Hamlet as Scourge

Michael J. Krozel

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English

Central Connecticut State University

New Britain, Connecticut

May 2003

Thesis Advisor

Professor Donald McDonough

Department of English
Prior to completing his Master’s Degree in English, Michael J. Krozel earned a B.A. from Central Connecticut State University in English, combined with Special Studies in music, forming a dual major. He subsequently completed requirements for a teaching certification in secondary English. Mr. Krozel received the Graduate Outstanding Scholar Award at Central Connecticut State University for 2001, and he has published a volume of his own poetry. He intends to pursue a career in teaching English and to continue writing in multiple genres. He is married and resides in Middletown, Connecticut. His interests include theology, reading, creative writing, chess, and various outdoor activities.
To Kathleen for her unmatchable love and support

To Professor Donald McDonough for his infinite patience and consistent guidance

To Professor Richard Bonaccorso for his willing assistance
Table of Contents

Preface

The Heart of Hamlet’s Mystery

1

Chapter One

Hamlet, the Scourge of Critics

3

Chapter Two

The Use of the Term “Scourge” in Biblical, Patristic, and Renaissance Literature

37

Chapter Three

An Analysis of Hamlet’s Role

69

Conclusions

101

Endnotes

103
Abstract

This thesis analyzes Prince Hamlet’s role as a divinely commissioned scourge in Denmark, asking whether Hamlet functions in a multifaceted capacity as a scourge or as a univocal scourge figure, a figure that is a stereotypically evil scourge. It concludes that Hamlet acts as a scourge who accepts the Providential plan to cleanse Denmark. The first chapter is a detailed examination of important criticism from the latter half of the twentieth century regarding Hamlet’s role as a scourge, establishing as background for the discussion the most recent developments in the debate concerning this topic. This chapter finds two opposing critical camps. Led by Fredson Bowers, the first camp finds Hamlet univocally evil. The second, more diffuse, camp allows for Hamlet’s role as a Providential scourge who is not evil. This essay quarrels with certain particulars of the second camp’s analysis, but agrees with their conclusions.

The second chapter follows with a study of the chronological development of the term “scourge” through biblical and early modern literature. It analyzes the biblical role of scourge, focusing on the Assyrians (as related in Isaiah 10), Moses and Aaron, Nathan, Jeremiah, Jonah, Jehu, and Christ. Also covered are the following figures from history: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Attila, the Ottoman Turks, Timur the Lame, and Henry V. An examination of Marlowe’s scourge figure Tamburlaine precedes the conclusion of the chapter, which is a discussion of Shakespeare’s use of characters as scourges in plays other than Hamlet. This chapter’s analysis concludes that, contrary to the position of the Bowers camp, biblical, historical, and literary scourges are not univocally evil. The final chapter provides an analysis of Hamlet itself, focusing on Prince Hamlet’s interaction with other characters in the play.

Historical and literary evidence will demonstrate that Shakespeare had available to him extant models of human scourges who acted in a variety of capacities, not just as evil instruments whom God used before they were damned. The position espoused in this essay opposes the views of Fredson Bowers, Eleanor Prosser, and other critics of the camp who maintain that Hamlet’s role as “scourge” is univocally evil and that “scourge” and “minister” are mutually exclusive terms, and it expands upon the
views of a second camp who oppose the views of the Bowers camp. Critics of the Bowers camp hold to a narrow view of Hamlet’s role in the play. Hamlet is not the stereotypical evil scourge.

Hamlet is a multi-dimensional scourge. He is both a purgative and punitive scourge, a verbal *flagellum* who lashes vice, folly, and the weaknesses of the human flesh. He is an instrument of divine justice who wields the sword against Denmark’s evil. By the final act, he embraces Providence and his role, and in so doing, he effects the purgative and punitive purposes of God in setting the time aright in Denmark.

Hamlet’s functions as a scourge are subordinate to a benevolent Providence. The realm is ultimately purged by him of the evil initiated by Claudius’s usurpation. An examination of Hamlet’s interaction with Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Gertrude demonstrates his zeal for virtue. He abhors duplicity, which earns the severity of his rhetorical lash.
Hamlet as Scourge

Preface: The Heart of Hamlet’s Mystery

One vital element in Hamlet is the dynamic of mystery. Shakespeare says to the critic, Hands off! In his impassioned scolding of Guildenstern, Prince Hamlet, comparing himself with a musician’s recorder, issues a rebuke that could well apply to every critic and attendee of Hamlet the play: “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery [...]” (3.2.355-57), after which he warns Guildenstern, “Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me” (ll.361-63). Critics might “seem” to know the prince’s stops, but they cannot finally play upon him; many critics have called him what instrument they will: he is the evil scourge who makes good in the end or he is the damnable character who only serves to fulfill God’s judgmental will. However, they, like Guildenstern, cannot finger his stops so easily. Hamlet does see himself as an instrument, indeed as a divinely commissioned “scourge,” but the scramble occurs when critics try to determine what sort of scourge he really is.

That is one danger of Hamlet criticism. One can hardly hope to be original in assessing Hamlet. Harry Levin states the case very neatly:

[Hamlet] has been described, in varying terms, as a poetic puzzle, as a dramatic sphinx, and as the Mona Lisa of literature. This has led most of its commentators to read it as if it were some sort of riddle—as if, by somehow plucking the heart of Hamlet’s mystery, we should come to know what God and man is. Yet Hamlet expressly warns against such an approach, and keeps suggesting that there are reaches of thought which cannot be spanned by naturalistic or academic solutions. (4)

Maynard Mack calls Hamlet’s world “a world of riddles” (505). Clearly, Hamlet opposes fruitless conjecture, but he does want his story known. He tells Horatio in his last moments, “Report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied” (5.2.343-44).
The lack of a definitive interpretive base in the play may be only apparent. Concerning Hamlet’s declaration that he is Heaven’s “scourge and minister,” Ejner Jensen sees, however, “a syntactical confusion (‘heaven hath pleas’d it so’), an uncertain pronoun reference (‘their’), and two lexical items (‘scourge’ and ‘minister’)” (98). There is division among the audience concerning how to view the play. Like the onlookers in the *Saxo Grammaticus*, the audience respond “with divided opinion to the killing of [the] king” (*Saxo* 108), who is, in this case, Claudius. Some see Hamlet as a villain, others as a dutiful, and all too human, prince. The key is to allow Hamlet his mystery while observing carefully what Horatio has revealed.

What is revealed in Hamlet’s story as told by Horatio is what can be known. All who try to dig further into Hamlet’s secret life come to an ill end, critics included. In the play, Horatio alone allows Hamlet to be Hamlet. The antique Roman is satisfied to observe, and therefore he will later be trusted to report. That is the best any critic can do.
Chapter One: Hamlet, the Scourge of Critics

[...] but heaven hath pleas’d it so,

To punish me with this and this with me,

That I must be their scourge and minister (Hamlet 3.4.175-77)

Prince Hamlet calls himself a “scourge” commissioned by Heaven, and the importance of this confession is that it reveals, to a considerable extent, Hamlet’s view of his role in his own drama. He gives this revealing and vital admission in the most impassioned scene of the play, the closet scene. His emphatic use of the word “must”—“I must be their scourge and minister”—seems to preclude a synergy of wills between the Almighty and himself in achieving justice and restoration in the realm, suggesting, in other words, that Hamlet is to be a scourge and minister regardless of his own preference in the matter. That this role is a punishment in Hamlet’s eyes, at least through the first three acts, is a commentary on his struggle with the will of Providence, a struggle that lasts until his banishment from Elsinore. It is vital to a reasonable understanding of the play that the viewer be aware of Hamlet’s view of his own role and his struggle with that role.

The first Act closes with a crucial observation by Hamlet: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.196-97). Evil must be purged, unrepentant evildoers punished, and order restored. Hamlet bemoans the fact that he is the Heaven-commissioned “scourge and minister.” He does not at all like the prospect of being the agent through whom the Almighty will purge Denmark, and he sees his role as scourge and minister as being a punishment.

Concerning Hamlet’s open-ended and even enigmatic statement about this role of scourge, Fredson Bowers’ 1955 study affirms that Hamlet is a distinctly evil scourge who miraculously transmogrifies into a heavenly minister (cf. 99-101) just before the final act. Hamlet’s mystery seems to
have been plucked, but there are problems with Bowers’ interpretation.

This essay disagrees with Bowers and establishes Hamlet as a two-fold scourge. He is a divinely commissioned human scourge who wields a civil sword, and he is also a purgative instrument, functioning in this capacity as a verbal lash: a figurative punisher of evil and a figurative penitential flagellum used to lash vice and folly and the weakness of the flesh with his rhetorical skills. He is employed to bring both punishment and purgation to Denmark. Shakespeare establishes Prince Hamlet as a two-fold scourge because Hamlet must dispossess what is wrong: Claudius, and reestablish what is right: order and degree in Denmark. He is not merely punishing wrong; he is also setting things right. Hamlet is not an evil scourge; rather, he is a reluctant agent of Heaven, who wrestles with, and agonizes over, his duty and princely role, but who, in the end, cooperates with Providence in carrying it out. He is a purging agent as well as a punishing agent, but he is not a divided man, not a Manichean entity manifesting both an evil nature and then a redeemed nature. His position as scourge is dependent upon the purgative goal of Providence in the play. Order must be restored. Good must overcome evil. In the relationship between the prince and Providence, however, Hamlet as a scourge is an agent of divine justice.

When Prince Hamlet refers to himself as a “scourge and minister,” he posits an ambiguity that has generated some pointed discussion among certain critics, particularly over the last fifty years or so. The notion that Hamlet sees himself as Heaven’s “scourge and minister” is significant because the prince thereby conveys his view of his own role in the play. G. R. Elliot correctly views the “scourge and minister” passage (3.4.175-77) as a pivotal point in the play: “Those lines, condensing the tragic theme of the whole drama, summing up the action so far and preparing for what remains, are profoundly true of the methods of ‘heaven.’ Hamlet […] has been, and will further be, its two-fold agent, its ‘scourge and minister’” (122). The lines explain Hamlet’s immediate actions in the closet scene; they reveal his role and function in the play; even more importantly, they reveal his view of himself. He sees himself as being punished with his role. He will be punished for the fatal, hasty action against the hidden Polonius, but he finally sees the hand of Providence in it all.
The “scourge and minister” debate concerns Hamlet’s role in the play, as well as his self-evaluation. The criticism concerning the “scourge and minister” passage contains interesting connections and observations, yet the conclusions seem in the end to be finally unsatisfying. Marvin Rosenberg may have been wise to throw up his hands and admit, “Only the reader-actor can decide about the coupling” (712).

Analysis of this phrase has polarized critics roughly into two interpretive camps. It is important to review Hamlet criticism, particularly over the last fifty years or so, about the notion of “scourge and minister.” In the last half of the twentieth century, new ideas emerged concerning this facet of the play. R. W. Desai divides critics into two camps based on their positions concerning whether the terms “scourge” and “minister” constitute “a case of hendiadys, or whether they represent two distinct functions” (22). Desai places Harold Jenkins, Philip Edwards, C.J. Sisson, Harold Skulsky, and R. W. Dent in the former camp, listing Fredson Bowers, Eleanor Prosser, and Paul Gottschalk in the latter (22). Desai himself belongs to the first group.

Somewhat altering the focus of Desai’s division of camps, reversing their order, and expanding the lists of included critics, this essay is organized as follows: the first camp includes those who see the terms “scourge” and “minister” as being mutually exclusive in meaning, while the second comprises those who do not. The first camp, which argues that the terms “scourge” and “minister” are exclusive, thereby suggesting that a scourge is evil and a minister is good, includes the following eleven representative critics. The date in parentheses following each critic’s name indicates the year of publication of the relevant criticism: George Kittredge (1939), Fredson Bowers (1955), Eleanor Prosser (1971), Paul Gottschalk (1973), Bernard McElroy (1973), R. A. Foakes (1973), Robert Hunter (1976), Kenneth Muir (1979), Anna Nardo (1983), Martin Dodsworth (1985), and Marvin Rosenberg (1992).

analysis may not fit strictly in either camp concerning the meaning of the two terms, Roy Battenhouse (1969) will be added to the second camp, as he does not distinguish between the terms and hints that they are joined in meaning instead of being exclusive. His ideas are important in that they set the stage for Bowers’ foundational observations.

Although his work served as a foundation for Bower’s ideas, Battenhouse does not distinguish “scourge” from “minister.” Bowers partially builds his definition of “scourge” on assertions found in Battenhouse’s study of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* in connection with the notion of the dramatic scourge. In this work, Battenhouse emphasizes the evil nature of the typical scourge, calling up support from Philip Mornay, “[who] applies the Scourge concept to more ancient history. He explains how Cyrus, Titus, Attila, and Judas—each led on by his own evil passion—were made by God the unwitting instruments of His Providence” (110). Then, drawing from Sir Fulke Greville’s *Treatie of Warres* (published posthumously in 1633), Battenhouse appends Nimrod and the Ottomans to the four scourges listed above (111). These personages have negative reputations. The scourge, as Battenhouse sees him, is an evil personage.

These critics of the Bowers camp disagree with those of the opposing camp on the meaning of “scourge” and “minister,” and they do not always agree concerning particulars with members of their own camp. There is also basic disagreement among critics about exactly what (or who) ultimately prompts Prince Hamlet to apply the “scourge and minister” role to himself. Is Hamlet commissioned by a vengeful ghost, or is he commissioned by Heaven? Geoffrey Hughes takes issue with the notion that Hamlet is led by fate or by Heaven. He attributes Hamlet’s admission of being a “scourge and minister” to “Hamlet’s own hubris” (405). Hamlet is not, Hughes suggests, God’s agent; he merely assumes that he is (406). Hughes’ idea does not account for the on-going inner wrestling and turmoil concerning Hamlet’s responsibility through which the prince suffers when he feels destined to set the time right in the troubled realm. The “scourge and minister” passage serves both as Hamlet’s own view of his role in the play and as an important clue to the mystery of Hamlet’s character.

The word “scourge” appears twice in the text: the first (3.4.177-75) pertains to Hamlet’s self-
evaluation; the second (4.3.6-7) does not. Shakespeare has Hamlet calling himself a scourge. Hamlet is a human agent, not an inanimate instrument in the hands of Providence. Hamlet recognizes the power and will of the heavenly force behind his commissioned role. The prince embraces his role, despite much inner wrestling concerning the matter. Hamlet’s will matters in the course of events; that is to say Hamlet possesses autonomy. Claudius points out to Hamlet that the prince “shows a will incorrect to heaven” (1.2.95) concerning the death of the former king; choices are real. He chooses to live and not to commit suicide. He chooses not to kill Claudius when the king is praying.

Shakespeare emphasizes language as the primary vehicle of purgative scourging because words carry in them the power and the potential to effect change. Hamlet can persuade or even compel through his use of words. Once the sword is employed, the potential for change is out of Hamlet’s hands. Shakespeare maintains a tension between contemplation and action, between words and deeds. Hamlet is a scourge in both words and deeds. The most potent Shakespearean characters, good or evil, are erudite: Edmund, Richard III, Iago, Beatrice, Henry V, and Marc Antony, to name but six. Language can be used to laud, to woo, to persuade, or to chastise.

Throughout the play, Hamlet exudes a sense of destiny, of imputed responsibility. Shakespeare firmly establishes the notion that Prince Hamlet sees himself as an instrument of divine correction in Denmark, taking pains to establish the point in the first act of the play with this vital statement from the prince:

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,

That ever I was born to set it right. (1.5.171-72)

These lines are connected to Hamlet’s understanding that he is punished by Heaven in that he must be “their scourge and minister.” Hamlet’s position in the realm leaves him with this responsibility, and his struggle with it leads to a dramatic crisis during the last two scenes of Act 3. At the height of that crisis, Hamlet states to himself and to his mother that he is a “scourge and minister,” an admission not of two opposing roles, but of one multifaceted role. The revelation of Hamlet’s role in the closet scene, after the
Ghost’s gentle reproof has calmed the frenzied prince, becomes the turning point in the play. Hamlet begins to surrender to the role that he resisted before.

In *Hamlet*, two important images appear in connection with retributive justice set in motion by the usurpation of the Danish throne by Claudius: the scourge and the sword. Unlike the sword, the scourge image is connected to Providential ordination in the play, and, therefore, the scourge is the more important image. In this play, the sword serves the scourge, even as the scourge serves Providence. Civil authority serves heavenly authority. Shakespeare establishes Hamlet as a divinely ordained “scourge and minister,” not the sword of God’s wrath. The sword or foil, along with its relative, the dagger, is an important symbol in the play. The poisoned foil is emblematic of the poisoned state of Denmark; the foil is the punishing instrument of state, and with it Hamlet vanquishes Laertes and Claudius. With it, Laertes vanquishes Hamlet. When Hamlet chooses to spare Claudius’s life in the prayer scene, he says, “Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent” (3.3.88). Hamlet should not execute justice in private; he does the right thing for the wrong reason.

Yet, it is not “scourge and sword” that generates the discussion, but rather “scourge and minister.” Hamlet identifies his role in the play with the latter phrase. Hamlet’s position as scourge is multi-layered. His position as scourge is dependent upon the purgative as well as the punitive goal of Providence in the play. In the relationship between the prince and Providence, Hamlet as scourge is an agent of divine justice, and his commission is what C. J. Sisson calls “the dread task of heaven’s justiciar” (70). The task is daunting, but it is issued (perhaps demanded) by a just God.

Hamlet’s twenty-three-word self-assessment concerning his role as “scourge and minister” contains the metaphysical tension found in the raging battle between St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin opposed by the Semi-Pelagians and James Arminius (1560-1609) over the freedom of the human will. St. Augustine, argued that the postlapsarian human will is not free, “For it was by the evil use of his free-will that man destroyed both it and himself” (*Enchiridion* 36). This position was adopted by Luther and Calvin. Opposite doctrines were espoused by the Semi-Pelagians, initially shaped by figures such as John Cassian and Faustus of Riez. The Semi-Pelagian position was subsequently adopted
and further emended by Arminius, a contemporary of Shakespeare’s.

Following Augustine, Calvin argues that humanity has no free will; all events are sovereignly ordered and executed by God, and humans ultimately cannot change those divinely appointed parameters. God’s will necessitates the unfolding of all events in the manner in which they occur. In his Institutes, Calvin defines predestination:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death. (3.16.5, p. 206)

In the Calvinistic approach, Christ’s atoning sacrifice is limited only to God’s pre-ordained Elect, and His saving grace is irresistible, as is His decree of what John Wesley, in his essay “Predestination Calmly Considered,” terms “unconditional reprobation” (207).

On the other hand, Arminius takes issue with the idea of a God who, capriciously and of His good pleasure, would arbitrarily reprobate any human. Arminius censures Calvin’s position in the Institutes: “It is a horrible affirmation, that ‘men are predestinated to eternal death by the naked will or choice of God, without any demerit [proprium] on their part’” (Arminius 710, bracketed word in text). Humans are, in Arminius’s view, free to choose or deny God: “That teacher obtains my highest approbation who ascribes as much as possible to Divine Grace; provided he so pleads the cause of Grace, as not to inflict an injury on the Justice of God, and not to take away the free will to that which is evil” (700-701). To say otherwise would be to affirm a capricious and cruel Providence. God does not program people to be saved or damned. Arminius makes his position clear: “All unregenerate persons have freedom of will, and a capability of resisting the Holy Spirit, of rejecting the proffered grace of God […] of refusing to accept the Gospel of grace […] and these things they can actually do, without any difference of the Elect and of the Reprobate” (721). Both sides acknowledge God’s sovereignty, although the Calvinists argue that human freedom negates that sovereignty.
As indicated in the following survey of criticism, critics vary in their interpretations of what kind of instrument Hamlet is. These variations on several exegetical themes concerning the “scourge and minister” passage are presented so that the argument is understood in the context of the ongoing critical discussion. Most views listed below do not adequately allow for the richness in interpretive latitude concerning the term “scourge,” a term that should be unpacked and analyzed to accommodate three different facets relating to Prince Hamlet, as is supported in biblical and in early modern usage. Hamlet is an instrument of divine justice; he punishes vice with invective, and he uses satire to lash human folly. He is thus employed both as an instrument himself and as a verbal lash. The term “scourge” works on two distinct levels: purgative and punitive justice.

