APPENDIX C

**Hamlet:**
"What a Piece of Work Is a Man!"

This, the most explicit statement of Hamlet on what man is (II.ii. 295 ff.), is constructed on the same principle of the antithesis of man and animal as the passage investigated in Appendix A. It is more complex philosophically, for it draws on the various aspects of the *conjunctio oppositorum* in man. Hamlet's assessment forms a cryptic answer to Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's probing for the secret of his melancholy: "I have of late—but wherefore I know not—," the prince explains, "lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise." And Hamlet goes on to paint a picture of the world and of man that delights him no longer. The humanistic orations on the dignity of man that have been cited as analogues prove Hamlet's speech—and the orations themselves—to be a web of commonplaces; the correspondence of its structure to that of the eighth psalm and the parallels to exegeses of the biblical account of creation that have been pointed out demonstrate the theological orthodoxy.\(^1\) One must realize that the eighth psalm was for the humanists and theologians a major source for the theme of "the dignity of man"—the heading the psalm has in the Genevan Bible—and that it suggested descriptions of man according to his creation. But since the indebtedness of Hamlet's words to theological patterns has been expertly examined by others, I shall stress their conformity to the philosophical background.

When Hamlet looks first at the universe before considering man, he follows not only the structure of the psalm but also the demand of Cicero in *Tusculan Disputations* (V.69-70) to study first the revolution of the spheres so that the soul might know its own self and feel its union with the divine mind.\(^2\) This macrocosm-microcosm sequence was almost automatic in Renaissance treatises. Pierre
de La Primaudaye, for instance, began his chapter "Of Man" with a rotund praise of the heavens, and Guillaume du Vair turned his eyes upward before asking man to "look into himself." The familiar sequence, "this great world," followed by "man that is so glorious a creature," is about all that is left of Hamlet's speech in the doggerel verse of the First Quarto (1603); the adapter, whoever he was, that mangled some of Shakespeare's best philosophical passages knew at least enough not to tamper with the order!

When Hamlet appraises the macrocosm, he does so by paraphrasing the biblical account of creation as did, with slightly different details, La Primaudaye and du Vair. Hamlet first considers the earth: "this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory." Then he appraises the heavens, which appear nothing to him "but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours." In the descriptions of the heavens, modern editors generally prefer the version of Quarto 2: "this most excellent Canopie the ayre, look you, this braue o'erhanging firmament, this maiesticall roofe fretted with golden fire." This version, however, obscures the essential bipartition of the creation: first God created the earth, then the "firmament." The latter was, as the Genevan sidenote to Genesis 1: 6 explained, again bipartitioned into "spreading over, and air." The version of the Folio corresponds to the biblical dualism: [1] "this most excellent Canopy the Ayre, look you," [2] "this braue o'erhanging, this Maiesticall Roofe, fretted with golden fire." The "overhanging" is thus in turn partitioned into a "roof" and its upper adornment, the sphere of golden fires.

Some recent editors' preference for the version of Quarto 2 has created havoc with the interpretation of Hamlet's assessment of the microcosm and has led one commentator to sense a lack of balance, an abruptness, and repudiation of the traditional world picture. But the Folio version, which appears to me distinctly preferable, is clearly balanced. It will be instructive to set the two side by side:

**Quarto 2 (1604):**

What peece of worke is a man, how noble in reason, how infinit in faculties, in forme and mouing, how expresse and admirable in action, how like an Angell in apprehension, how like a

**Folio (1623):**

What a piece of worke is a man! how Noble in Reason? how infinite in faculty? in forme and mouing how expresse and admirable? in Action, how like an Angel? in apprehension, how like a
Appendixes

Hamlet's topic sentence, "What a piece of work is a man," echoes the "what is man" of the psalm. As the Genevan side-note explained, man, "touching his first creation," was lower than God. Hamlet's phrase, "piece of work," is a reminder that man was created by God of the earth, and thus differed fundamentally from God. As John 3:31, puts its, "He that is from on high is above all; he that is of the earth is of the earth and speaketh of the earth. He that is come from heaven is above all." The Genevan-Tomson side-note explained that he that is of the earth is "nothing else but man, a piece of work made of the slime of the earth."

Hamlet then pays tribute to the nobility of man's reason—both theologians and philosophers saw in it man's greatest gift—but he balances the praise by also admiring the powers of the soul in general: "how noble in reason? how infinite in faculty?" The Quarto's "how infinite in faculties" is surely incorrect; the soul could be considered infinite in its power or potentiality, but not in the number of its faculties. As a unit, it had one "faculty." For instance, Timothy Bright explained that the soul "is able, with one universal and simple faculty, to perform so many varieties of actions as the instrument by which it performeth them carrieth an apt inclination thereto."

Because man was created in the image and likeness of God primarily through his soul and secondarily through his body, Hamlet now considers the body: "In form and moving how express and admirable?" I fail to understand the sense of "how infinite in faculties, in form and moving," as some editors, in agreement with the Quarto, divide. (To introduce "faculty" from the Folio into this confusion does not improve it.) Shakespeare, in the Folio version, speaks in terms of the creation of man in the "image" of God. "Form" and "express" go particularly well with "image," for the latter word, as John Woolton explained, for some theologians meant anything that is...
either in painting or graving or by another means expressed after
the example of another matter. . . . The word “image” therefore
appertaineth unto the form, and “similitude” unto nature. . . . An
“image” is an outward bodily form or fashion, expressing or repre­
senting any man.7

Man thus expresses the divine form, but no matter how “express and
admirable” his body is, it is still—as is implied in “form and mov­
ing”—his animal part, for animals as well as men possessed the
faculties of sense and motion.

