to conscious and intentional action; power of choice in regard to action" ("will, n."), related to the auxiliary verb in expressions of future plans ("I will watch tonight; / Perchance 'twill walk again" [1.2.241-42]), and prominent in early-modern debates about free will versus predestination, will is a central concern in *Hamlet*. Claudius thinks Hamlet excessively mourning his dead father shows "a will most incorrect to heaven" (1.2.95). During the recitation of Aeneas' tale to Dido, Pyrrhus is—paralleling Hamlet—paused "like a neutral to his will" (2.2.403). In Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, fear of the unknown "puzzles the will" (3.1.79). In his own soliloquy, Claudius wants to repent, but can't, "though inclination be as sharp as will" (3.3.39). Both soliloquies show, to quote Hamlet, that "reason pardons will," as the second quarto reads (3.4.88), or that "reason panders will," in the folio (3.4.80). The whole plot of the play grows from Hamlet's hesitation to enact revenge though he has "cause and will and strength and means" (4.4.44). The centrality of human will, ethical agency, and individual choice in plays like *Hamlet* led A.C. Bradley to state that, in Shakespearean tragedy, "character is destiny" (13)—a rebuke of the dominance of fate over free will in classical tragedy.

The second challenge to fate is *fortune*: what one person sees as divinity reaching into history to secure a

predetermined outcome, another sees as the freewheeling splatter of random chance. From the Latin *fortuna* and *ferri*, "to bear" ("fortune, n."), fortune was personified in ancient Greece in the goddess Tyche, "luck." In Shakespeare's age, fortune was blind (guiding the world "willy-nilly" [5.1.16]), promiscuous (a "strumpet," as Hamlet calls her [2.2.229]), spinning "her wheel" (2.2.417)—those in high station are brought low, and the low are raised up. Beset with "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.57), Hamlet sees everyone, except Horatio, as "a pipe for Fortune's finger" (3.2.63). Since humans have little say in the events that befall them, Hamlet remorselessly chides Polonius, after accidentally killing him, to "take [his] fortune" (3.4.32). Like fate, fortune clashes with will but, *pace* Bradley, only fools like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern think they control their own destinies ("on Fortune's cap we are not the very button" [2.2.222]). We only control our reactions to the senseless distribution of good and bad luck, as illustrated by Horatio ("a man that Fortune's buffets and rewards / Hast ta'en with equal thanks" [3.2.60-61]) and Fortinbras ("with sorrow I embrace my fortune" [5.2.366]).

Thus, in *Hamlet*, the belief in fate asserted several times by several characters comes under attack from both sides: fortune presents a world of random happenstance, will a theory of efficacious human action. This dynamic in the play captures millennia-long, trans-cultural debates about fortune, chance, fate, providence, predestination, free will, and human agency running from the classical to the medieval to the early-modern ages (see Poppi, d'Hoine and Van Riel, and Rosendale). On this backdrop, I want to ask—irrespective of what characters say and believe—what the structure and imagery Shakespeare wrote into *Hamlet* suggest about some version of fate at work in the play. In doing so, I eschew historicism, partly because there's broad consensus in the extensive historicist scholarship contextualizing this issue in *Hamlet*: Shakespeare clearly wrote Reformation ideas of divine providence into *Hamlet*, yet the play includes

something more, something different, something uniquely Shakespearean not reducible to the ideas that came before him (see Hamilton, Colley, Sinfeld, Mallette, Curran, Osser, and Pierce).

The role of fate in *Hamlet* is best discerned not by looking to the text's past to identify ideas it does not endorse, but by looking to its future to discover those it anticipates. I contend that the world of Hamlet is governed by neither fate nor fortune, nor even the Christianized version of fate called "providence." Yet there is a modern, secular, disenchanted form of fate at work in *Hamlet*—what is sometimes called "social determinism"—which calls into question the freedom of the individual will. As such, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both commented on the transformation of pagan fate into Christian providence that happened in the centuries leading up to the play, and anticipated the further transformation of fate from a theological to a sociological idea, which occurred in the centuries following *Hamlet*.

I

Shakespeare did not merely decline to write divine providence into the metaphysics of *Hamlet*; he critiqued providence as a delusion of the mentally disturbed. Yes, a ghost visits from the beyond and must be accepted as real according to the metaphysics of the play. But affirming a supernatural plane of existence is not the same as believing that God reaches into history to control our destinies. The question for Shakespeare and his contemporaries was not, *Do you believe in the Christian God*? They did with very few exceptions. The question—debated, for example, by Luther and Erasmus—was, *Which version of the Christian God do you believe in*?