The majority view among critics, that the terms “scourge” and “minister” are mutually exclusive in meaning likely gained impetus from G.L. Kittredge’s comments in 1939 regarding the passage. Kittredge contributes the following note in his edition of *Hamlet*: “[T]heir scourge and minister: heaven’s scourge (of punishment) and heaven’s agent—minister of divine retribution. Their refers to heaven (l. 173). The use of a plural pronoun to refer to the singular noun heaven is common” (246). Unlike Battenhouse, Kittredge insists that the distinction between the two terms is a given. It seems that only in relatively recent times, particularly after the publication of Bowers’ essay, has a contrary position gained attention and impetus.

As Rosenberg points out in his commentary on the passage, one must define what is meant here by Heaven (712). While Shakespeare’s use of “their” certainly can mean multiple powers of Heaven, is that all he means? By using “their,” Shakespeare is careful to maintain an ambiguity concerning heavenly powers, an ambiguity that persists until the final scene, when Hamlet affirms his perception of a biblical Providence, commenting, “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.216), an allusion to Matthew 10.29: “Are not two sparowes solde for a farthinge? And none of them dothe lyght on the grounde, with out youre father” (Matt. 10.29 Tyndale 1534).

The issue that divides critics into the two camps is whether “scourge” and “minister” are exclusive in meaning, and at stake in that analytical conflict is how Hamlet should be perceived by the
audience. Is he an evil scourge? In his crucial essay “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge” (1955), Fredson Bowers focuses the debate about the nature of Hamlet’s role in the play on the pivotal phrase, “scourge and minister.” He argues that the terms are exclusive in meaning. In Bowers’ view, a scourge is an evil instrument only, a person beyond any hope of salvation. Bowers’ position has attracted a fair following, as noted before.

Bowers is careful to define a scourge univocally as an evil instrument. Building on a position maintained by Roy Battenhouse in the latter’s work on Marlowe’s Tamburlaine (1941), Bowers affirms:

But sometimes Heaven punished crime by human agents, and it was standard belief that for this purpose God chose for His instruments those who were already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation. This was not only a principle of economy, but a means of freeing God from the impossible that He would deliberately corrupt innocence. When a human agent was selected to be the instrument of God’s vengeance, and the act of vengeance on the guilty necessitated the performance by the agent of the crime, like murder, only a man already damned for his sins was selected, and he was called a scourge. (94)

Key is the notion that the scourge is “past salvation,” a man “already damned for his sins.” It is, in Bowers’ view, a commonplace among the people of Shakespeare’s time that the typical scourge must be singularly evil. This is what Bowers has in mind when he argues a bit later in his essay, “When Hamlet called himself a scourge of Heaven, it is inconceivable that the Elizabethan audience did not know what he meant, and that Hamlet did not realize to the full what he was saying” (95). Bowers interprets “scourge” and “minister” as signifying a Manichean polarity within Hamlet. In Bowers’ interpretation there is a tension between mighty opposites at work in the conflicted prince.

Bowers is careful to maintain direct opposition between the meaning of “scourge” and the meaning of “minister.” After asserting the evil nature of the typical scourge, Bowers distinguishes him from the typical “minister”:

The distinction between minister and scourge, thus, lies in two respects. First, a retributive
minister may visit God’s wrath on sin but only as the necessary final act to the overthrow of evil, whereas a scourge visits wrath alone, the delayed good to rest in another’s hands […] In the second respect, as a contrast to the evil and damned scourge, if a minister’s duty is to exact God’s punishment or retribution as an act of good, his hands will not be stained with crime. (95-96)

The “minister” is not damned, not “stained with crime.” Such a one cannot be damned. He is by nature, and through the necessary vehicle of God’s grace, pure and godly.

Pressing his distinction between scourge and minister, Bowers anchors his position on the well-documented distinction between two major types of revenge, asking whether Hamlet is “to be the private-revenger scourge or the public-revenger minister” (96). Bowers notes that the scourge looks for his own opportunity instead of waiting for the timing of Providence, as would a minister (96-97). Bowers suggests that Hamlet undergoes an apparent transformation from damnable scourge to godly minister, a transformation that occurs somewhere between the closet scene and the beginning of Act 5, and this transformation, he argues, is fully manifest in the final scene with its divinely sanctioned public revenge, the ministerial act of a prince who finally cooperates with God (101).

Bowers’ either/or interpretation of Hamlet’s “scourge and minister” line creates a problem: a person who is past salvation cannot suddenly be savable or he was not truly past salvation in the first place. He may be fit for damnation until a conversion takes place, but he cannot be beyond salvation and savable in the same relationship. Whatever he does after the closet scene, Hamlet has murdered an innocent man (at least a man innocent of murder himself) during that scene, a man Hamlet was never directed to kill, a man he never intended to kill. Polonius places himself in harm’s way, and he pays a horrible price for his meddling, but Hamlet never sought the old man’s life.

Bowers identifies Hamlet’s transformation as having occurred after the closet scene, after the trip to England: “When next we see Hamlet, after the interlude of the graveyard scene, a manifest change has taken place” (99). Bowers pinpoints the moment of Hamlet’s recognition of his role as occurring during the latter segment of the closet scene, hence his admission of being “their scourge and minister.”
This assessment seems correct. In this scene, Hamlet has not yet embraced Providence. Hamlet’s escape from his uncle’s nefarious plot with the unlikely assistance of pirates ("thieves of mercy"—4.6.19) persuades the prince to believe that his life is, after all, in the hands of Providence. He can entrust the Almighty with his future. Irving Ribner explains this change in Hamlet by suggesting that the prince moves from one role to another. Commenting on 5.2, Ribner states, “[Hamlet] can now view the death of Claudius not as a sinful act of private vengeance which must be his own damnation, but as a lawful act of public duty, that of a minister of God and not of a scourge” (81). Hamlet is mysteriously transformed from an instrument fit only for damnation into a minister who is fit for salvation.

Bowers agrees, saying, “Shakespeare takes great pains to remove the blood guilt from Hamlet by the expiation of his own death, and to indicate that the open killing [of Claudius in the final scene] was a ministerial act of public justice accomplished under the only possible circumstances” (101). So, according to Ribner and Bowers, Hamlet is not the evil scourge who killed Polonius after all; instead, he is the minister of God who effects public revenge in full compliance with Providential timing in Act 5, scene 2. It is as if the prince suddenly stripped away an evil mask from his saintly face.

Was Hamlet a scourge who reforms, or a minister who went wrong before reforming in the end? Hamlet’s apparent transformation negates the possibility that he
could have been a true scourge in Bowers’ sense, a man past salvation. Bowers himself concludes that Hamlet is not past salvation. Perhaps William Kerrigan is correct when he comments that Bowers’ “Hamlet as Scourge and Minister” [sic] is “an influential but probably too schematic essay” (26); Bowers seems bent on fitting Hamlet’s mystery into too fixed a plan and too narrow a definition of “scourge.” Hamlet’s role must be viewed through a wider lens.

In her important book *Hamlet and Revenge*, Eleanor Prosser endorses Bowers’ view that the terms “scourge” and “minister” are not synonymous: “The two terms are so contradictory that they are irreconcilable” (201), but she does not endorse Bowers’ argument that Hamlet changes from a scourge into a minister during the course of the play. Prosser affirms instead, “[Hamlet] does not say that he has been Heaven’s scourge but now will become its minister. He says he is both” (203). She allows for a duality in Hamlet, but not a duality in the term “scourge.” She posits, “Hamlet does not excoriate Gertrude in words befitting a man of rational discipline, much less a minister of God whose only purpose is the salvation of his hearers” (196), but in this instance, she is focusing on Hamlet’s momentary extreme passion rather than his underlying motivation.

In Prosser’s estimation, the scourge is an evil instrument of punishment. She demonstrates that God can “choose an evil man as his agent of punishment […]” (202), and she likens the scourge of God to the disciplinary rod that is used on a child and then consigned to the flames after its employment (202). There is an echo of Bowers in her statement, “Most simply, God elects as his scourge only a sinner who already deserves damnation” (202), but she does not affirm that the scourge is beyond salvation. The views of damnation posited by Bowers and by Prosser should be qualified here: that all sinners deserve damnation, means, according to St. Augustine, that the “whole mass of the human race was under condemnation […]” (*Enchiridion* 33), but Providential grace, enacted through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ (cf. *Enchiridion* 72-3), allows repentant sinners access back into God’s favor. One who is beyond salvation will never find this access; he will never repent.

As there is in Prosser’s (and Bowers’) model nothing redeemable about a scourge, this evil instrument is opposite to the minister of God, who, “by contrast, was conceived to be a divine agent not
only in his punitive function but also in his motives and method” (202). Hamlet identifies himself to his mother—just after murdering Polonius—as both scourge and minister. Prosser’s view of Hamlet immediately after the closet scene precludes the notion of a change stirring in the prince at the moment of his “scourge and minister” statement. Prosser observes that when Hamlet leaves the scene with Polonius’s corpse, “Hamlet is now acting much like the medieval Vice” (204). He is following evil impulses, effecting only dark work in Denmark. He is in this scene the unwitting minion of an evil spirit masquerading as the ghost of his murdered father.

Critics in the Bowers camp are more likely to call Hamlet evil. Paul Gottschalk emphasizes the sense that the typical scourge is beyond salvation, but he fixes his interpretation on Hamlet’s internal crisis:

‘Scourge and minister’: the phrase is another example of Hamlet’s vision of inner self-contradiction, for the terms are mutually exclusive. Both refer to agents of God’s vengeance, but the minister is righteous and in overthrowing evil directly establishes good in its place, while the scourge is evil: although he may destroy the sinful, he is already irretrievably caught up in sin himself and damned in the very act of vengeance. (161)

Gottschalk offers Vindice and Bosola, the former from Cyril Tourneur’s (or perhaps Thomas Middleton’s) play *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and the latter from John Webster’s play *The Duchess of Malfi*, as examples of avenging scourges, calling “the Hamlet of the Prayer Scene […] their spiritual forbear” (161). The punitive aspects of Hamlet’s role as a scourge are again emphasized over the purgative elements of that role, which Gottschalk seems to attach entirely to Hamlet’s role as a minister. However, if revenge is an important component in *Hamlet*, revenge does not exist for its own end; it too serves a higher purpose, a purpose that is always present in the play, even if Hamlet wrestles with it.

While critics see a contrast between the terms “scourge” and “minister,” they do not always agree concerning the meanings of each term. Bernard McElroy states, “Heaven has appointed Hamlet as its minister in only a most limited sense, and its scourge not at all; that is an office he has taken upon himself in specific defiance of all orders” (79). In other words, Hamlet is only a self-appointed scourge; Heaven has nothing to do with his rash act. Hamlet does not, therefore, represent Heaven as its
appointed scourge. In McElroy’s reading, Prince Hamlet is incorrect in his assessment of his own situation. He is not Heaven’s scourge, argues McElroy.

Like McElroy, R. A. Foakes suggests that Hamlet’s role as scourge is self-appointed, “[Hamlet] assigns the responsibility for [the murder of Polonius] to ‘heaven,’ as if he had been appointed a divine agent” (25). That “as if” is telling. Hamlet is seen here as one evading responsibility, despite the fact that Hamlet knows his act will exile him.

Foakes also holds to the notion that “scourge” and “minister” are disparate terms. In his comparison of Prince Hamlet with Vindice, Foakes cites Prosser’s echo of Bowers that “scourge” and “minister” are irreconcilable terms, commenting, “Hamlet could not be both at the same time, and the moral confusion present here is brought out further in his recognition in the same speech that, ‘This bad begins, and worse remains behind [3.4.181]’” (25).

If Hamlet is functioning in his dutiful role as a prince who must right his faltering kingdom, is his role singular or multifaceted in nature? Robert Hunter observes a contrast between the terms “scourge” and “minister”:

The source of Hamlet’s (in my opinion) extraordinary reaction to the killing of Polonius lies in his justified conviction that he is the scourge and minister of God. He is a scourge because in destroying the rottenness in Denmark he is responsible for human suffering and must suffer in turn for afflicting it. He is a minister because in setting right the time he will restore the sanctity and health of the state. (118)

Hunter’s interpretation shows Hamlet acting simultaneously in both roles, an observation that agrees with Prosser’s. It suggests that Hamlet does not exchange one role for another, but that he completes the tasks dual roles in the last scene.

Kenneth Muir argues that Hamlet is not certain of his role when he utters the “scourge and minister’ line: “It is no wonder that, after the death of Polonius, Hamlet should wonder whether he is
God’s minister, called upon to execute justice on a sinner who would otherwise escape punishment, or a scourge of God, a wicked man who is used by God to punish sinners, but at the expense of damning himself” (87). Muir issues an either/or interpretation of “scourge and minister” that sets the terms at odds one with another, an interpretation that echoes Bowers.

Ambiguity can lead to the kind of uncertainty Muir sees in Prince Hamlet. Anthony Miller observes, “Hamlet embodies even more clearly the ambiguity of the revenger’s position as scourge and minister” (21), and such ambiguity offers rich matter for analysis. The ambiguity surrounding Hamlet’s role forces the audience to examine the prince carefully. Anna Nardo also raises questions pertaining to the ambiguities in the play. Included among her queries is a consideration of Hamlet’s role as scourge or minister: “In accomplishing the providential revenge, is [Hamlet] God’s approved ‘minister’ or His ‘scourge,’ an already damned soul used to accomplish divine retribution?” (198). Nardo embraces Bowers’ differentiation between the terms, even if she endeavors to maintain neutrality. Her aim to is to point out the ambiguities in Hamlet, not to solve them. These ambiguities are evidence of the dualities in the play, she states, and they signify what she terms “a double bind” (181). She calls Hamlet “Shakespeare’s most ambiguous play” (181). The core issue, however, is whether Prince Hamlet finds his own role ambiguous. Nardo maintains that the play does not indicate whether Hamlet’s actions do damn him, affirming that the “play is significantly silent” (198) regarding the question.

In his book Hamlet Closely Observed (1985), Martin Dodsworth agrees that a distinction exists between “scourge” and “minister,” but he leaves room for multiple applications of the view. He accepts that a scourge is an evil and damnable instrument used for divine purposes: a “meaning [that] is obviously pertinent.” He adds, “On the other hand, so are the literal senses of the instrument and the man who wields it; as the latter [minister] Hamlet knows what he is doing, as the former [scourge] he does not” (254). Dodsworth does not itemize the “literal senses of the instrument,” but he does acknowledge them. Here is a provocative hint of the multi-layered scourge, but Dodsworth does not pursue this avenue further.

Yet, Dodsworth does not see divine Providence behind the prince’s self-evaluation as a scourge.
Dodsworth maintains that Hamlet uses his “scourge and minister” passage to excuse or justify his own brutal act, stating, “The phrase exculpates him for the murder of Polonius in two ways, by saying that he did not know what he was doing, and also that what he did was what he knew (or knows) God wanted him to do” (254). This leads Dodsworth to conclude that the “figurative sense of ‘scourge’ is surely secondary and, as it were, accidental” (254). In Dodsworth’s interpretation, Hamlet’s identification of himself as “their scourge and minister” becomes an alibi for a heinous crime. However, long before the events in the closet scene, Shakespeare has already established Hamlet’s awareness of his princely duty to set time right. The murder is a reminder to Hamlet of his duty, not an excuse for a rash act.

The uncertainty noted by Nardo regarding Hamlet’s role seems to open the door for Dodsworth’s perception of multiple applications of the term “scourge,” and it is this sense of unsolvable uncertainty that Rosenberg emphasizes, particularly concerning the power behind Hamlet’s commission. Rosenberg suggests a difference between the two terms:

It seems to me that Hamlet probably does not think himself scourging for heaven by killing old Polonius. Did Shakespeare perhaps intend Hamlet’s scourge to be reflexive? On the one hand, heaven makes me a whipping-boy while on the other employing me to minister for it. O cursed spite…In this sense Hamlet is again seeing humanity and himself subject to influences—nature, the devil, custom, conscience, Heaven […] later Providence. (712)

The implication here, centering on the “one hand…other” construction, is that the two terms do not share the same meaning. Rosenberg argues that Hamlet is not entirely certain of the source of his employment as an instrument of correction or of the parameters of his role.

The second camp stands at the opposite pole from the Hibbard and Bowers camp. The critics of the second camp see the words “scourge and minister” as synonymous, not mutually exclusive, and they do not believe that a scourge must be evil. G. R Hibbard, in his edition of Hamlet, defines “scourge and minister” as an “instrument of chastisement” (286), indicating a single purpose for the two terms. Other critics discussed below hold to the view that the terms “scourge” and “minister” are inclusive in
meaning and that the terms must not be distinguished, one from another. Battenhouse does not fit neatly into either camp; he seems to join the two words into one, but he applies it to Hamlet only its evil sense. The critics discussed below do not differentiate the terms “scourge and minister” in Bowers’ manner, nor do they affirm that a scourge must be evil.

Battenhouse does not see “scourge” and “minister” as exclusive; he says of the prince’s perception of his own role, “Hamlet has given us testimony that the true nature of his own action has been that of Heaven’s minister as scourge” (Shakespearean Tragedy 261), and to add that Hamlet has usurped this authority. Prince Hamlet thus sees himself as a good man inflicting pain because God wishes him to do so. He is, therefore, in Battenhouse’s view, a self-appointed scourge. This is similar to Robin Lee’s notion that Hamlet’s “role as the rational and deliberate ‘scourge and minister’ of the Danish court” is “self-generated” (27). For Battenhouse, the terms may not be mutually exclusive.

Battenhouse sees Prince Hamlet as an evil agent. To Battenhouse, all figures who are identified as a “scourge of God” are evil and must be condemned. He closes his chapter “The Theory of Punishment” in his work Marlowe’s Tamburlaine by concluding: “The concept of the Scourge of God has, therefore, two complimentary aspects: it serves to explain historical calamities by showing they are chastisements of sin permitted by God; and it assures tyrants that God is not helpless before their power but that He will, when He has used them, destroy them utterly” (113). This joining of tyranny with the scourge of God explains that God employs the tyrant as a scourge against wickedness, though the tyrant is himself wicked.

Although he seems to emphasize “scourge” over “minister” (which term he barely mentions), Battenhouse does not distinguish one term from the other. It is not clear how Battenhouse defines “minister,” but he states that “such an office is a punishing one […]” (Shakespearean Tragedy 249). This suggests that the two terms work together; Battenhouse dovetails the two terms into a single punitive ministry. In Shakespearean Tragedy, written after Bowers’ essay, Battenhouse connects Hamlet’s view of himself as a divinely appointed scourge to Isaiah 10, in which Assyria is described as a rod of God’s wrath (Shakespearean Tragedy 249). Briefly, Jehovah uses Assyria to punish Israel for
her sin, even though Assyria is herself an evil nation. This passage of Scripture will be analyzed at length in the next chapter.