Nor need we accept that Shakespeare believed in divine providence simply because many of his characters do. Horatio thinks "heaven will direct it" (1.4.91) when Marcellus frets that "something is rotten in the state of

Denmark" (1.4.90), but Shakespeare built the whole play around Hamlet not doing what the Ghost says. If heaven gives "direct[ions]," the humans in *Hamlet* don't follow them. If, as Hamlet says about his charge to avenge his murdered father, "heaven hath pleased it so ... that I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.174-76), it must be admitted that heaven grievously miscalculated whom to trust to re-establish order in Denmark. Similarly, Claudius is demonstrably wrong when he invalidates Laertes' "will" by proclaiming, "There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would" (4.2.123-24). Claudius just killed his brother, the king. God does not watch over royalty in *Hamlet*. The characters proclaiming divine providence are sorely mistaken, mentally compromised, or flat-out lying.

And claims for divine providence in *Hamlet* run into a problem with the pirates. Typical of pirates: always causing problems. According to the theory and practice of tragedy voiced by Aristotle, there ought to be a necessity to the catastrophe that ends the play (see Frede). It should follow plausibly—as a clear consequence—from the protagonist's mistake or *hamartia*. Once that mistake is made, the catastrophe is inevitable—fated, as it were. But Shakespeare dissociated Hamlet's hamartia—the not-killing of Claudius at prayer and the accidental killing of Polonius—from the catastrophe that ends the play through the absolutely bonkers episode with the pirate ship (see Wentersdorf). After killing Polonius, Hamlet is sent to England with secret orders for his execution upon arrival and, if this were a traditional tragedy, Hamlet's death in England would illustrate the tragic necessity connecting *hamartia* to catastrophe. But Shakespeare disrupted that sense of necessity by having Hamlet return to Denmark through a stroke of random chance. On the way to England, Hamlet's ship was boarded by pirates, whom Hamlet befriended and bribed to bring him back to Denmark. That happenstance erases any cause-and-effect consequentiality between Hamlet's *hamartia* and his death. The pirates turn *Hamlet* into a play of fortune, not

fate.

Hamlet does not read the episode with the pirates as I have done here. He sees it, instead, as the hand of God reaching into history to move us around as He, in His divine wisdom and power, sees fit: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will," Hamlet says to Horatio when narrating his journey at sea (5.2.10-11). The metaphor comes from carpentry: we humans can cut out the "rough" edges of our lives, but God "shapes" the details more finely. Horatio agrees, but wonders how Hamlet was able to counterfeit the royal Danish seal on the letter he rewrote to change the order for his execution to go to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Even in that was heaven ordinant," Hamlet replies (5.2.48). Which is more likely: that God put King Hamlet's ring (with its royal Danish seal) on Hamlet's finger, as he believes, or that Hamlet himself chose to wear the ring to honor and commemorate the dearly departed father he has been obsessed with? Hamlet then shifts his belief that God is writing history from a way to interpret the past to a way to proceed in the future. He tells Horatio not to worry about the duel with Laertes because he's on God's side and "there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.191-92). "Special providence" is a technical term from Renaissance theology. In contrast to Arminian "general providence," which held that God created the world such that humans are capable of exercising free will to choose to follow God's law, Calvinist "special providence" held that God is actively directing the things humans do, on down to the most minute details, like the fall of a sparrow. There is no free will in this radical sense of special providence, commonly called "predestination," the Calvinist concept holding that God has already selected who will go to heaven and who to hell. In such a system, humans are merely acting out a script already written by God with no opportunities for improvisation—like the actors in the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, or the actor playing Hamlet on stage. Calvin himself used the metaphor of theater to illustrate predestination (Cannon, Tiffany).

"Let be," Hamlet concludes (5.2.195): *God has a plan.* This is not a moment of nirvana. He is not at peace with the world. Instead, Hamlet is so battered by history that he turns to hocus-pocus. Here spirituality is a salve, yet one which, while healing the emotional turmoil of one person, brings about harm to others. Violence is done in God's name. Belief in God becomes crime. This is Hamlet as religious fundamentalist, terrorist, or Abraham about to murder Isaac. The vengeful God Hamlet imagines controlling the events of the play in Act V is not one anyone should worship (see Fernie). And no one wants to live in a world of Hamlets who believe God has a plan, and whatever they do is part of it. Divine providence may not be real, but the consequences of believing in it are.