Unlike Bowers, Battenhouse does not see a shift in Prince Hamlet. Alluding to the idea that, after the sea voyage, Hamlet “is no longer a scourge but now a saved minister,” Battenhouse tenders strong reservations concerning this transformation: “But the facts of the play, it seems to me, allow us no such conclusion” (Shakespearean Tragedy 250). Battenhouse’s Hamlet is a self-appointed scourge, and Hamlet’s apparent devotion to Providence in the last scene is, in Battenhouse’s view, a paean to rashness, emphasizing Hamlet’s impulsiveness (Shakespearean Tragedy 250). William Hamilton, who calls Hamlet’s phrase “a justification of rashness” (206), agrees. Following this, Sidney Warhaft alludes to Hamlet’s recognition of divine guidance as “another of his occasional flashes of insight [wherein] he is willy-nilly, their ‘scourge and minister’” (204). Warhaft denies the notion that heavenly powers are at work. Warhaft’s view that Hamlet is a self-appointed scourge ignores Hamlet’s divinely ordained duty as a leader, Hamlet’s awareness of his princely duty.

Battenhouse holds that Christian elements in the play constitute a Black Mass, and that Hamlet is, in the final scene, the “minister [...] of a poisoned chalice”; Hamlet is a minister in the sense of being a “Black Priest” (Shakespearean Tragedy 250). This interpretation continues Wilson Knight’s argument that Hamlet is “the ambassador of death” (45), and that Hamlet’s “consciousness, functioning in terms of evil and negation, sees Hell but not Heaven” (28). Battenhouse presents an occult dark prince, one who is not, and who cannot be, redeemed; Hamlet is, in this interpretation, beyond salvation. The critics of the second camp do not concur with Battenhouse’s or Bowers’ view concerning Hamlet’s role as scourge.

C. J. Sisson finds Bowers’ reading of the “scourge and minister” passage problematic because of its suppositions. Bowers’ position, Sisson argues, is too rigid: “It is a very complex and thorny exegesis, resting upon narrow theological implications in the terms ‘scourge’ and ‘minister’ and upon fine distinctions between prescience and predestination” (105). Sisson illustrates his point with Horatio’s prayer, in which Horatio requests that angels sing Hamlet to his rest. This would be undermined if
Hamlet is damned for his sins (105). For Horatio, Hamlet is not an evil man (or by implication an evil scourge).

Instead of the either/or interpretation of the “scourge and minister” passage, Sisson offers an alternative: “Hamlet’s phrase, be it observed, is ‘scourge and minister,’ and in his mind the two are clearly not incompatible. Indeed, to Hamlet’s mind, it is in his capacity as a minister of Heaven that he becomes involved in action as a scourge or punisher of evil, and so the audience would take the matter” (106). Sisson’s alternative merits a more careful defense than he provides. He does not consider or qualify in his discussion of this passage Hamlet’s statement that Hamlet is “Prompted to […] revenge by heaven and hell” (2.2.580). Heaven desires justice, and Hell wants souls to turn away from Heaven.

Harold Skulsky echoes Sisson’s focus on the conjunction in the phrase “scourge and minister,” refuting those of Bowers’ camp, and he states that the two terms form a hendiadys. He does not provide extensive support for his position, but he correctly identifies the relationship between the two terms:

It has been suggested that when Hamlet says he is ‘scourge and minister’ the latter term somehow denotes an alternative to the former. But this proposal has more goodwill in it than grammar; a conjunction is a very strange way to add an alternative. What we have here is an ordinary hendiadys; Hamlet will be the kind of minister who scourges. (85)

There is a difference between the terms in Skulsky’s view, though “scourge” is not directly contrasted with “minister” in the mutually exclusive sense Bowers suggests. The implied meaning of “scourge” here seems univocal. Skulsky presents “scourge” as a transitive verb instead of a noun. It is what Hamlet does rather than what he is, an instrument. He is a minister in God’s hands who undertakes the action of scourging.

That the two terms form a hendiadys accords with Shakespeare’s characteristic practice, particularly in this play. Thomas McAlindon observes that this rhetorical doublet, which, as he reminds readers, means “etymologically ‘one from two,’” is a common occurrence in Hamlet (116). McAlindon holds that (280) “scourge” and “minister” forms a hendiadys (280).
Skulsky emphasizes that God need not be limited to a human agent past salvation as His choice of a scourge, and this highlights the power of God’s mercy as superior to sin (85). God may use any person He chooses as a scourge, because “in Hamlet’s words […] ‘heaven hath pleas’d it so’” (Skulsky 85). The evil scourge may find redemption if he chooses to do so. Hamlet’s reluctance to violate God’s canon against self-slaughter indicates a legitimate concern for the health of his own soul.

Yet, Skulsky writes, “By sinning against the Holy Ghost, Hamlet continues to play the part of the scourge” (86). Skulsky refers to those times when a Patriarch becomes like a sword in God’s hand, adding, “And the only difference between the deed of the sword and the deed of the scourge is that the latter ends in damnation” (86). Hamlet is, therefore, that scourge who sins against the Holy Ghost. Indeed, Skulsky sees Hamlet as “a tragedy of spiritual decline” (87). Hamlet has failed a sort of spiritual test. Skulsky enigmatically concludes that the “darkly striving Prince, though he is saved, is no better than the rest of us” (87).

Skulsky establishes that there exists for divinely employed agents a complex exception to divine law: “Like Tamburlaine—or Abraham, for that matter—Hamlet is performing what is ‘enjoin’d me from above.’ But like Abraham he will not be damned” (86). Hamlet is not a scourge who will be damned, even though he sins against the Holy Ghost. Regarding Hamlet and Abraham, however, Skulsky seems to draw a false connection. Abraham is tested in his willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God, but he is not permitted to carry out the sacrifice of Isaac; nor is Abraham pleased to carry out the act. Abraham is commissioned directly by God Himself.

Hamlet faces an ethical dilemma, challenging his ultimate salvation: can the end ever justify the means? Though a Christian, Hamlet is commissioned to avenge murder, incest, and usurpation, and he learns of these crimes from a ghost who appears to come from Purgatory. Hamlet is a late Elizabethan play with a pre-Reformation setting, which likely accounts for references to Purgatory in the play, taking into account the factor of Protestant censors. Two solid hints that Hamlet takes Purgatory seriously are his comment: “Yes by Saint Patrick but there is, Horatio […]” (1.5.142), Saint Patrick being the patron saint of Purgatory, and his question, “Hic et Ubique?” (1.5.164), of which Steven Greenblatt observes:
“The point is not only that such pleas for the dead make use of the key phrase *hic et ubique* but also that they are specifically connected to belief in Purgatory” (235).

Hamlet knows his duty as a prince in a Christian realm; the divine right of kings is a fixed and well-known concept, even to Claudius, who reminds Gertrude, “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king/That treason can but peep to what it would,/Acts little of his will” (4.5.123-25). It is that sense of order that must be preserved. When order is compromised, disorder must be purged from the realm.

Hamlet’s role is multi-layered, purgative, and/or punitive. Paul Jorgensen tries to clarify that complexity with martial imagery: “Hamlet’s role in the play, still not a simple one, becomes less baffling if we recognize that he is a surrogate form of war, a scourge and minister of the heavens” (125). Jorgensen contradicts Bowers’ notion that “scourge” and “minister” are exclusive terms, concluding instead that the terms are “often used interchangeably” (126); thus, a minister can be as cruel as a scourge. Such a conclusion suggests not that Hamlet is a “good” scourge, but that he must perform a “diabolical function of war” (126).

The nature of Hamlet’s role is important here, and Jorgensen finds the correct emphasis in this regard, except for his argument that Hamlet must undertake a diabolical function of war. Hamlet’s role as scourge is not martial in the conventional sense; that function is better represented by his father and by Fortinbras. Of course, the military conqueror is one type of scourge; war itself is a scourge.

While there is a threat of war in *Hamlet* between Norway and Denmark and between Norway and the Pollack, the internal war against disorder, against vice and folly drives the play. Hamlet’s personal war is one in which he must master his passions and submit to Providence, and it is a war that he wins in the end.

R. W. Dent also directly opposes the position maintained by Bowers, Prosser, and Gottschalk concerning Hamlet as “scourge and minister.” In his brief overview of the position held by Bowers and by the other proponents of that position, Dent cites a footnote by the editors of the first edition of the *Riverside Shakespeare*, reproduced here from the original text: “Scourge suggests a permissive cruelty
[...] but ‘woe to him by whom the offense cometh’; the scourge must suffer for the evil it performs” (1169n). Dent offers an important qualification to the argument: “There is one difficulty with all this. Although it was of course common to distinguish between God’s use of good and evil instruments, neither Shakespeare nor the age habitually associated ‘minister’ with ‘good’ or ‘scourge’ with ‘evil.’” (83). Dent points out that a minister can be good or evil. For example, Joan of Arc, in I Henry VI, refers to herself as a scourge (cf. 1.2.129), a factor that would seem to mitigate the notion that a scourge must be damnable (83). Even though Shakespeare’s presentation of Joan is not particularly favorable, she is not, as will be explained in the next chapter, a damned villain.

Dent sees the terms as “but one more of the play’s innumerable pairings of synonyms or near synonyms” (84). He enlists the Shakespeare concordance in support of his position, as it “will make evident the range in morality of both ministers and their governing powers” (83). If ministers of divine justice may demonstrate a wide range of morality, a scourge may do so as well. Dent alludes to Thomas Churchyard’s A Scourge for Rebels (1584) as a work that includes a positive view of a scourge, in this case the Earl of Ormound. Dent offers a reading of the Elizabethan audience that directly counters Bowers’ view: “In hearing Hamlet call himself a scourge, then, an Elizabethan audience would have had no reason to believe he was necessarily condemning himself for any evil action, past or prospective, nor to believe that he intended any significant contrast between ‘scourge’ and ‘minister’” (Dent 83). This conclusion is supportable from the play’s text. Hamlet does admit faults and frustrations, but even in the final scene he cites his madness as the reason for his offense against Laertes.

The breezy common sense of Dent’s approach to the debate belies the weight of his point: Shakespeare is not forcing Hamlet to admit, in his “scourge and minister” line, that Hamlet is evil. Nowhere in the play does Hamlet view himself as evil, or as being beyond salvation. It is consistent with the text to observe, as Dent does, that Hamlet is employed in a Providential scourging action in the play.

In a carefully wrought rhetorical analysis entitled “Hendiadys and Hamlet,” George Wright meticulously unveils the practice of hendiadys as a fixture in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly in Hamlet, where Shakespeare uses the device “sixty-six times, more than twice as often as in any other play” (173).
Wright traces the use of hendiadys from Virgil and other classical rhetoricians, demonstrating how Shakespeare varied the use of the device.

The etymology of this rhetorical term is important to the study of “scourge” in the play. Frank Kermode gives the straightforward definition of “hendiadys” as meaning “one-through-two,” and he cites as examples: “‘law and order’ or ‘house and home’” (100-01). Kermode also observes, “Hendiadys is a way of making a single idea strange by splitting an expression in two […]” (15). Shakespeare plays with the technique in *Hamlet*, reinforcing the complexity and the intricacy of its plot.

Wright lists the occurrences of hendiadys in *Hamlet*, defining the “scourge and minister” phrase as “scourging minister” (187). He repeats the point that the English reader expects the conjunction “and” to connect units that are “parallel not only in grammar but also in bearing” (170). Exceptions are cases of intended humor for shock effect. Contrary to hendiadys is zeugma, the connection of two disparate units, a device often used to emphasize wit. Kermode builds a chapter upon the manifold and interrelated dualities—and therefore the prevailing concept of duality as a whole—in *Hamlet*.

Perhaps Hamlet is employing dark wit to maintain that he is heaven’s “scourge and minister.” He has already established that he must set time right in Denmark. Hamlet is using the device of the “scourge and minister” phrase to underscore his struggle with his princely responsibility. Use of hendiadys lends sophistication and complexity to the speech. Wright explains, “[Shakespeare’s] hendiadys usually elevates the discourse and blurs its logical lines, and this combination of grandeur and confusion is in keeping with the tragic or weighty action of the major plays” (171). Shakespeare’s use of the phrase “scourge and minister” heightens the sense of tragic displacement.

Harold Jenkins, in his edition of the play, also challenges what seem to be the mainline definitions of “scourge” and “minister,” that is, the Bowers position. Jenkins quotes Jorgensen’s comment that affirms the interchangeability of the terms “scourge” and “minister,” and he suggests that the “heavens may employ a ‘minister’ for their anger (2H6 V.ii.34) to give ‘chastisement’ (R3 V.iii.113), while their ‘scourge’ is not invariably the cruel tyrant that a term applied to Attila and Tamburlaine would suggest” (523). As the survey of representative scourges from biblical through the
early modern period will demonstrate, Jenkins is correct in his suspicion that a scourge need not be evil.

Jenkins’ conclusion is satisfactory yet troubling: “The story of Hamlet’s revenge, then, as Shakespeare’s play presents it, is of a dual revenge which is both righteous and guilty” (“To be, or not to be” 20). Like Bowers, Jenkins challenges the law of non-contradiction, so that revenge is righteous in the sense of its being a matter of official duty to maintain the harmony of the realm, while at the same time violating God’s edict that revenge belongs to Him alone: “[…] for it is written: Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rom. 12.19 Douay). Revenge cannot be righteous if it violates God’s edict, nor can it be guilty if it fulfills God’s commission. Jenkins’ interpretation works, assuming that the act is righteous from God’s point of view, even though God employs a guilty party, as is the case in His use of Assyria to punish Israel in Isaiah’s account (Isa. 10). Either private revenge is sanctioned by God for princes or it is not.

In his edition of Hamlet, Philip Edwards suggests that private revenge is God’s alone to enact. Edwards adds the following textual notes:

‘Scourge and minister’ is a single concept (scourging officer), split by the familiar Shakespearean hendiadys. Compare ‘Who made thee then a bloody minister?’ asked of Clarence in Richard III 1.4.220, concerning the death of Plantagenet, after Clarence has said that private men must not carry out the vengeance which is the responsibility of God. (182)

For other reasons, Hamlet denied himself private revenge when he put up his sword while Claudius knelt. A minister need not be good, and a scourge need not be evil.

An alternative to the notion that a scourge must be evil arises in the definition of a minister as one whose actions and demeanor are not so different from the Bowers’ version of the scourge. R. W. Desai refers to a New Testament allusion, demonstrating that those who maintain that the terms form a hendiadys “[gain] support from Romans 13:3-4 where ‘minister’ denotes an equally stern aspect of God’s justice as does scourge” (23). Desai compares Hamlet’s responsibility in Denmark to the
admonition that St. Paul issues to princes concerning their duty to avenge wickedness with the sword.

Like Jorgensen, Linda Kay Hoff connects the scourge image with war, but she takes it to an apocalyptic plane:

Hamlet refers to himself, in a conjunction of synonyms, as heaven’s ‘scourge and minister.’ The word *scourge* is associated with vengeance or terrible punishment inflicted through war, *minister* with administration and disbursal. What Hamlet will eventually do as the administrator of vengeance and justice that both *scourge* and *minister* evoke is bring Denmark to a scourging ‘war’ like the reckoning of Revelation’s Doomsday. (306)

Hoff’s interpretation is narrow in that she can only see the term “scourge” associated with war and Hamlet as, symbolically, the administrator of the final war. Fortinbras is the bringer of war in the play, not Hamlet. Prince Hamlet is a punitive and purging agent from within the realm. Hamlet’s father killed Fortinbras’ father; that provoked his son, not Prince Hamlet, who is cordial to the Norwegian soldiers when he meets them (in 4.4).

Desai’s interpretation agrees with Skulsky’s affirmation that Hamlet is “the kind of minister who scourges” (85). Desai does not see Hamlet as an unfortunate prince who fails God’s spiritual test. Hamlet has a duty “as the representative of the Crown” (Desai 23) to right the realm, to purge the kingdom of the rottenness that was generated by Claudius’s evil act. Desai suggests that the restraint placed upon private revenge in Romans 12.19 does not apply to the Danish prince (24). Hamlet, he feels, is free to fulfill his duty, unshackled from biblical restraints on revenge.

In summary, there are two camps of criticism regarding the meaning of the “scourge and minister” passage in *Hamlet*. Bowers and other critics in his camp adhere to the idea that “scourge” and “minister” are exclusive in meaning, an idea that is previously mentioned in Kittredge’s notes on the text in 1939. Bowers argues that a scourge is an evil person whom God employs to work punitive ends, a person who will be damned. He affirms that Hamlet is an evil scourge until he undergoes a
transformation into a heavenly minister of divine justice before the last act. Prosser concurs that a scourge is evil and a minister is good, and she agrees that Hamlet is a scourge who will be damned, but she does not observe the transformation that Bowers sees. Rather, in her view, and later in Hunter’s view, Hamlet exhibits a dualistic nature; he is both scourge and minister simultaneously.

Gottschalk also sees Hamlet’s role as dualistic, as both a punitive scourge who is damned and a purgative minister. McElroy and Foakes argue that Hamlet is a self-appointed scourge. Muir maintains that Hamlet is not certain whether he is a scourge or a minister, and Nardo suggests that the ambiguity is deliberate and remains unsolved. On the other hand, Rosenberg is adamant that Hamlet is certain of his role. Although he too states that a scourge is evil, Dodsworth hints at a multi-layered application of “scourge” to Hamlet.

The second camp comprises those who do not view “scourge” and “minister” as exclusive terms, and they do not believe that a scourge must be evil. Sisson finds Bowers’ reading of the phrase too rigid; he argues that Hamlet is not necessarily an evil man because he identifies himself as a scourge. Jenkins agrees. Skulsky suggests that the terms form a hendiadys and that “scourge” reflects Hamlet’s action rather than what he is. Jorgensen indicates that Hamlet is a scourge in a martial sense. Dent, Edwards, and Desai argue that the terms are synonymous, and Wright adds the phrase to his impressive list of examples of hendiadys in Hamlet. Hoff offers an apocalyptic reading of Hamlet’s role as scourge. Battenhouse does not fit neatly into either camp, and while he does not differentiate between the two terms, he affirms that a scourge is evil and that Hamlet is damned.

There seems to be more agreement among those of the second camp in their presentations concerning Hamlet’s role than there is among those of the first camp. Critics in the first camp maintain that the two terms are exclusive in meaning, but they vary more in their views concerning Hamlet’s nature than do those in the second camp. Affirmation that the terms form a hendiadys, that they are not mutually exclusive in meaning, allows more latitude to the exegesis of the passage, and it is in keeping with Shakespeare’s ambiguities in the play.
Chapter Two: The Use of the Term “Scourge”

“Scourge” does not apply only to evil agents, nor are its inflictions merited only by incorrigible people. Even a relatively cursory review of literary history supports this argument. A scourge may purge as well as punish and correct as well as condemn. When Polonius intends, concerning the traveling players, to “use them according to their desert” (2.2.523), Prince Hamlet reproves him sharply, acknowledging that all humans deserve to be scourged: “Use every man after his desert and who shall scape whipping?” (2.2.525). In Hamlet every character, indeed all of Denmark, is in some way scourged, but not all are condemned. The complexities of the play preclude a simple reading of the scourging action. For example, Gertrude is purged by her son’s verbal lashing in the closet scene, and then she is killed by Claudius in the final scene. This poisoning serves to reveal the hidden evil in Claudius, and he is duly punished by Hamlet’s sword and by his own poisoned cup for that evil. There is a redemptive purpose to Gertrude’s death. Claudius’s death allows for restoration in Denmark. The scourging thus works on two levels.

The word “scourge” is more varied in meaning than many critics allow. Harold Bloom rightly affirms Shakespeare’s significance in the development of the English language: “Early modern English was shaped by Shakespeare: the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is made in his image” (10). The OED offers five definitions of “scourge” as a noun, four as a verb, two definitions of “scourged,” three of “scourger,” and six of “scourging,” not counting a number of divisions within these definitions. Five senses of “scourge” observed in the OED are common in the investigation of historical and literary examples of the term: a whip (or flagellum), applied rhetorically “to the torturing of human beings, or to ascetic discipline”; an “instrument of divine chastisement”; a “cause of (usually, widespread) calamity, [applicable] to a cruel tyrant, a warrior, a war, a disease that destroys many lives”; one “who ‘lashes’ vice or folly”; and one “who ‘lashes’ with satire or invective” (OED 697). Hamlet verbally lashes vice and folly, and he is an instrument of divine justice. He is both a purgative and a punitive scourge.

Scourges are vital within the purposes of Providence in the Old Testament, which sets the stage for the New Testament. Jehovah uses scourges both to purge and to punish. Multiple types of scourge
can be found in the Bible, although the variety is not as rich as that found in early modern literature. Evidence from biblical passages, from studies of certain historical figures, and from early modern literature suggests that the term “scourge” is not univocal. Shakespeare’s use of the “scourge” assumes a survey of representative scourges from the Bible through early modern literature. Biblical considerations of the term figure prominently in Hamlet’s function as scourge.

In Patristic literature, Athanasius, in his *History of the Arians*, writes of the repentance of Ursacius and Valens, who, suggests Athanasius, came to their change of minds “as if suffering the scourge of conscience” (278). Hamlet affirms that conscience “does make cowards of us all” (3.1.83). It is this scourging function of conscience that keeps Hamlet from committing suicide, and it causes him to repent his killing of Polonius: “For this same lord/ I do repent […]” (3.4.174-75). Hamlet’s willingness to petition Laertes’ forgiveness before the duel in the last scene, “Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong” (5.2.222), evinces a healthy conscience. Hamlet’s apparently cruel comment that the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “are not near [his] conscience” (5.2.58) introduces ambiguity while it emphasizes that the two meddlers received their just punishment.

Throughout the Bible, God scourges evil individuals and evil nations, and He also scourges His chosen nation Israel. He punishes and purges by various means, including war, captivity, afflictions, infirmities, and plagues. In addition to those methods, Jehovah designates specific people as instruments to accomplish His chastisements, including the Assyrians (as indicated in Isaiah 10), Moses and Aaron, Nathan, Jeremiah, Jonah, Jehu, and, in the New Testament, Christ. Two other types of scourgings discussed in this essay are the scourge of the tongue, which is mentioned in Job and in Ecclesiasticus, and flagellation.

Jehovah purges Israel through various modes of chastisement. In addition to the In *The City of God*, St. Augustine writes:

> For our part, we recognise that even in this life some punishments are purgatorial—not, indeed, to those whose life is none the better, but rather the worse for them, but to those who are constrained by them to amend their life. All other punishments, whether temporal or eternal,
inflicted as they are on every one by divine providence, are sent either on account of past sins, or of sins presently allowed in the life, or to exercise and reveal a man’s graces. They may be inflicted by the instrumentality of bad men and angels as well as of the good. (784)

Like the repeatedly wayward nation of biblical Israel, Denmark does need to be purged of its inner rottenness.

In addition to using plagues and “natural” phenomena, such as the ten plagues Jehovah placed upon Egypt, to scourge individuals or nations, Jehovah also employs human agents, some of whom are evil but others who are not, to accomplish His purgative purposes in the nation of Israel. A common pattern emerges: Jehovah purges Israel, but He destroys her enemies. A clear indication of this pattern can be found in Isaiah 10, where God counsels his people:

Therefore thus saith the Lord the God of hostes, O my people that dwellest in Zion, be not afraid of the Asshur: he shal smite thee with a rod, and shal lift vp his staffe against thee after the maner of Egypt […] And the Lord of hostes shal raise vp a scourge for him, according to the plague of Midian in the rocke of Oreb: and as his staffe was vpon the Sea, so he wil lift it vp after the maner of Egypt. (Isa. 10.24-27 Geneva)

Jehovah scourges Assyria, whom he calls “the rod and the staff of mine anger” (Isa. 10.5 Douay). The Catholic Encyclopedia states that the “Hebrew words for ‘whip’ and ‘rod’, [sic] are in etymology closely related” (“Flagellation”); thus, the “rod” is one of the physical scourges. In the Bible, a rod signifies authority; Aaron’s rod, submitted before the Lord in the tabernacles of witness, along with one from each of the other eleven tribes of Israel, budded and then produced almonds, a clear indicator to the Israelites that Aaron was indeed sanctioned by God (Num. 17.1-13). The Bible reminds the reader that the rod in the hands of the shepherd (cf. Ps.23) can bring comfort; it is used to rescue the sheep and to fend off predators, such as wolves. Thus, the rod is not always a terrifying instrument of judgment and punishment; it protects and maintains virtue.

Jehovah employs Assyria as a punitive rod against Israel, but His purpose is ultimately
purgative, not destructive. God’s destruction of Assyria is, in effect, the scourging of a scourge, but His scourging of Israel with Assyria is the chastisement of a wayward child by a devoted Father. Israel errs. Gertrude errs. Hamlet errs. Unlike Gertrude and Hamlet, Claudius is not willing to repent or answer for his sin. In this account about Assyria, one sees the two types of scourge, purgative and punitive, in clear juxtaposition. Martin Luther comments on the connection between the prophesied scourging of Assyria and the conquest of the Midianites recounted in Judges 7. He recalls that the Midianites were impelled to destroy themselves and were not destroyed “by any sword of the enemies” (*Works* 16.114).

The only physical swords observed in Gideon’s battle were those used by the Midianites against each other; therefore, the “sword of the Lord and of Gedeon” (Judges 7.20 Douay) suggests spiritual armament, the “swearde of the sprete, which is the worde of God” (Eph. 6.17 Tyndale 1534). Near the end of the Apocalypse, John notes, “And the remnant [of the beast’s army] were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh” (Rev. 19.21). At the Last Judgment, Christ Himself, leading His saints, becomes the scourge of the nations, even as Gideon was the scourge of the Midianites, using a spiritual sword. Hamlet employs the sword against Claudius, a mark of his divine commission.

In another complex scourge passage, Isaiah indicates that woe will come upon Ephraim, which Luther sees as applying to Jerusalem and Judah by metonymy (*Works* 16.219). Before the judgment is proclaimed, Christ is, figuratively, referenced:

> Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Beholde, I wil lay in Zion a stone, a tryed stone, a precious corner stone, a sure fundacion. […] And your covenent with death shalbe disanulled, & your agrement with hel shal not stand: when a scourge shal runne ouer and passe through, then shal ye be trodde downe by it. When it passeth ouer, it shal take you away: for it shal passe through euerie morning in the day, and in the night, and there shalbe onely feare to make you to vnderstand the hearing. For the bed is streight that it can not suffise, and the couering narowe that one canot wrap him self. (Isa. 28.16-20 Geneva)²
The scourge is ever present with the Ephraimites (or with those of Judah), following even to the place of rest. This scourge, as noted in Calvin’s Commentaries in the parallel Latin text, is the *flagellum* (7.2.268). The “overflowing scourge” in this passage is not a whip or lash, but is, as Calvin indicates, a number of unnamed “calamities and afflictions [that] are so rapid and violent that they resemble a ‘flood’ ” (7.2.288). These natural phenomena serve Jehovah’s purposes in the world but are not intended to destroy Israel.

In chapter 17, Isaiah interrupts his railing against the nations, Israel included, in the previous five chapters. In chapter 19, Isaiah is inspired to bless Israel and Egypt and Assyria, seeming to reverse his proclamation against Egypt in the first 17 verses of the chapter: “So the Lord shall smite Egypt, he shall smite and heale it: for he shal returne vnto the Lord, and he shalbe intreated of thé and shal heale them” (Isa. 19.22 Geneva). In the Douay-Rheims Old Testament3, the verse reads: “And the Lord shall strike Egypt with a scourge, and shall heal it, and they shall return to the Lord, and he shall be pacified towards them, and heal them.” (Isa 19.22) Against two of Israel’s enemies, God uses a scourge to induce them to turn from their idols, at least for a time, and worship Him, so that He can heal them through the office of a Savior, whom Calvin takes to be Christ (Commentaries 7.2.74).

The notion that God employs a scourge to drive a person or a people to repent and to be healed is a commonplace in the Scriptures. Luther makes an important distinction concerning God’s chastisement of humanity in the Bible: “Scripture points to a twofold punishment: One is a punishment of just measure, which is a fatherly chastisement, not fore the purpose of destruction […] The other is a rod of anger, which causes complete destruction and reduces to nothing” (16.108). St. Augustine maintains that the “patience of God still invite[s] the wicked to repentance, even as the scourge of God educates the good to patience” (*City of God* 10).

Throughout the history of the Israelites, God chastens His beloved people. Even when He refuses a generation of Israelites (excepting Caleb and Joshua) entrance into the Promised Land, Jehovah’s purpose is purgative, not destructive. He wants a generation of His people who will be loyal to Him, who will believe in Him. His punishments are designed to drive His nation back to Himself and to make
that nation a light to other nations that many nations might go to His holy mountain (Zion), from where He rules (cf. Mic. 4.2). He warns His people of the harsh consequences of idolatry: “Knowe ye for a certeine, that the Lord your God wil cast out no more of these nacions from before you: but they shal be a snare and destruction vnto you, and a whip on your sides […] vntil ye perish out of this good land, which the Lord your God hathe giuen you” (Josh. 23.13 Geneva). The term “whip” in the Geneva translation is changed to “scourges” in the Authorized Version of 1611. This verse indicates the progression of sin: God’s favor leaves the nation; the nation with which Israel compromises houses dangerous snares that develop into scourges and thorns, leading ultimately to death, if the nation does not repent. It is not God’s purpose to destroy His people; He takes pains to warn them so that they could avoid the dangers He shares with them. In Hamlet, Claudius is allowed his opportunity to repent, but he chooses not to.

God’s motivation behind the purgative element of this kind of scourging is summarized in The Epistle to the Hebrews: “For whome the Lord loueth, he chasteneth: and he scourgeth euerie sonne that he receiueth” (Heb. 12.6 Geneva). Scourging is not a form of punishment, but a form of loving discipline, a sign that God cares for His own children. In his comment on the passage from Hebrews 12, Calvin makes a distinction:

This seems not to be a well-founded reason; for God visits the elect as well as the reprobate indiscriminately, and his scourges manifest his wrath oftener than his love, and so the Scripture speaks, and experience confirms. But yet it is no wonder that when the godly are addressed, the effect of chastisements which they feel, is alone referred to. For however severe and angry a judge God may shew himself towards the reprobate, whenever he punishes them; yet he has no other end in view as to the elect, but to promote their salvation; it is a demonstration of his paternal love […] Let us then remember that the taste of God’s love towards us cannot be had by us under chastisements, except we be fully persuaded that they are fatherly scourges by which he chastises us for our sins. No such thing can occur to the minds of the reprobate, for they are like fugitives. (Commentaries 22.1.316)
God’s wrath is poured out upon the sons of disobedience, but He does not cease to be ultimately motivated by love. Saint John indicates in his first Epistle: “He that loueth not, knoweth not God: for God is loue” (1 John 4.8 Geneva). This saving love motivates God’s “fatherly scourges.” Commenting on Miriam’s leprosy, which she incurred by questioning her brother Moses’ authority, and relating it to the flesh of Christ, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in his treatise “On Conversion,” asks, “And how should we think of this leprosy of the body in all the elect but as a rod of fatherly correction (Prv 29:15) and a purgation of the heart (Ps 44:7)?” The rod of the Almighty is employed for purgative, not for destructive, purposes.

Another biblical association of the rod with love is exemplified in the well-known proverb, “He y spareth his rod, hateth his sonne: but he that loueth him, chasteneth him betime” (Proverbs 13.24 Geneva). Here, the intention of the scourging is once again beneficial to the recipient, and the goal is righteousness. The scourging is again an act of love, not of hatred or destructive anger. This verse notes that parents who neglect to discipline their child hate the child. Luther says, “All works of the Lord, namely, of chastising His children, are done in judgment and not in wrath” (Works 16.10.109). Jehovah seeks to preserve His children from wrath.

One fearsome scourge from which Jehovah seeks to protect His own is the scourge of the tongue. Jehovah tells Job, “Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of y tongue, and thou shalt not be affraied of destruction when it cometh” (Job 5.21 Geneva). Jehovah chastens Job, one whom He loves, but God keeps Job from the scourge of the tongue. In his epistle, James develops the notion that the tongue can be a scourge-like instrument. He calls it a “fire,” and continues, “But the tonge can no man tame. Yt is an vnruyl evyll, full of deedly poyson. Therwith blesse we God the Father; and therwith cursse we men which are made after the similitude of God” (Jas. 3.8-9 Tyndale 1534). As this and other passages maintain, the tongue can be used to praise God and to speak truth, yet it can be used destructively.

The scourge of the tongue appears in the Apocrypha, particularly in a passage from Ecclesiasticus: “The wounde of a scourge maketh wannesse; the wounde forsothe of a tunge shal to-broosen boenes” (Ecclus. 28.21 Wycliffe4). Earlier in the same book, the author gives the following exhortation: “My son, in thy
good deeds, make no complaint, and when thou givest any thing, add not grief by an evil word” (Ecclus. 18.15 Douay-Rheims). Chapter 28 of Ecclesiasticus appears to anticipate the third chapter of James’s Epistle, in which the writer cautions, “And the tongue is fyre, and a worlde of wychednes” (Jas 3.6 Tyndale 1534). That the tongue is a potentially wicked device is well established in Scripture.

St. Thomas Aquinas categorizes “words injurious to our neighbors” as “(1) those which are connected with judicial proceedings, and (2) injurious words uttered extra-judiciously” (67.1.II-II). The subheadings under extra-judicious injurious words are: “(1) reviling, (2) backbiting, (3) tale bearing, (4) derision, [and] (5) cursing” (72.1.II-II). The act of reviling is of particular relevance to Hamlet’s actions and state of mind, and, of that source of injurious speaking, Aquinas states, “Now reviling is closely connected with anger’s end, which is revenge: since the easiest way for a man to take revenge on another is to revile him. Therefore reviling arises chiefly from anger” (72.4.II-II). Reviling and false witness are two of the types of verbal lashes that can issue from the tongue, but the tongue can lash without evil intent, as in the case of God’s verbal reproofs of Job (cf. Job 38 and following). God’s words—and Hamlet’s in the context of his heaven-ordained role—can bring correction as well as judgmental destruction, even if they are harsh.

Nathan is not a scourge in his actions, but the stinging word he delivers to David is a form of chastisement for the errant king; the prophet in this case does not speak of a plague upon David, but tells what the future holds. Hamlet too, speaks of the erring king Claudius after the prince confronts Ophelia: “Those who are married already—all but one—shall live […]” (3.1.149-150). David is fit for reproving chastisement. Claudius, who refuses to repent, is destined for punishment. In both cases, a Heaven-commissioned minister brings God’s sentence to the errant monarch.

Through His prophets, God brings destruction upon Israel’s enemies, and punishment upon God’s people. Moses and Aaron become God’s ambassadors to the Pharaoh of the Exodus, and at their word ten plagues arise to afflict Egypt because of the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. Moses also bears the tidings of God’s various chastenings to the stubborn recidivism of the Israelites in the wilderness. Yet, Moses also intercedes for his people, even offering his own life in their stead. He is therefore a
compassionate scourge.

Jonah is sent as a preemptive scourge to Nineveh, bearing a verbal blow to awaken the Ninevites to God’s impending wrath. Jonah is reluctant because he desires to see the Ninevites irrevocably punished by God rather than see them repent and be spared. He is a vessel chosen by God to be His prophet and representative.

Hamlet too is the reluctant bearer of God’s corrective commission. He hates Claudius as Jonah hates the Assyrians. Claudius slays his brother and then marries his sister-in-law. When Hamlet is awakened to this rottenness that infests Denmark, he, like Jonah with the Ninevites, seeks the perpetrator’s destruction.

Jeremiah is a chastising scourge. At a time when the wayward children of Israel embraced gladly the soft—and deceptive—encouragements of false prophets, Jeremiah came with the sober lashings of warnings and reproaches from God. Like Elijah, Jeremiah seems to be one whom the people may view as a troubler of Israel, but he also bore God’s chastisements of Israel as if they were his own. Calvin states:

He [Jeremiah] says that his *smiting was full of pain*; and then adds, *And I said, Surely it is my stroke, and I will bear it.* As I have already said, he does not relate what the Jews said or thought, but what would have been the case with them had they the smallest portion of wisdom […] The Prophet here reminds his own people with what feeling they ought to have regarded the fact, that God was angry with them; for he no doubt indirectly condemns their sottishness, because God’s hand was put forth to chastise them, and yet they disregarded the hand of him who smote them. He then relates what they ought to have thought and felt, when God shewed tokens of his wrath,—that they ought to have acknowledged that it was their own stroke, and that it was therefore to be borne: for it is the best preparation for repentance when the sinner acknowledges that he is justly smitten, and when he willingly receives the yoke. (*Commentaries* 9.2.47-48)

Calvin’s argues that God’s chastisement in this instance is corrective, intended to goad the people to
repentance. Thus Jeremiah’s function is as God’s corrective instrument, and he is a prophet who laments the stubbornness of his own people in the face of God’s wrath.

In addition to using prophets as scourges, God also employs kings. Jehu functions as an internal scourge of Israel; his mission is to rid the nation of the calamitous effects of the idolatry introduced by Jezebel. In their account of the history of Israel up to and including the Babylonian Exile, John Davis and John Whitcomb call Jehu the “mad militarist” (420). Jehu is consumed with his mission to purge Israel of the sin that was given admittance by Ahab’s compromises with Jezebel. Like Hamlet, Jehu takes his role too far in carrying out a rightful act of Providentially directed purgation and revenge, although Hamlet is able to pull back from his extreme zeal in the end. David and Whitcomb observe, “Jehu (like Nebuchadnezzar) was more of an instrument than a servant of Jehovah, and [he] was spiritually incapable of promoting the true worship of Israel’s God” (425). Jehu’s zeal is not misplaced, but perhaps it is overstated.

Roland Mushat Frye comments on the following gloss taken from the Geneva Bible and concerning 2 Kings 10.30: “Thus God apprueth & rewardeth [Jehu’s] zeale, in executing God’s judgement, albeit his wickednes[s] was afterward punished,” stating: “Translated into terms Hamlet uses, this means that Jehu was both scourge and minister” (62). The fact that Jehu sinned does not necessitate that he is an evil character. According to the scriptural account, God thinks well of Jehu’s zeal for the purification of Israel. Jehu, unlike Nebuchadnezzar and other external scourges of Israel, is himself a king of Israel, a member of God’s chosen people. He is an internal instrument of purgation in the hands of the Lord.