The most obvious evidence against the reality of predestination in Hamlet is that the whole play is about *Hamlet* exercising free will to decide what he should do. But that absence of predestination is coupled with a critique: Hamlet's belief in "special providence" in Act V is both a misreading of fortune as fate and the outgrowth of a frustrated mind compromised by the contingencies of life and thought. Applying Shakespeare's critique of special providence to those who held the doctrine of predestination, he may have seen the Calvinists as not only wrong, but delusional. This does not mean Shakespeare was an atheist, a term which, in the Renaissance, referred not to the belief that there is no God, but to the belief that God is not good. Shakespeare was no atheist under either definition. Theologically speaking, *Hamlet* gives a better sense of what Shakespeare did not believe than what he did.

II

Sociologically speaking, *Hamlet* gives a pretty good sense of what Shakespeare thought: our destinies are completely out of our hands. Despite Hamlet's intense, repeated deliberations, he's just an empty vessel through which royalty

works its will. When we first meet him, Hamlet wants to go back to school in Wittenberg but can't because, according to King Claudius, "It is most retrograde to our desire" (1.2.114). The idea of social determinism is then explicitly broached in the next scene. Concerned about Ophelia's budding romance with Hamlet, Laertes tells her not to succumb to Hamlet's vows of love, not because Hamlet is insincere or unworthy, but because he is the Prince of Denmark. He will be forced into a political marriage not of his own choosing. He can choose whom he loves, but not whom he marries: "his will is not his own" (1.3.17). This image of Hamlet as the property of Denmark—to be directed this way or that—is then thematized when the spirit of his father charges Hamlet to exact revenge against his uncle. Hamlet doesn't want to do it, but "his will is not his own." His "fate cries out."

For Hamlet's fate to cry out is for history to burden him with an unwelcome situation that cannot help but significantly dictate what will happen in his life. It's not that Hamlet has no free will. Instead, external events are bearing down upon him so heavily that he has little power to direct his life as he desires. Thus, much of the play is about his inability to make a decision, just as much of Ophelia's story is about others making choices for her. Shakespeare often made the tension between individual inclination and social expectation—especially familial duty—into the engine for conflict in his plays. Usually, it takes the form of parents imposing predetermined templates of thought and action on children who seek to defy them. Henry V and Juliet are the most prominent additional examples. But several of the major tragedies, *Hamlet* chief among them, frame these stories of familial and social expectation with the supernatural. With the Ghost, Hamlet presents familial and social obligation as metaphysical necessity.

That's why Hamlet laments, at the end of the first act, "The time is out of joint: oh, cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.189-90). He describes the Ghost's visit, peculiarly, as a matter of disjointed time. Why "time"?

Why "out of joint"? Because the Ghost is his fate—his fate calls out—the past in the present determining his future. Hamlet says he was "born" to kill Claudius. That's especially important because Hamlet was born on the day King Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras, as we learn in Act V when Hamlet asks the gravedigger how long he has been digging graves:

> GRAVEDIGGER. Of the days i'th' year, I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.
>
> HAMLET. How long is that since?
>
> GRAVEDIGGER. Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It was that very day that young Hamlet was born.... I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years. (5.1.128-46)

Oceans of ink have been spilled on what these lines say about Hamlet's age (see Kaaber). Those debates overlook the symbolic significance of Hamlet being born on the day King Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras. Why create that connection? I think Shakespeare made Prince Hamlet's birthday the day his father killed Old Fortinbras to suggest Hamlet's life and death were determined from that day. His will was never his own. The Gravedigger and Hamlet have been moving toward each other, Shakespeare suggests, ever since the one started digging graves on the day the other was born. The next grave will be Hamlet's.

This reading hinges on a question that might seem unrelated: why is Claudius ambitious? The traditional reading of *Hamlet* sees Claudius's ambition as the origin of the story. Thus, the entire Norwegian subplot is often cut from the play in performance. But it is precisely because the Norwegian material is unnecessary that it is important. It doesn't need to be there, so why is it? The obvious answer is that Shakespeare put it there, so what was Shakespeare trying to convey? What does the play gain from that subplot that otherwise it would lack?