In the New Testament, Christ is an instrument of purgation, and zeal for His father’s house consumes Him (cf. Jn. 2.17). He purges the temple of the moneychangers because He values the sacred purpose of, and the divine Presence in, the temple. The purging of the temple is linked with the purging of the human body. The outward demonstration of that purging with the scourge symbolizes an inward cleansing. The body and the temple are each intended to be the dwelling place of God, the tabernacle of the Spirit of God, a place of devotion and prayer to God.
In the cleansing of the temple, when Christ drives out the moneychangers, He is both the scourger and the scourge. His Father employs Him just as He employs the whip—to restore the temple to its intended purpose: prayer to, and worship of, God. In his translations of the New Testament, Tyndale writes, “And he made a scourge of small cordes, and drave them all out of the temple” (Jn. 2.15). In his comment on Marks’ account of the cleansing of the temple, Donald Juel suggests how the preceding episode in which Christ curses the fig tree bears on the actual cleansing:

The cleansing of the temple must in some sense imply the rejection of the official representatives of Israel, the leaders of the temple establishment. Some care is necessary at this point. It is perhaps inaccurate to suggest that the events point to the rejection of Israel. Jesus’ opponents in the last chapters of the Gospel are clearly the leaders of the temple establishment, the scribes, the high priests, and the elders. At this point it is at least possible to say that the cleansing, interpreted by the cursing of the fig tree, points to the rejection of a particular group within Israel. Those in charge of the temple have borne no fruit; they have perverted God’s intentions and will thus be rejected.

Jesus prunes the fruitless limbs of God’s tree. In this case the scourger/scourge is certainly not evil, and His purpose is not destructive but purgative. This is perhaps the most significant association between the scourge and the process of cleansing, excepting perhaps Christ’s own scourging at the hands of the Romans. In fact, Christ desires to restore the purpose and glory of the temple, just as Hamlet strives to restore order in Denmark. Calvin suggests that Christ’s act is symbolic and purgative:

But it is asked, Since Christ saw the temple filled with gross superstitions, why did he only correct one that was light, or, at least, more tolerable than others? I reply, Christ did not intend to restore to the ancient custom all the sacred rites, and did not select greater or smaller abuses for correction, but had only this object in view, to show by one visible token, that God had committed to him the office of purifying the temple, and, at the same time, to point out that the worship of God had been corrupted by a disgraceful and manifest abuse. (Commentaries 17.1.12)
In other words, Christ’s purgation of the temple signifies God’s purging and redemptive purpose in the New Covenant. Christ employs the whip to lash defilers of the temple.

With a touch of sarcasm, Luther explores the question of the whip Christ used: “Some teachers assert that Christ fashioned the whip out of the cord with which He was girded after the fashion of the barefooted friars. Of course, our dear Lord must have been a barefooted friar! And His mother was probably a nun or an abbess!” (Works 22.221). Luther believes Christ found some ropes in the temple (ibid). But Luther tackles a more important question: “Why does the Lord use force here, whereas He had previously done everything by word of mouth?” (Works 22.221). Luther first observes that Christ is, in the words of Isaiah, the “one who ‘will smite the earth with the rod of His mouth’ (11:4)” and, “His are an oral rod and an oral sword” (Works 22.222). Luther projects Christ as speaking the following words:

God uses the ‘the rod of His mouth’ when He judges and punishes an unbelieving world, saying: ‘Whoever does not believe is doomed. Whoever commits adultery, steals, blasphemes God, disobeys parents, lives an ungodly and shameful life, is already dead and judged.’ I use the sword of the divine Word when I condemn all the actions of man and place the whole world under sin. Thereby I behead no one, scourge no one with a rod; but with my mouth I whip, punish, flog, and judge. Thus Christ wields an oral sword, not a fisted one. The Word of God is the sword with which He punishes the whole world. (Works 22.222-23)

Luther concludes that Christ “does not act in His capacity as Christ but as Moses, as one who subjected Himself to the Law, [sic] Thus He indicates that He is Lord of both realms—of teaching and, like Moses, of punitive action as well; and in accord with the Law of Moses He here resorts to force” (Works 22.223). The law is perfected, not abolished, in Christ.

Christ’s scourging has significant purgative effects for mankind. Isaiah writes, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was broken for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53.5 Geneva). The healing comes through the restorative work of purgation.
The Christian idea of mortification of the flesh seems to stem from Paul’s admonitions to champion the spirit, that inner part of man in tune with God’s Holy Spirit, over the flesh, the outward part of man that responds to earthly pleasures. The verbal lashings of Prince Hamlet on the inner flesh nature of other characters (and on his own) accomplish similar purgative results. St. Augustine argues that the cause of sin is not really the flesh (for the devil has no flesh), but the soul (*City of God* 443-44).

By mortifying the flesh’s desires and tendencies, the Christian allowed for the emergence of a healthy soul. Flagellation became a physical demonstration of the mortification of the flesh, a purgative scourging meant to keep the flesh in subjugation to the spirit. But the notion of whipping as an act of purgation of, as well as a deterrent to, sin is an important association to the act of flagellation. In his book, *The Philosophy of Sin*, Oswald Chambers comments on Jeremiah 51.50: “If sin only needed to be corrected, the symbol would have been a lash, not a sword; but God uses the symbol for killing” (1114). The lash, one of the connected meanings to “scourge” that apply to Prince Hamlet, is corrective, whereas the sword is entirely punitive. The lash assists in effecting purification; that seems to be the goal of flagellation.

The act of flagellation could be endured for the benefit of others. Rudolf Bell recounts of Catherine of Sienna, “Three times a day she flagellated herself with an iron chain, once for her sins, again for the living, and then for the dead. Until she ultimately became too weak to continue this punishing routine, each beating lasted for one-and-one-half hours and blood ran from her shoulders to her feet” (43). In an overview of ascetic practices in the medieval church, F. Petit states:

> From the beginning of the Middle Ages there is a noticeable tendency towards the use of another penitential practice, the one we now call discipline. In the Benedictine Rule the word ‘discipline’ denotes the entire process by which an offense is corrected: the preliminary warning and the subsequent reprimand, penalty and scourging. Scourging was prescribed for many offenses […]. (38)

Discipline was rigorous because the health of the soul was paramount in the thinking of those in Medieval sacred orders.
Flagellation became a type of correction through which God purges the believer and maintains his holiness of soul. Writing of his struggles with the flesh, St. Augustine comments to God about “the severity of your mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, so that I should not give way once more […]” (*Confessions* 180). Severity of mercy, an oxymoron, captures succinctly the aim of flagellation.

The practice of mortification of the flesh increased in popularity before Chaucer’s time. Concern for the state of the soul reached a fever pitch. Not only individuals subjected themselves to flagellation; public processions arose:

> But about the year 1260 the intoxication became as it were, complete. People, no longer satisfied to practice mortification of this kind in private, began to perform them in the sight of the public under pretence of greater humiliation; regular associations and fraternities were formed for that purpose, and numerous bodies of half-naked men began to make their appearance in the public streets, who after performing a few religious ceremonies contrived for the occasion, flagellated themselves with astonishing fanaticism and cruelty. (*History of Flagellation* 86)

The reasons that such a practice gained impetus in Medieval times may hinge as much upon residual Neo-Platonic and Gnostic ideas as upon biblical interpretation. Plato’s de-emphasis of the flesh in favor of the unseen ideal realm found its way into Gnostic practices, which in turn may have influenced Christian practices by introducing an ascetic perspective to living the Christian life.

Gnostics believed that the flesh is imperfect and weak, whereas the spirit is pure. In their view, Christ, therefore, could not have come in the flesh. Luis Berkhof summarizes this point concerning Gnosticism, “The world of matter as the product of a lesser and possibly an evil god, is essentially evil” (48). This is important because it bears on Hamlet’s frame of mind as a scourge, particularly concerning his lament, “O that this too too sullied [or solid] flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew […]” (1.2.129-30), which will be discussed in Chapter Three of this essay. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* lists the motives of voluntary flagellation: “expiation of personal sin and the sins of others, self-conquest, the impetration of divine graces and favors, and especially conformity with Christ in his Passion” (5.954). The consuming desire to be pure before God became a driving concern among
many Medieval clergy and even among some laity.

Seven historical figures and one nation who are remembered as scourges bear on the study of “scourge” in *Hamlet*: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Attila, the Ottoman Turks, Timur the Lame, and Henry V. Alexander, Attila and Timur are notable examples of conqueror-scourge figures. Caesar is also conqueror, although he is less conventional in appearance and approach. Henry V exemplifies a noble scourge.

As indicated in the biblical accounts, war is a type of scourge used by God to chastise humanity. Battenhouse emphasizes the awareness of this fact among Elizabethan writers, and among his allusions he cites two lines by Greville as evidence: “Men would be tyrants, tyrants would be gods./Thus they become our scourges, we their rods” (111). The warrior-scourges often emerge as tyrants, exacting severe costs among their subjects, but they are not necessarily evil in character.

Examples of the warrior-scourge emerge from the extensive list of conquerors who have arisen in the world throughout the ages. The aforementioned Jehu is such a conqueror according to scriptural accounts, but Alexander the Great, mentioned in *Hamlet* (5.1.200-205) and also referred to in Scriptures, was referenced as a scourge to the entire known world of his day, an archetypal world-conquering scourge.

Alexander’s obsession with conquering the world and his success earned him the aura of one who was divinely commissioned to do what he did. In *The Medieval Alexander*, George Cary observes:

The substitution of Christian for pagan ideas necessarily involved the replacement of Fortune, that controlling force in the development of Alexander’s character, by Divine Providence. But in the parallel Jewish tradition, in the testimony of the Bible and of Josephus, Alexander is God’s instrument of wrath against the Persians, and his career is watched over by God. In Josephus Alexander is, in addition, conscious of the power of God, who accomplishes miracles on his behalf. (81)
It is this sense of divine purpose, this cosmic inevitability about Alexander as a world conqueror that sets him apart as a scourge from less mythologized military leaders. Not merely a bloodthirsty military figure, Alexander was a cultured man, a disciple of Aristotle.

Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) is also mentioned by name in *Hamlet* (5.1.206-209). He too was a conqueror, and that makes him a scourge in the military sense, but did not carry the aura of divine inevitability in the manner of Alexander. Instead, Julius attributed his success to good fortune. Even his appearance defied the conventional appearance of the military scourge; Suetonius calls him a “dandy” (34). A cultured leader, Caesar was a fine writer of Latin prose; his *Gallic Wars* are still ideal reading for students of Latin. Caesar was an excellent field commander and an astute politician. The point is that Julius Caesar, though a military conqueror, and therefore a scourge, was not an overtly cruel or evil man. In fact, Plutarch comments that the people “looked upon him as a man of great tenderness and kindness of heart” (857). He seized the rule of Rome, becoming a dictator, but he was not ruthless. Still, Battenhouse’s research suggests that Caesar was a tyrant, making him a scourge: “Moralists were comforted by the fact that the ‘Scourge of God’ notion commonly includes an ultimate mundane punishment for the Scourge. The tyrant Caesar, so Philip Mornay said [in *Christian Religion*], was slain miserably […].” (*Marlowe’s* Tamburlaine 112-13). Yet evidence shows that Caesar was less than a tyrant.

The tyrant-warrior Attila (c.406-453) was known to his enemies as “the scourge of God.” Most of the impressions of Attila in Pre-Shakespearean literature are negative, as typified by Dante, who notes:

> It is there that Holy Justice spends its wrath

> on Sextus and Pyrrhus through eternity,

> and on Attila, who was a scourge on earth […]. (*Inferno* 12.133-35)

Thus, Attila’s notoriety earns him lodgings in Dante’s seventh circle of Hell. Chaucer’s Attila in the Pardoner’s Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* is a drunken sot:
Looke, Attila, the grete conquerour,

Deyde in his sleep, with shame and dishonour,

Bledynge ay at his nose in dronkenesse:

A capitayn sholde lyve in sobrenesse. (CT 6.579-82)

Chaucer attaches importance to the leader’s moral condition. He is a great conqueror, but he has no self-control regarding his own person.

Attila becomes the type for the cruel scourge-tyrant. Battenhouse draws parallels between Tamburlaine’s development in Marlowe’s plays of that name and the sixteenth-century history of Attila by Paulus Giovius. Battenhouse comments on this history of Attila written in Shakespeare’s time (c.1575):

Attila behaved himself, says Giovius, as if he were the deadly scourge of a wicked age […] the monstrous devastator of cities and lands. Indeed, he wanted to be called by the high and terrible name of Scourge of God in order that he might attribute to the wrathful power of God his own hatred of the human race and his own savage ill will. (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 129).

This commentary suggests a self-appointed “divine” scourge who rights what he perceives to be great societal wrongs. Earlier in his book, Battenhouse cites another important passage, this by Philip Mornay, who applies the Scourge concept to more ancient history. He explains how Cyrus, Titus, Attila, and Judas—each led on by his own passion—were made by God the unwitting instruments of His providence. In writing of Attila, Mornay states the theory most clearly: ‘Ye must think that when this great Robber cast lots in his country of Scythia, whether he should leade the third part of that land, he had another meaning than to reforme the world. Yet notwithstanding, all men acknowledge him to be a necessary scourge of GOD, and to haue come in due season […] as
barbarous as he was, he fell to thinke of himself, that he was the Scurge whereby God chastised the World [...] Euen so doth God punish the wicked one by another….’ (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 110)

If Mornay is correct, then Attila is a self-appointed scourge who is in turn punished by God, even though he is not, in this interpretation, a scourge appointed by God. Hamlet’s use of the word “scourge” may contain a reference to such conquerors as Chaucer’s Attila when he thinks of punishment.

Hinting that Attila was indeed vilified by his enemies, Patrick Howarth offers an important qualification: “To his Christian enemies he was known as the Scourge of God, yet the sister of a Roman empress sent him her ring as a way of proposing marriage” (16). In its short entry on the Hun king, the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, a similar qualification appears: “[Attila] is known in Christian legends of Latin origin, from his savagery, as the ‘Scourge of God’ (flagellum Dei), i.e. as a minister of divine vengeance. Teutonic legends, on the other hand, represent him as hospitable and magnanimous” (106). The archetypal “scourge of God” was not univocally evil or cruel.

Though next chronologically, Timur the Lame (c.1336-1405) will be discussed at the end of the chapter as a bridge between historical and literary scourges.

Henry V (1387-1422), the king perhaps most revered by Shakespeare in his History plays and by the England of his time, remains one of England’s greatest heroes. Henry’s extreme zeal for a purity of faith that brought severe persecution upon the Lollards, the followers of John Wycliffe, seems reminiscent of the Apostle Paul’s pre-conversion zeal for uncompromised Judaism.

In his biography of this great monarch from the House of Lancaster, Desmond Seward recounts an anecdote about Henry V as a scourge:

[…] Henry never missed an opportunity of claiming he enjoyed divine favour and his merciless orthodoxy and Puritanism impressed many churchmen. One such was the Spanish Dominican, Vincent Ferrer […] In May 1419 he came to Caen and preached before the king and his court,
publicly rebuking him for killing so many Christian men and women who had never done him any harm. Henry listened impassively. Afterwards he had Vincent brought to him. His first words were, ‘I am the scourge of God sent to punish the people of God for their sins.’ (127-28)

Seward proceeds to maintain that as “in Wales and at Agincourt, the king ascribed his victories to divine favour” (128).

Before Shakespeare’s time, the Ottoman Turks were a significant force against Christian Europe, a scourge against Christianity. As Battenhouse notes, Peter Ashton declared in his Shorte Treatise upon the Turkes Chronicles (1546) that ‘God suffereth the wicked and cursed seed of Hismael to be a scourge and whip us for our synnes’” (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 109-110). Battenhouse paraphrases Greville, “The wicked Turks punish the impious Christians. War is of the devil, but the devil is under the providence of God” (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 111), a comment that underscores Calvin’s reminder that even the devil is leashed by God, employed by the Almighty as a scourge.

The notion of a scourge opposing a scourge is a theme that arises in writings from biblical times to Shakespeare’s generation. Edward Hall’s Chronicles, published in 1548, include, in the account of Richard III, an archetypical evil scourge, a rallying cry against tyranny:

Let us therefore fight like invincible giants, & set on our enemies like untimerous Tigers & banish all feare like raping lions. And now auauce forward trew men against traytors, pitifull persones against murtherers, trew inheritors against usurpers, y skorges of God against tirautes, display my banner with good courage […]. (418)

Tamburaline, who successfully fought the Turks early in the fifteenth century, fulfills the role of a scourge against a scourge.

Marlowe’s version of the exploits of Timur Lang or Timur the Lame, including Timur’s rousing victory over the Turks in 1402, offers a bridge between historical scourges and literary presentations of them. Tamburlaine as Marlowe portrays him epitomizes heroism and combines an irresistible magnetism and
charisma with a fearsome cruelty and brutality. In the play that bears his name, Tamburlaine lives according to a heroic code, offering his enemies the opportunity to surrender before launching his irresistible and merciless attacks.

A great leader of the Mongols, Timur became a scourge against the Ottoman Empire. Timur seemed to relish the role of conqueror. Beatrice Manz comments on the “systematic ferocity” with which Timur conquered territories (90). Yet Timur’s greatness may live more in myth than in his immediate legacy. Manz writes, “Despite the extent of Temur’s conquests, the realm which he left to his successors was neither enormous nor secure” (2). It was his name and his image that were important to his people and to his enemies. Historical documentation concerning the personality of the historical Tamburlaine is sparse, but Manz emphasizes his great intelligence, particularly evinced in his military and political acumen (16). He was not a mindless, cruel dictator.

In Tamburlaine the Great, Marlowe produces a character who exhibits intense devotion to a cause. Tamburlaine’s drive to conquer is reminiscent of Alexander’s and Attila’s. Comparing Tamburlaine with the aforementioned Attila of Giovius, Battenhouse observes: “Tamburlaine, like Attila, is a barbarian of inhuman pallor and fiery eyes, thirsting after conquest; he is, like him, a robber who shamelessly claims the title, ‘Scourge of God’ as justification for his merciless cruelties” (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 131). Battenhouse relates from Giovius how Attila’s wrath was softened by the saintly Pope Leo I and by the two mysterious figures flanking the pontiff whom believers took to be the spirits of Peter and Paul (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 130).

Tamburlaine’s claim to be the Scourge of God is well established in the Marlowe plays. In Tamburlaine; Part Two, the conqueror states unequivocally:

There is a God, full of revenging wrath,

From whom the thunder and the lightning breaks

Whose scourge I am, and him will I obey. (5.181-183)
It is important to note that Tamburlaine acknowledges revenge as the motivation of God’s lethal attacks on humanity through himself as the Providential scourge: Tamburlaine. He declares,

I that am term’d the Scourge and Wrath of God,

The only fear and terror of the world,

Will first subdue the Turk, and then enlarge

Those Christian captives which you keep as slaves,

Burdening their bodies with your heavy chains,

And feeding them with thin and slender fare […]

(Part One 3.3.44-49)

Human weakness must be scourged. Mycetes, weak in speech and in military acumen, cannot stand against Cosroe the usurper, and Cosroe cannot stand against Tamburlaine. Weakness has no place in Tamburlaine’s world. Tamburlaine defends his action:

Villains, these terrors and these tyrannies

(If tyrannies war’s justice ye repute),

I execute, enjoin’d me from above,

To scourge the pride of such as Heaven abhors. (Part Two 4.1.148-51)

Battenhouse notes, “A dozen times in the play the protagonist calls our attention to his title; and he dies announcing with his last breath that ‘Tamburlaine, the Scourge of God[,] must die’” (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 133). Battenhouse lists the characteristic traits of the typical scourge: “The qualities we expect to see, prominently, are those of ambition, robbery, and tyranny, cruelty, magnanimity, and
invincibility” (Marlowe’s Tamburlaine 133). Certainly, Marlowe emphasizes Tamburlaine’s great ambition. It is the fuel of the conqueror.

The common critical perspective suggests that Tamburlaine’s preeminent characteristic is not his magnanimity but his cruelty. Charles Masinton summarizes the background of the play, emphasizing Tamburlaine’s primary role as a scourge:

Based on the life of Timur the Lame (1336-1405), it is a history or chronicle play interpreting the important events in the life of the Mongolian warrior who conquered the Turks at Ankara in 1402 and was regarded by many in the Christian West as a hero who through divine Providence had saved them from the hated Moslems. The ‘Scourge of God’ title that Tamburlaine gives himself therefore reflects the fact that he was seen by a large number of Christians as an agent of God sent to punish their enemies. But Marlowe uses this label for his protagonist in an ironic way, because Tamburlaine is more destructive and bloodthirsty than anyone he conquers. (14)

That Tamburlaine was held in high regard by Christians confutes the notion that he should be viewed as a univocally evil scourge, even if Marlowe presents him as being “bloodthirsty.”

Shakespeare, like Marlowe, does include military types such as Coriolanus, but he mainly offers a variety of uses of “scourge” and related images that are unlike Tamburlaine. Shakespeare’s plays that contribute material to the consideration of the scourge include, Henry VI, Part One; Henry VI, Part Two; Richard III; Henry IV, Part One; Love’s Labor’s Lost; King Lear; Coriolanus; Timon of Athens.

In Henry IV, Part One, Worcester comments deferentially to the king, “Our house, my sovereign liege, little deserves/The scourge of greatness to be used on it” (1.3.10-11). Such an address expressed in awe to a monarch merely affirms the weight of majesty. Worcester is not calling King Henry an evil man. In the same play, King Henry muses to his son, Prince Hal, on the latter’s affinity for improprieties unfitting his office:

I know not whether God will have it so
For some displeasing service I have done,

That in his secret doom out of my blood

He’ll breed revengement and a scourge for me;

But thou dost in thy passages of life

Make me believe that thou art only marked

For the hot vengeance and the rod of heaven

To punish my mistreadings. (3.2.4-11)

Prince Henry replies, “I am doubtless I can purge/Myself of many [offenses] I am charged withal” (3.2.20-21).

Earlier in the play, Hotspur comments to Northumberland, “Why, look you, I am whipped and scourged with rods,/Nettled and stung with pismires, when I hear/Of this vile politician, Bolingbroke” (1.3.238-240). It is news—words—that figuratively discomfit Hotspur in this case. But action also has its place in the scourging process. Worcester observes to Hotspur concerning the King, “He calls us rebels, traitors, and will scourge/With haughty arms this hateful name in us” (5.2.39-40).

The most frequent use of the word “scourge” occurs in Henry the Sixth, Part One. In the second scene, Joan of Arc (La Pucelle) indicates her divine commission, and she concludes: “Assigned I am to be the English scourge” (1.2.129). In the eyes of Shakespeare’s audience, Joan of Arc is an enemy, making her an evil scourge in the context of the play. In contrast, the Countess of Auvergne inquires, “Is this the scourge of France?/Is this the Talbot, so much feared abroad/That with his name the mothers still their babes?” (2.3.15-17). Later, Lucy comments, “Is Talbot slain, the Frenchmen’s only scourge,/Your kingdom’s terror and black nemesis?” (4.7.77-78).

Not only people, but also natural phenomena serve as scourges and as omens of scourgings in
Shakespeare’s plays. Comets are called upon to effect scourging action in this play:

Comets, importing change of times and states,

Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,

And with them scourge the bad revolting stars

That have consented unto Henry’s death [...]. (1.1.2-5)

Heavenly bodies can therefore scourge other heavenly bodies figuratively, and while comets are often harbingers of earthly cataclysms, in this metaphorical case the comets bring retributive justice to the stars, those heavenly bodies being the evil ones. Yet the sense of a harbinger persists: “Thou ominous and fearful owl of death,/Our nation’s terror and their bloody scourge,/The period of thy tyranny approacheth” (4.2.15-17).

In this play, the scourge is a fearsome instrument. Plantagenet warns Somerset, “For your partaker Pole, and you yourself,/I’ll note you in my book of memory/To scourge you for this apprehension” (2.4.100-02). The scourge as punishment is keenly felt in *Romeo and Juliet*, as observed by the Prince in the last scene: “Capulet, Montague./See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,/That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love” (5.3.291-93). He concludes, “All are punished” (295).


Commenting on the lunar and solar eclipses in *King Lear*, Gloucester observes that yet “nature finds itself scourged by the sequent events” (1.2.108-09). Edgar observes near the play’s end, “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/Make instruments to plague us” (5.3.173-74). Such instruments serve as scourges. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Pompey plans to use his navy to “scourge th’ ingratitude that
despiteful Rome/Cast on my noble father” (2.6.22-23).

Shakespeare demonstrates that fickleness in the mindless throngs most acutely in *Coriolanus*. Coriolanus is not a politician; he wishes that his deeds speak for themselves to the populace of his devotion to Rome. He takes no pleasure in the pomp and posturing of his position. When Coriolanus becomes a traitor against Rome, the citizenry complain to Coriolanus, “You have been a scourge to her [Rome’s] enemies; you have been a rod to her friends. You have not indeed loved the common people” (2.3.91-93). Coriolanus’s attraction is his zeal to protect Rome, and his repulsive quality is that he is truculent. Even Volumnia, his *Walküre*-like mother, comments of him: “You are too absolute […]” (3.2.41). He is not evil, but he lacks tact and political acumen.

Shakespeare refers to the law as a scourging instrument in *Timon of Athens*, wherein Timon calls, “The laws, your curb and whip” (4.3.448). The lash is a punishment for wrongdoing and therefore a deterrent. In that way, the law as a whip is beneficial; it maintains order. Yet the whip can be an instrument in beneficent hands. Berowne admits that he is “Love’s whip” (LLL. 3.1.172), and later he steps “forth to whip hypocrisy” (4.3.147). He and his fellows are purged more by their failures than they would have been by their self-imposed exile from humanity. In Shakespeare’s hands, the scourge, the lash, purges as well as it punishes. It is used to restore order.

To summarize, evidence drawn from biblical and literary history concerning the use of “scourge” and related concepts suggests considerable latitude of meaning concerning the term. Figures who were called scourges were not always considered evil. Historical scourges were employed for punitive and/or purgative purposes. Biblical scourges vary considerably in character and in function. There are destructive acts of God, such as plagues, disasters, wars, and other afflictions. Human instruments employed as scourges in biblical accounts include great prophets like Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Nathan, and Jonah, and kings like Jehu, and, ultimately, Christ.

Historical scourges also constitute a diverse group. Conquerors like Alexander, Julius Caesar, Attila, and Tamburlaine performed great feats that they or their foes viewed as being divinely wrought. Yet a scourge need not have been cruel or evil. Joan of Arc and Henry V were noble figures, and when
he became king, Henry V demonstrated strict adherence to virtue. Scourges were not all univocally evil or cruel, nor were they unanimously relegated to the flames of Hell.

Shakespeare also exhibits different types of scourge or whip. Love possesses a whip in Love’s Labor’s Lost. The law is a whip in Timon, keeping people in line. Characters such as Richard III could also be cruel scourges. Coriolanus is a military scourge, an honest man who lacks tact and political sense. His ambition is for the preservation of Rome, not for spectacle and pomp.
Chapter Three: An Analysis of Hamlet’s Role

Hamlet’s role as a scourge is a divine commission. He is the instrument through whom the effects of disorder in the realm, the weaknesses of the flesh, vice, and folly, are purged, and through whom evil is punished. The twin agencies of heavenly ordained purgation and punishment are both active in the play. He is not an evil scourge, but he is a two-fold scourge. He is a verbal *flagellum* who lashes vice, folly, and the weaknesses of the human flesh, and he is an instrument of divine justice. It must be understood that Hamlet is appointed by Heaven as a scourge, even if at first he finds the prospect distasteful:

[...] but heaven hath pleas’d it so,

To punish me with this and this with me,

That I must be their scourge and minister. (3.4.175-177)

His assessment of this role is not an evasion of responsibility regarding his murder of Polonius; the prince is not “blithely ascrib[ing] the murder of Polonius to Providence,” as Hamilton suggests (205). Elizabethan order negates the notion that Hamlet is merely a self-appointed scourge, and Shakespeare remains faithful in his dramas to that hierarchy of order. Heaven cannot abide the usurpation of order. This notion comes directly from Scriptures. Saint Paul writes, “[The ruler] is the minister of God, for thy welth. But and yf thou do evyll, then feare: for he beareth not a swearde for nought: but is the minister of God to take vengeaunce on them that do evyll” (Rom. 13.4 Tyndale 1534). The ruler has a God-ordained responsibility to maintain order. As soon as Hamlet confirms Claudius’s breach of order, he must take measures to fix the problem. His position in the realm demands that responsibility of him.

Shakespeare’s plays contain an omnipresent sense of order. Hamilton observes, “Many writers have observed that Shakespeare in general and *Hamlet* in particular must be seen against the background of the breakdown of the Renaissance world-view, that system of interlocking orders that included the heavenly order of the spheres, the political order of the state, and the inner order of the self” (193). Both
Hamilton and E. M. W. Tillyard allude to Ulysses from *Troilus and Cressida*, whose speech helps to explain Hamlet's responsibilities as the Prince of Denmark. In this famous oration, Ulysses states:

```
Degree being vizarded,

Th’ unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this center

Observe degree, priority, and place,

Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,

Office, and custom, in all line of order. (Troilus and Cressida 1.3.83-88)
```

Shakespeare, through Ulysses, then warns that order must not be compromised: “O, when degree is shaked,/Which is the ladder to all high designs,/The enterprise is sick” (ll.101-103), and, “Take but degree away, untune that string,/And hark what discord follows” (ll.109-10). Usurpation is perhaps the most heinous breach of order.

When Hamlet affirms that he must set time right in Denmark, he acknowledges his responsibility as a crown prince whose current monarch is a usurper in a realm that is thrown into upheaval by that usurpation. This is not mere self-aggrandizement or self-delusion. At the midpoint of the play, he sees his responsibility as a punishment levied against him. Hamlet states that Heaven is pleased to make him “their scourge and minister.” His is not a cavalier statement generated by his rash act. The usurpation of the crown has allowed duplicity and dishonesty to ravage the realm, and Hamlet as Prince of Denmark must purge the realm of these evils generated by Claudius’s murder of his brother, King Hamlet, and the taking of King Hamlet’s crown.

Between the polarities of faded virtue and the ravages of political expediency or ambition that surround him, Hamlet wrestles with his duty as the man to set the time right. The idea of contrarieties in *Hamlet* is persuasively demonstrated by McAlindon in *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos*, his study of the
balance of elements in opposition in Shakespeare’s tragedies. McAlindon posits, “Elemental imagery constitutes a major portion of the play’s symbolism and provides clear evidence of the contrarious model of nature and its impact on characterisation and theme” (105). He cites Shakespeare’s use of the words “mighty opposites” (5.2.62) used in reference to the error of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who come between two foes (cf. Jenkins’ note to the text: “antagonists” 397). McAlindon observes a structure of balanced natural opposites superimposed by Shakespeare, causing Hamlet’s inner wrestling.

Hamlet is wrestling to embrace his role, a single, yet multi-faceted, role that is his by virtue of his position as crown prince of Denmark under the Elizabethan concept of order. Tillyard convincingly documents Shakespeare’s consistent adherence to the concept of a great chain of being in his study The Elizabethan World Picture. Claudius, although a usurper, acknowledges that divine law when he states unequivocally (and ironically) in the face of the wrathful Laertes:

Let him go, Gertrude. Do not fear our person.

There’s such divinity doth hedge a king

That treason can but peep to what it would,

Acts little of his will. (4.5.122-125)

Balance and order are affirmed in the world of Hamlet; there is a unity of purpose and design. Evil must be purged from the kingdom.

John Mahon discerns a connection between Hamlet’s task and purgation. He tenders a relevant observation: “The Ghost has come from Purgatory; several sixteenth-century books on Purgatory use the word revenge as a synonym for purge” (44). The idea is that purgation, and not punishment alone, is at work in the play.

As indicated in Chapter One, a number of critics, among them Bowers, Battenhouse, and Prosser,
maintain that Prince Hamlet is an evil scourge. J. A. Bryant states emphatically, “To be sure, [Hamlet] does ultimately fulfill the central part of his commission: he does kill the King and purge Denmark of its evil. But he fulfills it within the pattern of God’s human and sinful scourges, who in doing his will execute also their own punishment” (131). This concurs with the views propounded by Bowers and Battenhouse. Bowers, as has been indicated already, reflects Battenhouse’s ideas when he points out that only “a man already damned for his sins was selected [to be the instrument of God’s vengeance], and he was called a scourge” (94). Such a man must be “so steeped in crime as to be past salvation” (Bowers 94). The logical difficulties of holding to such a view concerning Hamlet while also maintaining that Hamlet becomes a heavenly minister who embraces Providence have been discussed already; it is difficult to maintain the view that Hamlet is himself past salvation at any time in the play if one argues for his ultimate redemption (as does Bowers).

Hamlet is not a world conqueror; he is a thinker, a contemplative man who deplores the weakness of the flesh and the lack of honesty and virtue in his country. He sees the pressing need for purgation. In this regard, he is like an earlier Shakespeare character. A. C. Bradley notes a similarity in character between Brutus and Hamlet: “Both Brutus and Hamlet are highly intellectual by nature and reflective by habit. Both may even be called, in a popular sense, philosophic […]” (86). Both men are concerned about the state of their realms. Brutus claims, “We shall be called purgers, not murderers” (JC 2.1.181). His intention is to right the wrong he sees in the realm. The difference between Brutus and Hamlet is that Brutus is not dispensing with a usurper. Hamlet is. Caesar has not taken another’s throne, as has Claudius. Brutus is noble in heart, but his idealism deludes him. Hamlet is not so deluded concerning his role. He knows he must set the time aright. No political conspirator has lured him into a plot against Claudius. As the Prince and the rightful heir to the throne, Hamlet is duty-bound to labor for the realm’s greater good. That a ghost reveals the issue to Hamlet is another problem (to be discussed below). Claudius is not the true king. His fratricide and usurpation must be punished, and the effects must be purged from the realm so that order may be restored.

Hamlet muses on the reputation of Elsinore among the leaders of other nations, complaining, “They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase/Soil our addition” (1.4.19-20). The prince is
disgusted by the state of his own country. Though he is “a native here/And to the manner born” (1.4.14-15), he is a man who has high standards, an idealist who values order, honesty, integrity, and fidelity. It is therefore natural that he would be a scourge against the violators of the ideal virtues.

Like the prophet Elijah, who despaired of living when he learned of the price Jezebel placed on his head, Hamlet is despondent concerning the state of Denmark. He excoriates Gertrude for her vice. Bowers and other critics distinguish between private and public revenge, calling the former evil and the latter allowable (or even a duty). Prosser comments regarding Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, “Hamlet is facing the moral question that has too long been thought irrelevant to the play: whether or not he should effect private revenge” (162). The biblical injunction leaves private revenge to God, but Prosser wonders, “Can it really be ‘virtue’ to sit back and leave it to Heaven? On one level, we are debating the morality of private revenge, but on the other we are thrown headlong into the metaphysical dilemma of the Renaissance” (164). She contrasts the Medieval Augustinian paradigm in which “man had no being in and of himself” with the Renaissance humanism, in which “wisdom became ethical, developed in action in the affairs of a secular world” (164). Thus, the human capacity to act is in harmony with human autonomy, rather than being completely subservient to God.

The problem of revenge in Hamlet seems perched at this crossroad between the two historical periods. Eugene England concludes that the “play, I believe, stands ultimately against revenge” (55), and he identifies this point as the reason for Hamlet’s so-called delay in killing Claudius. Hamlet kills Claudius, and Claudius clearly deserves what he gets. Hamlet is the instrument of that appropriate end for the false king.

Hamlet’s soliloquies reveal a man given to contemplation and self-examination, a man who is truly disturbed by any form of hypocrisy or duplicity. He values honesty and integrity. Wilson Knight says of Hamlet that he “exposes faults everywhere” (41). In the words of Laurence Olivier, Hamlet is “bone-real” (77). He is a real man, albeit an idealist, who is faced with a Herculean task. He confides in Horatio, “He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,/Popped in between th’ election and my hopes” (5.2.64-65), but his emphasis in the statement is not his political ambition. Hamlet mentions his
parents first; the election serves as the context in which Hamlet underscores the nature of the man who actually was elected to govern. Hamlet’s concern is the moral state of his mother and the moral state of his world, which has been turned into an “unweeded garden” (1.2.135) by the breach of order perpetrated by his uncle. Like Gertrude, Denmark has chosen a “mildew’d ear” (3.4.64) over a true prince. Hamlet contemplates suicide, but recoils, sorry that the “Everlasting had not fix’d/His canon ’gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.131-32). This is a man who cares about the state of his soul even more than the pain he suffers. He also desires that Denmark be pure.

Hamlet wishes that Polonius—and Ophelia—were honest. He implores his mother to repent for her sins. He corrects Horatio’s response to his query regarding the reason for Horatio’s visit to Elsinore. He confesses his own pride and other sins to Ophelia. He embraces Providence by the time the last scene begins. He reconciles with Laertes in that last scene, forgiving the son of Polonius for his complicity in the king’s fatal plot against the prince. He also keeps Horatio from committing suicide, and he passes the kingdom peaceably to Fortinbras. This is not an evil character. He is the people’s prince; Claudius bemoans that fact when he plots against him after Polonius’s death: “He’s lov’d of the distracted multitude” (4.3.4). Claudius persists in his evil ways to the end.

The element of revenge as Shakespeare develops it in the play obfuscates Hamlet’s demeanor considerably. It seems that Hamlet not only botches the revenge commissioned by the Ghost (when he passes on killing the praying Claudius and instead kills Polonius erroneously in the next scene), but he seems set on sending Claudius (and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) to perdition. Northrop Frye points out that within the scope of the complexities raised by the three revenge themes—Prince Hamlet’s, Laertes’, and young Fortinbras’—Hamlet has two roles, one as murderer and the other as avenger, and that their “total effect is to neutralize the sense of the restoring of moral balance that a revenge is supposed to give us as a rule. Revenge does not complete anything, it merely counters something, and a second vengeance pattern will grow up in opposition to it” (90). The ending is odd in that it seems that young Fortinbras is the only successful avenger in the play, although he has not killed any Danish courtiers. Purgation comes from within. Is this an anti-revenge play, or is “revenge itself on trial” as Gideon Rappaport argues (84)? It is not merely revenge that accomplishes the restoration of the
kingdom’s equilibrium, but also Hamlet’s verbal lashings of folly in the kingdom. The inner rottenness of Denmark has been verbally purged by the end of the final scene.

The prince applies the same purgative scourge to himself that he uses on some of the other characters in the play, and he employs the punitive scourge where necessary. Hamlet verbally punishes folly, but he performs this action more extensively upon himself. As in the case of his interaction with his mother and Ophelia, Hamlet’s aim is the purgation of what he perceives to be vice in himself, and specifically this seems to be his difficulty in taking action. He lashes himself verbally for his delay, which seems generated (perhaps) by “some craven scruple/Of thinking too precisely on th’ event” (4.4.40-41). Matthew Proser argues, “At moments [Hamlet] must flagellate his spirit by ‘gross examples’ which indicate his dereliction of duty to stimulate sufficient emotion to lay the basis for action” (94). One might view Hamlet as a divided man whose two inner selves, action and contemplation, wrestle for preeminence. Hamlet chides himself for not acting on the Ghost’s request for revenge, but he must first establish the veracity of the Ghost’s word; he must test the Ghost.