The Norwegian material provides a more satisfying explanation of Claudius' ambition than the traditional

reading focused entirely on the main plot. This newfound explanation connects the sequence of events in the main plot in Denmark to those in the Norwegian subplot. For the answer to Claudius' ambition is not found in his most explicit statement about it. From his soliloquy in 3.3 alone, we might conclude that ambition is one of those inherent vices which spring from the depravity of the human soul. But that's not how ambition works in everyday life or in *Hamlet*. In his soliloquy, Claudius does not understand himself, does not understand his own ambition. We in the audience have a better vantage. We have heard of both "the ambitious Norway" (1.1.60) and King Hamlet's "most emulate pride" when battling Old Fortinbras (1.1.82). The word "emulate" is an odd one. It means "ambitious," but invokes emulation, "mirroring." In accepting Old Fortinbras' duel, King Hamlet is emulating the pride of the man proposing it. It could be further argued that Claudius is emulating the pride and ambition of his brother, King Hamlet, when he kills him. The only way to acquire wealth and power in this world, it seems, is through violent dueling. King Hamlet showed his brother how to acquire power, and Claudius mirrored those means back to him in a tragic way (see Dickson 75-76).

Here's the long, causal structure of this reading: King Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras, which led to King Hamlet's expanded power, which led to Claudius' expanded ambition, which led to the murder of King Hamlet, which led to two separate series of events. First, it took the spirit of King Hamlet to purgatory, which led to the reappearance of that spirit in Denmark, which led Prince Hamlet to search it out, which led the Ghost to task Hamlet with revenge, which led Hamlet—after all the business with the feigned madness, the royal surveillance, the existential waffling, and the Mousetrap—to kill Polonius thinking it was Claudius, which then split this thread of the plot into two sub-threads: first, the death of Polonius, combined with the break-up with Hamlet, led Ophelia to go mad, which led her to commit suicide; second, the death of Polonius, combined with the

loss of Ophelia, led Laertes to vow revenge against Hamlet, which led Claudius to exploit Laertes' revenge and conceive of the rigged duel, which led to the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes. Meanwhile, in the second series of events caused by the murder of King Hamlet, the ensuing destabilization of Denmark led the state to be seen as vulnerable by its enemies, which led the latent Young Fortinbras to reawaken his quest to reclaim his father's land, which led Claudius to write to Old Norway, which led Old Norway to reel in Young Fortinbras, which led Young Fortinbras to redirect his energies against Poland, which led his army across Denmark, which led Fortinbras to slip into the power vacuum created in Denmark when King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, and Prince Hamlet all die at once.

Thus, in *Hamlet*, there is a version of fate, "that which has been spoken," but the "speaker" is not the mythological deities of the ancients. It is crusty history and stone-cold society. What we do is determined by what others have done, Shakespeare is saying. Individual human agency remains illusory, but not because it has been replaced by some more powerful divine agency. Situation and circumstance dictate understanding and action. This social determinism is the form of fate seen in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard's 1966 adaptation of *Hamlet*: "There's a logic at work. It's all done for you. Don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax" (40). Stoppard used the metaphor of the ship to rethink "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will." Humans can shape the details of their lives, Stoppard suggests, but the rough edges have been cut in advance, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize: "Where we went wrong was getting on a boat.... Our movement is contained in a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current" (122).

Social determinism does not mean there is no free will. I chose to write that sentence: human agency in action. Isn't it amazing? The fact that an infinite number of minuscule forces in the history of the universe have combined to bring

about my choices doesn't mean they're not mine. In fact, there is no fate without free will in classical tragedy. Fate is called into existence, as a concept, to show the futility of free will. Similarly, social determinism holds that sometimes, no matter what you do, your desires and actions won't be efficacious if they attempt to step outside the predetermined set of possibilities history and society have given you. And tragedy grows from an individual's attempt to exceed his or her fated station in life.

Readers today are unlikely to pity Hamlet, especially if their lives look nothing like the world of wealth, power, and privilege into which he was born. Yet perhaps those who have lived their lives with the deck stacked against them are best positioned to appreciate Shakespeare's suggestion that individual human agency holds little power in the face of the overwhelming external social forces shaping our situations and limiting possibility and choice. Determinism exposes the fiction of freedom in modernity. Citizens in liberal democracies have political freedom in theory, but history and society often take it away in practice. Our births are often our lives, our wills not our own. Fate, in a manner of speaking, and tragedy.