There is something ascetic about Hamlet, a willingness to reject what he sees as the fleeting and deceptive pleasures of the temporal world in favor of more lasting issues, such as integrity, loyalty, and cleanliness of soul. He abhors the weakness of the flesh. He rues the weakness of his own flesh and of the flesh of humanity in general: “O that this too too sullied [or “solid” in the First Folio] flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew […]” (1.2.129-30). Dover Wilson notes one plausible explanation: “For [Hamlet’s] blood is tainted, his very flesh corrupted, by what his mother has done, since he is bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh” (42). Commenting on the same passage, Robert Fleissner observes an alchemical connection that suggests Hamlet sees his sullied flesh like base metals that need to be purified (508). These observations tie in neatly with the ascetic notions of mortification of the flesh derived from Neo-Platonic and Gnostic ideas mixed with early Christian practices, as noted earlier in the section on flagellation. The goal in all cases is purgation of the imperfections of the flesh.

Arthur Kincaid offers an accurate assessment of the prince’s character: “Hamlet, especially in the earlier part of the play, stands out as a conventionally-minded [sic] character. His rather rigid moral
framework shows itself in his attitude to his mother’s hasty marriage and in his disgust with the
drunkenness of the Danish king and court” (107). Bloom observes, “‘Hamlet’s desires, his ideals or
aspirations, are almost absurdly out of joint with the rancid atmosphere of Elsinore” (385). Warhaft
notes of Hamlet, “He is obsessed by sin, and often, like Iago, revels in his contemplation of it” (200).
Yet, unlike Iago, Hamlet is not worldly or opportunistic. His concerns are idealistic, even spiritual. He
values the health of his soul, and, as Catherine Belsey notes, “The fear of damnation inhibits
resolution” (136). It is this fear that checks Hamlet. The afterlife matters to Hamlet. He requests that
Ophelia remember his sins in her orisons (3.1.88-89). Hamlet insists upon propriety and virtue.

His own vice is not a simple matter to discern. He confesses to Ophelia in the nunnery scene:

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my
mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my bec
than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.
(3.1.121-127)

This is not mere affectation; in soliloquies, Hamlet takes great pains to examine his own life. He chides
himself for his hesitancy, although he cannot, after all, proceed hastily on the mere word of a ghost.
Hamlet asks, “Am I a coward?” (2.2.566), indicting himself on this charge. He states dejectedly, “Thus
conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1.83). This is a man who cannot kill in cold blood. Only
when he is stirred into extreme passions does he stab at the man behind the arras.

At the end of the closet scene, Hamlet exhibits a willingness to follow his own penitential tendencies:
“For this same Lord/ I do repent […]” (3.4.174-75), and he accepts his penance, that he must be “their
scourge and minister” (177). Prosser argues that this is not true repentance, but only regret (201), and
she likens his last actions and words in the closet scene to those of the typical medieval vice (204). If
one maintains that Hamlet is a vice character, then one must insist upon his repentance being merely
apparent. Hamlet is sorry for the death of Polonius. His comments about Polonius as he tugs the remains
out of the room seem uncomplimentary, but one might find a subtle strand of philosophical reflection
that is not entirely crude: “This counselor/Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,/Who was in
life a foolish prating knave” (3.4.215-17). Hamlet must be honest, but he observes a shadow of dignity in the dead Polonius that was not evident in the living Polonius. Death has elevated the old meddler, and Hamlet sees this. It is the high value Hamlet places on honesty that drives him to reprove Ophelia so vigorously.

Ophelia’s willingness to deceive Hamlet shows the duplicities in the realm that seem to originate with Claudius’s breach of order, as well as evidence of an unwilling but obedient daughter, who complies with her father’s order, as she does in 1.4 when he commanded her to avoid Hamlet. She is therefore unwittingly swept away with the sewage of rotten Denmark, a victim of the breach of order. She has wittingly adapted to the disorder of the court.

The nunnery scene displays a Hamlet who is convinced that Ophelia harbors that corrupting duplicity that he abhors in all of the other characters. He sees in her a sort of infidelity, a lack of constancy, and he verbally lashes her, bidding her to go to a nunnery and not to “be a breeder of sinners” (3.1.121). He asks her point blank, “Are you honest?” (3.1.103). He senses duplicity even in this seemingly innocent young lady, and he lashes out against it. In his notes on the play, Harold Jenkins points out that in Elizabethan usage a nunnery was considered a place where chastity was protected or the term was used sarcastically to mean a brothel (282). However the term is understood in Hamlet, the prince demonstrates his consistent abhorrence of the weak flesh with its duplicitous tendencies. Prosser comments on the demur Ophelia: “Even this charming bit of seeming innocence is not what she appears to be. Nothing is what is once seemed” (176). Hamlet cannot abide yet another mask, especially on the girl he loves. It “hath made [him] mad” (3.1.148-49). Even the innocent Ophelia is not what she seems to be.

Here, Prosser asserts that Hamlet “is not pretending madness; he has lost control” (177), and no wonder; those for whom he cares are not what they should be. Time is truly out of joint. The images look familiar, but the substance shifts too easily. Ironically, it is the Ghost, an ethereal being who identifies the cause of this upheaval in the realm: Claudius’s vile act. Reality has shifted into a shadow of itself, and the afterlife becomes more appealing to the struggling prince. Truth, even being true to oneself, is
difficult to see until the final act. Even Laertes complies with Claudius in a plot, that being to kill Hamlet. Consistent with the upheaval in Denmark, the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (3.1.58) come from Hamlet’s family and friends.

Hamlet’s purpose in verbally lashing Ophelia is not merely punitive; he wishes her to escape the corruption that prevails in the realm, the duplicity, the rampant lack of honesty and integrity among those of the court of Denmark. His passionate chastisement of her comes in repetitive verbal lashes; he adjures her to forego marriage: “Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (3.1.121-22). He repeats this order to her that she flee to a nunnery. He may have in mind the double entendre on the word “nunnery,” but it seems that the main definition, a residence for women in holy orders, is more in keeping with his predilection for almost puritanical virtue. He deplores the duplicity of women, “I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another” (3.1.144-45), but he is warning her to avoid that path, not to give in to this tendency in women as he sees it in his mother.

Hamlet also uses the convention of asking one in prayer to remember him in those prayers. When Ophelia plays with his affections, his tone becomes reproving. Hamlet does love Ophelia. When Hamlet states that his love for Ophelia exceeds the love of forty thousand brothers (5.1.264-65), the audience need not suspect otherwise. Hamlet cannot abide duplicity, especially in those whom he loves.

He thus forces Ophelia to see what he perceives to be the vice of inconstancy in women, and he wishes to drive it out of her by driving her from it. She sees Hamlet’s diatribe as madness; she cannot or will not see that her duplicity has set him off. All she can see is a “noble mind […] o’erthrown” (3.1.152). Perhaps it is innocence and naiveté that keeps her from comprehending his meaning. She does not seem to find that her part in her father’s scheme amounts to dishonesty; she is not honest with the prince. All she sees is his extreme state of mind, which somehow excuses her complicity in the duplicitous plot hatched by her father. Hamlet admits to her that it “hath made me mad” (3.1.148-49), the artificiality, the “painting” of women.

The father of Ophelia and Laertes is the meddling political figure, the persistent schemer who insists that
his views must be correct. Polonius is the prime minister of the corrupt state. He must have his hand in everything that goes on, the proceedings between Denmark and Norway, the private affairs of his children, the prince’s state of mind, and the relationship between Hamlet and the sitting monarchs. He is not as honest as a fishmonger (cf. 2.2.176), and Hamlet sees this irony. Leaders should model honesty, not the common folk. In his capacity as a minister of state, Polonius meddles privately where he is not welcome. His duplicity is the “official” duplicity of the realm, political expediency at the expense of honor and truth. He must by “indirections find directions out” (2.1.66).

Polonius is also a scourge, albeit an unwitting one. As he and the king set up the scheme to learn whether the cause of Hamlet’s madness is love for Ophelia, Polonius declares in his didactic tone:

’Tis too much prov’d, that with devotion’s visage

And pious action we do sugar o’er

The devil himself. (3.1.47-49)

Claudius replies in an aside, “O ’tis too true./How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience” (3.1.49-50). The usurping king is therefore lashed verbally by Polonius. The king’s conscience is stung. Shakespeare uses the old meddler’s unguarded garrulousness to prepare Claudius for the more telling scourge of words that will issue from Hamlet’s “Mousetrap.”

The meddlesome old man is emblematic of political duplicity, which is acceptable in Denmark’s political circles. Polonius will see in the imaginary cloud to which Hamlet refers any shape the prince suggests. St. Augustine pleads, “Point me out [a man] who sees, not one who merely cavils, and wants to appear to see what he does not see” (Of True Religion 60). Hamlet, like Augustine, cries out for an honest man, even as honest as a fishmonger. Polonius’s role is to appease his superiors. Appearance and deportment are primary to him. Substance and inner integrity are not important. Virtue is only useful inasmuch as it appears to be virtue.

Hamlet sternly lashes Polonius verbally after the latter states that he will treat the players as they
deserve: “God’s bodkin, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?” (2.2.524-25). The verbal lash becomes the whip that drives Polonius to magnanimity toward the players. The players are who they are; they play roles. They are supposed to be duplicitous in that sense. That is the paradox of the players. Polonius is not supposed to be an actor, yet he always plays a role. He creates schemes. The players are spared the whip, but Polonius must be scourged.

Like Claudius, Polonius meets death at the end of Hamlet’s sword. Indeed, Polonius stands in proxy for Claudius behind the arras. He is the king’s representative. Claudius acknowledges this when he realizes what would have happened to his royal person if Polonius had not gone in his stead to secret himself in Gertrude’s closet: “O heavy deed!/It had been so with us had we been there” (4.1.12-13). According to Hamlet, Polonius’s end was intended to be Claudius’s end. After stabbing Polonius, he asks, “Is it the king?” (3.4.26). Hamlet hopes he has killed Claudius, and not someone else. His act will send him to England. Hamlet sees his role as a scourge as Heaven’s punishment. Bryant writes, “Hamlet is as much a victim of Polonius as Polonius is the victim of Hamlet” (137); in that sense, they scourge one another. Polonius is scourged verbally, purgatively, before he is killed with the sword.

Perhaps the most complex relationship in *Hamlet* exists between the prince and his mother, and at no time is this complexity more acute than in the closet scene. In this scene, Hamlet seems on the verge of killing her, but he yields to an unexpected appearance by the Ghost whose reminders calm the impassioned prince. After this point, Hamlet is able to resume his mission to save his mother’s endangered soul. He tells her in the tone of the fiery prophets of old, “Confess yourself to heaven,/Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come” (3.4.151-52). He acts as her priest or minister, seeking with a holy urgency to shrive her, to make sure that she escapes the judgmental conflagration that awaits the unrepentant. Joan Larson Klein offers that very reading: “In the closet scene, Hamlet abandons the role of playwright, director, and chorus which he assumed earlier. He takes on instead the function of minister as it was understood in Renaissance England” (157). His purpose is purgative, corrective. Gertrude cries, “What shall I do?” (3.4.182). These words can be read two ways: they reveal her despair at what she perceives may be her son’s madness and convey the penitential surrender of a mother who sees her own inner darkness and who wants to be rid of it.
Like a humbled penitent, she writhes under the spiritual onslaught of her son: “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.158). Hamlet advises her, “O throw away the worser part of it/And live the purer with the other half” (ll.159-60). His instruction to her evokes Christ’s admonition, “And if thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish, rather than thy whole body be cast into hell” (Mt. 5.29 Douay). Hamlet is deeply concerned for her soul, and he takes great pains in the scene to make his mother see her own sins.

In the transition from King Hamlet to Claudius, Gertrude is the queen in both regimes. Denmark reels under the effects of the breach of order. Someone must assume control of the realm quickly and capably because Norway is making war on Denmark. Claudius supposes that Fortinbras believes Denmark “to be disjoint and out of frame” (1.2.20), and Claudius rightly refers to Denmark as “this warlike state” (1.2.9). Claudius seems the right man to steady the ship, but Hamlet learns that he, and not Claudius or any other, is the man who must set Denmark right. Hamlet’s mother is, by Claudius’s own admission, “Th’ imperial jointress to this warlike state” (1.2.9). In one sense, she is emblematic of Denmark, hiding something rotten within that must be revealed and purged. Hamlet will set a glass not only to her soul but also to Denmark, and Hamlet will scourge her and Denmark.

By her son’s insistent verbal lashing, she is forced to see her true state, and in that condition, as Hamlet says himself, “who shall scape whipping?” (2.2.525). Gertrude does not escape Hamlet’s harsh verbal lashes, but his end is purgative. The level of inner turmoil he suffers suggests that his mother matters very much to him. He does not agonize over Claudius’s moral state, but he lingers over the notion of his mother’s inconstancy and apparent fickleness. The fact that Gertrude too has succumbed to the venomous duplicity in the realm causes Hamlet considerable anguish. He deplores the state of the realm, but he focuses his anguish particularly upon his mother. She must be restored as the realm must be restored. She, like Denmark, has been harmed by the evil that works through Claudius; thus, Heaven works through Hamlet to eradicate that evil. Before he goes to Gertrude’s closet, Hamlet reminds himself, “Let not ever/The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom” (3.2.384-85); he does not wish to kill his own mother, as did Nero.
Hamlet’s abhorrence of duplicity renders him the least politically motivated character in the play. Even Horatio, though constant in friendship with Hamlet, is not above the occasional diplomatic turn of phrase, such as when he tells Hamlet his return to Elsinore is precipitated by his duty in attending King Hamlet’s funeral, without mentioning the marriage of Hamlet’s mother to the new king. Hamlet’s temporary loss of emotional control in the closet scene seems more likely to be extreme anger than madness, outrage at the breach of order in Denmark.

Hamlet’s acerbic comments regarding his mother’s apparent fickleness are a denunciation of human frailty in a broader sense. Gertrude is Denmark. Like her country, she is rotten, harboring a rottenness that Hamlet feels duty-bound to remove. Before his untimely death, King Hamlet was Denmark; with his death, the transfer of the state would come through Gertrude to the man she marries, but the new king is not true Denmark. Claudius is a corrupt doppelganger of Denmark, usurping the true state that remains with Gertrude. Before he issues his famous comment, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (1.2.146), Hamlet calls this world “an unweeded garden,” one whose uses are “stale, flat, and unprofitable” (cf. 1.2.133-35). Janet Adelman likens this unweeded garden to Gertrude’s contaminated body, a sort of fallen state (17), but “this world” is more likely Denmark itself, Hamlet’s “prison,” and it is a world that must be scourged.

Gertrude is caught up in the duplicity of a world divided by usurpation. Only a purgative scourging will release the realm from its pollution. The crisis point of this verbal lashing of vice in Elsinore occurs in the closet scene, when Hamlet ministers cruel kindness to his mother. Michael Mooney, commenting on the closet scene, is correct in his simple, but vitally important, observation that this “scene reunites Hamlet and Gertrude. The arras that hung between them comes down” (98). Son and mother are once more bonded; the purgative scourging of Gertrude by her son has accomplished its task: the realm can begin its healing process, which will climax in the excision of the usurping agent, Claudius.

In her concern for her troubled son’s welfare, Gertrude agrees to participate in Polonius’s scheme, a subterfuge that costs the old man his life, and the queen pays with a severe verbal lashing from Prince...
Hamlet. He will not be denied his opportunity to reveal truth about the duplicitous world of Denmark, “You will not go till I set you up a glass/Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.18-19). His interest in driving his mother to see her own sin, her inner darkness, but he is so forceful in his manner with her that she questions in the next line whether he will murder her. Her outcry impels Polonius to reveal his presence behind the arras, a fatal action on the part of the old man. Hamlet uses his sword to kill Polonius, then he turns the razor sharpness of his words upon his frightened mother, “Peace, sit you down./And let me wring your heart; for so I shall/If it be made of penetrable stuff” (3.4.34-36). That emphasized word “peace” is a thrust of irony in the feverish pace of Hamlet’s onslaught on his mother’s vices, but it is also a clue that Hamlet’s apparent cruelty is motivated by kind intentions. Orestes’ comment to Dante in *Purgatorio*, “‘Love is the lash that scourges’” (13.39), is relevant here because Hamlet does care about his mother’s welfare.

He is a scourge who purges. His mother is joined to Claudius, the man whose fatal poisoning of Denmark’s true king began the spread of rottenness in the realm. Hamlet reminds Claudius that “man and wife is one flesh” (4.3.55), so the prince calls Claudius his “mother,” signifying that Claudius has corrupted her. The prince is most concerned that his mother has succumbed to the pollution that pervades the realm, and he wishes to spare her the consequences of such compromise; he warns her, beckoning to her,

Confess yourself to heaven,

Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come;

And do not spread the compost on the weeds

To make them ranker. (3.4.151-54)

He is concerned for his mother’s soul. The idea that the scourge is associated with penance was common enough in Shakespeare’s England, noted in the flagellants discussed earlier in this essay. He is not set upon destroying his mother. Even in his exceeding displeasure with her regarding her “o’er-hasty
marriage” (2.2.57), he had been willing to respond to her: “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1.2.120).

Had he not cared for Gertrude, it would not matter to him that she had strayed, in Hamlet’s view, from the path of virtue to the primrose path of dalliance with Claudius. Her fickleness threatens the stability of Hamlet’s worldview because she is Denmark. In the closet scene, Hamlet, following the example of the heavenly Father, is chastening one whom he loves; he is not destroying one for whom he has only contempt. Roland Mushat Frye rightly asserts, “It is thus a work of charity which Hamlet performs in his mother’s chamber” (162). Hamlet loves his mother enough to confront her with her own darkness in the hope that she might repent.

It is this love that drives him to apply his verbal lash with such force that he flays Gertrude’s heart open, whereupon she cries, “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.158). She had already told him, “O speak to me no more./these words like daggers enter my ears” (3.4.323-24). He used a sword to kill Polonius and now figurative verbal daggers to open Gertrude, yet he calls himself a scourge. He flays her verbally to open her own eyes to her sinful nature.

The whipping image has already been established by this time in the play, specifically when Hamlet tells Polonius: “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?” (2.2.524-25). Later, Polonius’s words are a lash to the king’s conscience (3.1.49-50), directly connecting words to the lash. Thus, this image is set in principle early in the play—before the climactic closet scene.

Hamlet’s purpose is redemptive toward his mother. He sets up a glass to her inward parts and wrings her heart. As indicated in the first chapter, Prosser argues, “Hamlet does not excoriate Gertrude in words befitting a man of rational discipline, much less a minister of God whose only purpose is the salvation of his hearer” (196), but Prosser focuses here on Hamlet’s momentary extreme passion rather than his underlying motivation, which is setting the time aright, righting what is wrong. Hamlet bids Gertrude to confess what has been and avoid what is to come.

His efforts to open her eyes to her sin are violent, but successful. Gertrude sees her inner
darkness and bemoans it:

O Hamlet, speak no more.

Thou turn’st my eyes into my very soul,

And there I see such black and grained

As will not leave their tinct. (3.4.88-91)

She is faced with her sin. She experiences in this scene a type of anagnorisis. Hamlet has helped her to see her flawed self. Thus Hamlet acts as her confessor in this scene. John Barton says of the duties of a confessor that as “God’s minister he should act in conformity with the ways of divine providence which inflicts temporal punishment after the guilt has been forgiven” (86). Gertrude has shown an abhorrence of what she sees in herself, and she asks what she must do.

Prosser sees in the closet scene a penitential restoration brewing that is impeded by the appearance of the Ghost: “Nonetheless, Gertrude’s cries of anguish indicate that [Hamlet’s] words have moved her beyond mere terror to the first conviction of sin, and it seems likely that she will repent. At that moment the Ghost enters” (197). In Prosser’s interpretation of the scene, the Ghost’s appearance prevents Gertrude from repenting: “The fleeting moment of proffered grace is gone” (198). Prosser then affirms that Gertrude gives no evidence of repentance (198). Anthony Miller echoes Prosser’s view when he states, “Hamlet seems to win over Gertrude but with the appearance of the ghost he seems to lose her” (4). Gertrude’s moment of self-discovery hinges not upon the condition of her son’s mind, but on her own inner awareness. She has seen the condition of her soul, and she asks her confessor, her son Hamlet, what she should do as a penance.

In his comment on Hamlet’s line, “For this same lord,/I do repent […] (3.4.174-75), Harry Morris rightly maintains, “Following the ritual with his mother, Hamlet illustrates the pattern, shows her the road to redemption as he initiates his own purification” (56). After the Ghost leaves and Gertrude expresses her concern over his apparent madness, Hamlet confides in her about his pending trip to
England and about his view of his two “friends” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This is reconciliation at work. Gertrude, when Claudius joins her in the next scene, attributes Hamlet’s murder of Polonius to madness; she is protecting her son. Gertrude keeps the main content of Hamlet’s exchange with her from Claudius, a fact consistent with her own admission: “Be thou assur’d, if words be made of breath,/And breath of life, I have no life to breathe/What thou hast said to me” (3.4.199-201). She protects her son from what she sees as the likely possibility of a harsh judgment from Claudius.

Before considering Hamlet’s interactions with Claudius, it is appropriate here to comment on Hamlet’s relationship with Claudius’s two spies. Hamlet’s two school friends, whom he would trust as “adders fang’d” (3.1.205), form a human hendiadys. They are interchangeable, a factor that Shakespeare highlights when he includes the following expression of gratitude by the king and queen toward them:

KING. Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

QUEEN. Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz. (2.2.33-34)

Or, as Robert Hunter puts it, “Thanks gentle Tweedledee and gentle Tweedledum” (123). One could easily be the other. They are a physical manifestation of the duplicity in the realm, and they are themselves a manifestation of their own duplicity. More than a two-faced man, they are a two-man face, a unit formed of two.

Their job is to spy on their friend, and later to escort Hamlet to his doom; it is a duty perhaps, but it is an employment to which they “make love” (5.2.57). Roland Mushat Frye points out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ‘had elected to play a deadly game against their prince […]’, and he adds that few “if any [of the Globe audience] would have felt that [Hamlet’s] conscience should be disturbed by the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were merely cat’s-paws for the assassin Claudius” (262). These cat’s-paws are more interested in keeping the king’s favor than they are in being Hamlet’s friend and confidant. These two men may be concerned about their friend, but they will not tell him the truth. When Hamlet asks, “What news?” Rosencrantz replies, “None, my lord, but the world’s grown honest,”
to which Hamlet quips, “Then is doomsday near. But your news is not true” (2.2.336-38). These are not perceptive, or honest, men. They, along with the king, think that they know what is best for the troubled prince; they need not consult with him. They have only to follow through with their scheme. Even when Hamlet gives them an opportunity to tell him the truth, they remain evasive.

But Hamlet sees through their ruse and forces them to admit that they are spying on him for the king. It is the duplicity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in particular, their attempts to probe into their friend’s inner world to trap him, that ignites Hamlet to wield his verbal lash. He asks Guildenstern (it could as easily have been Rosencrantz) to play the recorder, and Guildenstern replies that he cannot. Hamlet assures his friend, “It is as easy as lying.” (3.2.348). When Guildenstern insists that he is unskilled in the playing of this instrument, Hamlet lashes him:

> You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass [...]. S’blood, do you think I am easier to play than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me. (3.2.355-363)

Hamlet uses “seem” because he is not duplicitous in nature, though he is capable of acting. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may seem to know Hamlet’s stops, but their duplicity cannot open Hamlet’s depths to them. He forbids them entry into his confidence. In keeping with the decline of Denmark, Hamlet’s two friends are duplicitous. They are “as adders fanged” and must be scourged from Denmark.

This venom of duplicity flows through words; it enters via the ears, as symbolized by the poison Claudius poured in King Hamlet’s ear; therefore it must be combated by words. Hamlet’s tone with his two friends in the passage quoted above is unmistakably harsh and reproving. He rebukes them for their employment as spies; he verbally scourges them for their folly, lashing out at them with deep indignation. Like Polonius, they are first scourged purgatively (verbally), then punitively. They are victims of their own complicity with the corrupted state.

In this state, Claudius is not the rightful king. William Tyndale warns explicitly in his treatise *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, “Neither may the inferior person avenge himself upon the superior or
violently resist him for whatever wrong it be. If he do he is condemned in the deed doing: inasmuch as he taketh upon him that which belongeth to God only which saith vengeance is mine and I will reward (Deuteronomy 22)” (38). Shakespeare seems to present an exegetical quandary concerning the scriptural injunction to which Tyndale alludes. God places a usurper as a scourge, but only He may remove one.

Claudius is a murderer and a usurper, but he seems to be an efficient monarch. Northrop Frye calls him “a strong and attractive monarch” (92). He manages difficult situations smoothly and with fine political acumen, being careful to observe the trends in public opinion (for example as pertaining to his nephew) while maintaining the welfare of the realm with careful to details. He manages Norway without goading that nation into further violent action against Denmark, achieving a truce, if an uneasy one. He is able to marry Gertrude without inciting division among his courtiers; indeed, only Hamlet seems to object. He reaches out to Hamlet with an amiable and beneficent demeanor, reminding Hamlet of the duty of his princely position, warning him about taking his mourning to the point that they interfere with this duty: “It shows a will most incorrect to heaven” (1.2.95). Claudius cleverly concludes his gentle reproval of Hamlet with an announcement that Hamlet will be his successor.

Claudius’s character seems respectable and “correct.” Hamilton compares the Claudius of 3.3 with Prince Hamlet, observing:

When we look at Claudius’s words in the scene, we are confused. In some ways, he is more impressive than Hamlet himself. It may be that, as he states, he cannot pray. But his words at the kneeling bench are a beautiful description of the meaning of prayer, forgiveness and repentance [….] Knight refers to Claudius’s words as ‘that most beautiful prayer of a stricken soul.’ (204)

But Claudius moans that he “cannot repent” (3.3.66). By his own admission, he does not wish to give up the effects of his ill-gotten crown: “My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (3.3.55). This is not evidence of a respectable character. Hunter observes, “From the Calvinist perspective, Claudius is given a taste of divine goodness, a temporary faith that moves him to an unsuccessful try at contrition” (112). Claudius’s “thoughts remain below,” and he concludes morosely, “Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97-98). Words must have substance.
Early in the play, Claudius’s manner with Hamlet is fatherly, and his words demonstrate wisdom and concern. These are the actions of an able leader, an astute king who seems to care for his realm and who has the courage to face the challenges of his new position. He is tender with Gertrude; he calms the acrimonious Laertes, who returns with deadly manner after hearing of his father’s murder, handling the incensed son of Polonius with deft skill and concern.

Claudius confesses to the fratricide by which he achieved the throne and won the Queen of Denmark. He lives a life of subterfuge, of constant deceit. He tries unsuccessfully to eliminate his troubling nephew-stepson. Claudius convinces Laertes to act dishonorably in their scheme to kill Hamlet. His sin troubles him, but he is unwilling to give up its rewards. Hamlet boils within Claudius’s conscience: “For like the hectic in my blood he rages,/And thou [England] must cure me” (4.3.69-70). Claudius, however, is the disease that Hamlet must cure. Hamlet prepares the body of Denmark for its cure by scourging its members.

Hamlet has already verbally lashed Polonius when he calls the older man a fishmonger (2.2.171-219) and when he chides Polonius concerning how Polonius will accommodate the players (2.2.524-29), and he has lashed Ophelia in the nunnery scene (3.1.103-51). Hamlet also lashes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he bids the latter to play the pipe (3.2.341-63), but not before Hamlet scourges Claudius by means of “The Mousetrap.” Hamlet does not desire Claudius’s purgation, but rather his damnation. The prince comments to Guildenstern that for “me to put [Claudius] to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler” (3.2.297-98). Hamlet continues the attack on the monarch’s conscience sharply begun by Polonius’s comment,

‘Tis too much prov’d, that with devotion’s visage

And pious action we do sugar o’er

The devil himself. (3.1.47-49)

The play within the play drives Claudius to his knees, and, though the king cries out for the ability to
repent, he cannot release his “limed soul [...] struggling to be free” (3.3.68). These words lash the king into desiring some light (cf. 3.2.263). Hamlet’s ultimate action against Claudius will be one of physical retribution. It is not a purgative action, steeped in passionate words. The sword will pierce Claudius, and he will drink of his own poison. It is the Providential plan to punish Claudius for his evil.

The Providence to whom Shakespeare refers is the plan and oversight of the Judeo-Christian Deity of the Bible. Hamlet states directly, “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.215-16), a reference to a comment by Jesus recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: “Are not two sparowes solde for a farthinge? And none of them dothe lyght on the grounde, with out youre father” (Matt. 10.29 Tyndale 1534). Shakespeare provides clues regarding the nature of the Deity who has a Providential plan to scourge Denmark. He fixes His canon against self-slaughter; His eye is on the sparrow.

A.C. Bradley sees Hamlet’s embrace of Providence as fatalistic, as he comments that Hamlet’s lines in favor of Providence “seem to express that kind of religious resignation which, however beautiful in one aspect, really deserves the name of fatalism rather than that of faith in Providence, because it is not united to any determination to do what is believed to be the will of Providence” (140-41). The play centers on Prince Hamlet’s struggle to accomplish what he perceives to be his Heaven-ordained mission: to be a scourge and minister to Denmark. Eleanor Prosser disagrees with Bradley, “I find no sign of despair in [Hamlet’s] dying words, no suggestion that nothing matters any more” (238). That Hamlet does not strongly reaffirm his sense of mission as scourge in the last scene of the play suggests that he sees it in the expanded frame of a larger picture. He cooperates with Providence.

Hamlet marvels at his deliverance from Claudius’s edict of death at the hands of the English king; he is amazed by his experience with the pirates. In a letter to Horatio, he notes that these pirates turn out to be “thieves of mercy” (4.6.19) who happen to rescue the prince from his fate. Later, Horatio asks Hamlet how the prince was able to seal his “new commission” (5.2.32) to England. Hamlet replies, “Why, even in that was heaven ordinant./I had my father’s signet in my purse,/Which was the model of that Danish seal” (5.2.48-50). This convinces Hamlet of the Providence over the world; Hamlet is aware that Providence will see to the restoration of the kingdom, that he needs to be available and willing to
cooperate as Providence’s scourge and minister.

In his *Enchiridion*, Saint Augustine observes: “For [God] judged it better to bring good out of evil, than not to permit any evil to exist” (33). The biblical pattern is that God brings good out of evil. The Ghost’s message alerts Hamlet to the nature of the evil in Denmark and enables him to maintain vigilance. Providence, through Hamlet, ultimately purges Denmark: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). This divinity that shapes his ends allows the apparition of the Ghost, and Hamlet chooses “to be,” to comply with Providence.

Robert Hunter calls the Ghost a “hybrid,” stating that the Ghost “comes from purgatory […] but his behavior is distinctly nonpurgatorial” (104). This issue bears on the reader’s interpretation of the Ghost’s nature. The Ghost, arising from Purgatory, commences the scourging of Denmark that Hamlet undertakes. The Ghost’s words act as a lash to the Prince of Denmark. Dover Wilson observes, “The Ghost, departing after the delivery of his mission, leaves his son in a pitiable condition” (90).

Whether the Ghost hails from Purgatory or from Hell bears on Hamlet’s role as scourge. Battenhouse states, “Critics who judge the Ghost to be a spirit of darkness tempting Hamlet to evil are now many” (435). One of those critics is Prosser, who, however, notes that the Ghost in *Hamlet* is the only specter in Elizabethan and Jacobean about which there is even any subtle suggestion that it returns from Purgatory (105).

Michael Andrews bolsters Prosser’s hint by observing that Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio are “uncertain about the Ghost, not convinced that it is evil” (21), and Andrews presents evidence that Horatio must be certain of the Ghost’s nature: “It would be a fine act of friendship to summon Hamlet to a conference with a demon” (22). Horatio, the former unbeliever, becomes a believer in the world beyond, and, before Hamlet speaks with the Ghost, Horatio states, “Heaven will direct it” (1.4.91). Harold Jenkins agrees that “[…] the Ghost is finally established as a truthful witness” (“To Be” 16). Sister Miriam Joseph also sees the Ghost as God-directed: “If the Ghost is a good spirit, as Hamlet is satisfied he is after the play-test, he could not come without God’s permission, and as a saved soul confirmed in grace he could not command Hamlet to do evil. The command he brings can come only
from God, the sole master of life and death” (501).

In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt builds a convincing case for the notion that the Ghost comes from Purgatory, focusing particularly on the importance of Saint Patrick in the doctrine of Purgatory. Greenblatt methodically establishes through his examination of the lore of Purgatory the importance of remembering the souls of the departed, and he concludes that when Hamlet uses the clause “hath kill’d my king” (5.2.64), “the remembrance of the dead has become depersonalized” (226).

Greenblatt’s findings argue for the Ghost’s being a Purgatorial spirit. If Hamlet is prompted to revenge by Hell alone, then he is an evil scourge who will be damned. If he is willingly guided by Providence, then he serves the purposes of Providence, who cares for the fall of a sparrow. Hamlet tests to learn whether the Ghost’s claim is true that it is, “Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,/And for the day confin’d to fast in fires” (1.5.10-11) and tests whether it is “a spirit of health or goblin damn’d” (1.4.40). The key words in the first quotation are “for a certain term.” If the Ghost is honest, then Hamlet’s duty is clear. He must become Denmark’s scourge and minister and bring good out of evil.

The Ghost is careful in its choice of words; it does not tell Hamlet to damn Claudius or how to enact revenge. Andrews observes, “What is striking is the terrible freedom Hamlet is given. He must decide how to secure vengeance. No advice is given” (26). It warns Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.85), and it shows concern for Gertrude, “Leave her to heaven” (1.5.86). The Ghost centers its request to Hamlet in terms that emphasize the welfare of Denmark while encompassing the personal wrong perpetrated against Hamlet’s father: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damned incest” (1.5.82-83). The Ghost never tells Hamlet explicitly to kill Claudius. The Ghost leaves Hamlet with a great deal of latitude in carrying out this commission: “howsomever thou pursuest this act [...]” (1.5.84).

The connection between Providence and the Ghost is important. Hunter states, “The world which Shakespeare creates in Hamlet includes a God, and the ghost is the first and most striking indication of His existence and nature [...] Providence has been at work always and in everything” (105). Hunter
concludes, “Hamlet’s evil impulses are directed by providence to a good end. Claudius’s good impulses fail of their object and that failure is the cause of even greater evil than the sin which set the tragic action in motion” (114). Hamlet becomes a scourge of Claudius’s evil deeds.

Hamlet embraces Providence. Matthew Proser notes “kingly resignation and maturity” (111) in the prince. Irving Ribner is correct when he affirms, “In the fifth act Hamlet has submitted to the will of God, and in this very act of submission he has attained his victory” (80). With verbal lashes and with sword, Hamlet succeeds to drive evil from Denmark.

In summary, Hamlet’s dealings with the other characters in the play reveal a purgative and a punitive scourge in action. He reproves with words, verbally lashing the vice and folly of others. His zeal for virtue and constancy in the realm drive him to confront Ophelia in the nunnery scene and his mother in the closet scene. He is motivated by a concern for their virtue, and he desires that both be freed from the dictates of sinful flesh. He pines for a righteous Denmark, and he knows he must set the time aright. When necessary, he uses the sword as well, administering divine justice to the unrepentant Claudius. Hamlet is not evil; he is man who embraces Providence.
Two critical camps of critics are divided over the meaning of the terms “scourge” and “minister.” One group argues that the terms are mutually exclusive: a scourge is an evil avenger, a person to be damned, yet employed by Providence for punitive ends, while a minister is a heavenly emissary of divine justice, a good person who merits salvation. The other camp maintains that the terms are not exclusive in meaning, that a scourge need not necessarily be evil, nor a minister necessarily good. The position of the latter group is correct. Hamlet embraces Providence and becomes a scourge to cleanse Denmark.

This essay has argued that Hamlet is not evil and that he is a divinely commissioned scourge. Wright calls Hamlet a scourging minister, a minister who scourges, but it is more accurate to state that Hamlet is a scourge who ministers. He administers divine justice, expressed in both purgative and punitive ways. He is both a purgative scourge and a punitive scourge. He is a purgative verbal lash, employed against the folly of his realm, and he bears a sword of punitive justice.

The argument offered by Bowers, and critics who agree with him, that Hamlet is an evil scourge, misreads history and Shakespeare. Not all scourges are evil. Hamlet is a scourge who is human. He wrestles with his role and his duty, but in the end he embraces it, and he embraces Providence. Hamlet is not a villain. He makes mistakes. His murder of Polonius tragically affects Ophelia, the girl he loves. He zealously longs for moral and spiritual stability in Elsinore. He lashes the “flesh” and extols the ideals of virtue.

Providence employs Hamlet to purge Denmark. Evil is punished and removed, and Hamlet is an instrument in the judgment of Claudius. Gertrude is shrived; she sees her inner darkness and wrestles with it. Horatio, who is spared from suicide by the dying Hamlet, lives to tell Hamlet’s story.

Hamlet is not the typical conqueror-scourge, such as Alexander or Attila, nor is he an evil agent who is sent to destroy an erring kingdom and then who is damned. Hamlet values virtue, constancy, and, above all, honesty. He cannot abide duplicity. He reproves and punishes the rottenness that threatens to, and begins to, unravel the fabric of Denmark. Like Jonah, he makes mistakes. He is zealous for justice, and
his outlook is not always redemptive. He wishes Claudius damned. He is zealous for virtue, and Denmark is filled with corruption.

Calling himself Heaven’s “scourge and minister,” he acknowledges and embraces his divinely commissioned role to restore the kingdom’s loss of order caused by Claudius’s usurpation. He is greatly troubled by his mission, but he knows that he must set the time right. He trusts Providence, and achieves his goal. Through Hamlet, the Almighty effects purgation and punishment in the healing of a breach of order. When Hamlet finally gasps his final words, “The rest is silence” (5.2.363), he has completed his task. Denmark’s wound is cleansed. The scourging is completed.
Endnotes

1 All citations from *Hamlet* are taken from *The Arden Shakespeare* edition, edited by Harold Jenkins.

2 Luther comments on Jerome’s interpretation of the last verse included in the passage (from Isaiah 28) cited above: “Jerome applies this to marriage, where the husband says to his wife: ‘the bed is too narrow, it cannot hold both me, your husband, and an adulterer. Either I or the adulterer has to fall out of it’ ” (Works 16.233. Also see Jerome, *Commentaries* 9.335). Adultery connects to the incestuous sheets of the usurper Claudius and his new queen.

3 The Douay-Rheims Old Testament was printed in 1609-10, and the New Testament was printed in 1582.

4 Wycliffe’s translation of the Bible exists in two versions. The first version, begun by Wycliffe’s disciple Nicholas Hereford and completed by a number of his associates, was completed in 1382, while the second was completed by Wycliffe’s amanuensis John Purvey in 1395. The earlier (Hereford) version is quoted in this section.

5 Wycliffe, the translators of the Douay-Rheims, and the translators of the Authorized, or King James Version, also translate *phragellion* as “scourge,” whereas translations after the Authorized Version employ the word “whip.”
Works Cited