III

In sum, divine providence is the "fate" of theology and social determinism the "fate" of sociology. If so, Shakespeare's rejection of providence was very timely—free will versus predestination was one of the great questions of his age—while his endorsement of social determinism was ahead of its time. "The time is out of joint": *Hamlet* is both of and before its time, seen as an old-fashioned revenge tragedy in its own day, but the beginnings of modernity in ours (see De Grazia, "*Hamlet*"; Wilson). In Europe, the notion that individuals and their actions are a byproduct of impersonal social forces would not be argued in full until the nineteenth century with philosophers like Hegel and Marx, both careful students of

Shakespeare. I'm not here to historicize the invention of social determinism (but see Daniels, Sherman, and Ruda). My purpose is not to track Shakespeare's influence in Hegel's system (see Bates), or Marx's obsession with Shakespeare (see Grady and Smith), aside from noting that Hegel and Marx used King Hamlet's Ghost as a metaphor for the past haunting the present (see De Grazia, "Teleology"; Stallybrass), and Derrida used Hegel and Marx using *Hamlet* to theorize *hauntology* (see De Boer and Halpern). Instead, I want to consider the transformations of fate by stopping here to ask a simple question: was Shakespeare right?

If he held that our wills are not our own, that our births determine our lives, is that really the experience of humankind? We should note that, if it is, then there must exist some situation or circumstance which led Shakespeare to propose the idea of social determinism: the decline of fate-as-predestination led to the rise of fate-as-determinism. The usual understanding of European secularization is that modernity off-loaded mystical concepts like fate. In truth, it transformed—reconstituted—them because those concepts grew from human experiences that continued in modernity (see Harries; Gillespie; and Landy and Saler). Europeans still sensed their wills were not their own. The notion of fate has survived through the ages—variously articulated in theology, philosophy, biology, psychology, and sociology—because there exists a deep-seated and trans-historical tendency in human beings to recognize the futility of human agency. But who owns our wills if not some mystical deity? Scanning for something definite that overruled individual agency, with the *up-above* and the *in-the-future* closed off by the disenchantment of the world, thinkers flung "fate" backwards into history and downwards into nature. As the verticality of early-modern religion flattened into the horizontality of modern society, the shape of "fate" shifted from forward-looking to backward-thinking. Whereas fate in its theological form—predestination—is about a fixed future, in its sociological form—determinism—fate is about the past

announcing itself in the here and now. Things could not have been otherwise.

Thus, rather than a positive identification of the thing which determines the course of our lives, "fate" is better defined negatively, not by what it is, but by what it is not: fate is our term for the futility of individual agency. The ancient notion of fate, so preposterous on first blush, is nothing more or less than a historically specific articulation of the smallness of the human individual in the context of the vastness of time and space. Looked at in that way, fate is not a quaint historical relic from a less sophisticated time. Fate is very much with us today. Fate is real. Fate is reality: the massive amount of the material universe that exists independent of our attempts to make our way through it. Nature is fate. Science is fate. Society is "that which has been spoken," not by the gods but by the men and women who came before us. My history is my fate—insofar as the past works upon me as I choose the future I want to bring into existence, like King Hamlet's Ghost visiting Prince Hamlet. "My fate cries out." Fate is nothing more or less than what I can't change.

This recognition allows us to read these two forms of fate against each other. Perhaps predestination was always a coded recognition that history and society severely limit our exercise of individual agency. Perhaps social determinism means the future is fixed. Social determinism, like predestination, suggests an invisible and implacable power behind the shaping of events—not God, but history and society. Predestination, like social determinism, prompts anguish, despair, and charges of injustice when confronted by individuals.

How did divine providence transform into social determinism as the primary antagonist of free will? The example of *Hamlet* suggests fate did a detour through art as it traveled from theology to sociology. The fate of fate seems to be that it will cycle through various historically specific discourses as the venue for expressing frustration over our inability to control the world. Fate is both the past which

has made us and the future we cannot change, despite our best efforts. In tragedies both ancient and modern, the protagonist's efforts to avoid fate can be read as his or her efforts to avoid reality, to change the unchangeable. A big part of the reason tragedy survives throughout the ages is that there will always exist a reality which is both fundamentally unsatisfying and absolutely impermeable. Tragedy is the story of our efforts to change histories, societies, and realities which resist those efforts—the name of that resistance is "fate."

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