But Genesis 1:26 said that man was created not only in the
“image,” but also in the “likeness” (or “similitude”) of God; and
in Woolton’s definition “a similitude is a quality of the mind which
we imitate and follow.” Hamlet therefore turns once more to the
primary resemblance of man to God: “in action, how like an angel?
in apprehension how like a God?” The twofold evocation “angel”
and “God” may well have come from the psalm, which in one ver­
sion, that of the prayerbook, reads, “thou madest him lower than
the angels,” and in another, that of the Genevan, “a little lower than
God.” But the angels also fitted into the hierarchical Elizabethan
world picture; and “angel . . . God” was another balanced dou­
blet. This action of the angels has disturbed some commentators;
but in the general Christian tradition, angels have always been
vigorous ministers of God’s will, swift of motion, like flames of
fire, riding the moving clouds. The “form and moving” of Ham­
let’s preceding sentence offers indeed an excellent transition to the
“action” of the angels. An Elizabethan who had been told that an­
gels were incapable of action might have retorted with Barckley
that man could well take the example of the angels for his action:

If felicity, as the philosophers affirm, be the proper action of man,
. . . it must be an action peculiar and proper to him alone. And
seeing that man is made of two distinct natures, . . . it is more
reason that this felicity should be agreeable with the best part of
his nature, which is a reasonable soul, and resembleth the angels
that are made after the image of God, than with the worst part of
his nature, which resembleth and is of the like substance to brute
beasts.8

The “action” of the angels, of which Hamlet speaks, is a spiritual
activity, and the idea is rhetorically balanced by the “apprehension”
of God. And not only rhetorically. The division of action and ap­
prehension corresponds to the ultimately Aristotelian division of the
mind into an active and a speculative or contemplative part, or, simply, into judgment and will. Shakespeare knew this division, as can be inferred from Desdemona's "my speculative and active instruments" (Quarto i), or (in the Folio) "my speculative and offic'd instrument" (I.iii.270). "Offic'd" (which I prefer) is a particularly appropriate term for the active mind because it has an association with the angels, whom Shakespeare elsewhere called "offic'd" (All's Well, III.ii.125)—the office of the angels, of course, being to serve God. As Peter Martyr explained: "They execute the office committed to them by God, both wisely and speedily, which two things are most worthily commended in ministers and ambassadors. For then they rightly execute their office if they join celerity with wisdom." There could be no more appropriate way to praise the active part of the mind than to liken it to the action of the angels. And "apprehension" is similarly appropriate for the contemplative mind because it designated the highest activity of the rational mind, completely abstracted from the body, that draws man closest to God. As Calvin said, "we have no apprehension of the heavenly life when we are tied to this world." Hamlet thus proceeds properly from the action of the angels to the apprehension of God; by contrast, the Quarto's "how like an angel in apprehension, how like a God," makes the angels inactive and ends in a direct comparison of man and God that to the Elizabethans must have sounded less than proper, if not blasphemous.

In the concluding section of his appraisal, Hamlet considers once more man's physical nature, and he does so in a characteristically balanced antithesis: man is "the paragon of animals" but also "the quintessence of dust." The Genevan side-note to the psalm expressed a similar contrast when it reminded man that he owed his existence to God, for whom "it had been sufficient...to have set forth His glory by the heavens though he had not come so low as to man, which is but dust." Man is a proud and yet a wretched thing.

The phrase "quintessence of dust" is something of a discordia concors itself. Man was "quintessenced" because, as the duke in Measure for Measure explained, he existed "on many a thousand grains / That issue out of dust" (III.i.20–21). The process of quintessencing was the attempt to distill a fifth essence or element from the other four; Aristotle was thought to have identified this fifth essence with man's mind. But this idea was generally declared to be theologically unsound. As Sir John Davies noted, no air, fire,
earth, or water can be found in the operations of the soul, which operations are excellent beyond anything found in the elements: “What alchemist can draw with all his skill / The quintessence of these out of the mind?” Yet the idea lingered, and Du Bartas, although he denied Aristotle’s account, still thought of the soul as a certain kind of fifth essence, even though not a chemical one, when it rises in a mystic flight from the dull earth and, mounting to heaven, “quintessences” man in God. The phrase “quintessence of dust” that strikes one as so Shakespearean in its intensity thus has an overtone of admiration; it is the deprecating yet transcendent touch that completes Hamlet’s picture of man.

But with all its beauty and complexity, Hamlet’s picture of man is essentially a conventional picture, put together according to humanistic formulas. If Shakespeare ever wrote an essay on homo in grammar school, he was likely to have used some or all of the ideas in Hamlet’s speech; even a modern scholar’s little Latin allows him to put together a fair approximation of the content of Hamlet’s speech by selecting appropriate quotations under such rubrics as mundus, homo, and anima in commonplace books like Nannus Mirabellius’s Polyanthea. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with the technique of “finding out” pertinent “places” for philosophical themes and putting them together in rhetorical patterns. In composing his Oration on the Dignity of Man, Pico presumably used the same method, as the beginning of his speech indicates: “It is a commonplace of the schools that man is a little world, in which we may discern a body mingled of earthly elements, an ethereal breath and the vegetable life of the plants, and the intelligence of the angels and a likeness to God.” The basic learning of the Renaissance was available at Stratford-on-Avon as well as in Florence.

The Elizabethans were taught by their humanistic schoolmasters to admire and imitate philosophical topoi. They had not yet lost what Douglas Bush has called “the courage of the commonplace.” Shakespeare had this quality to the highest degree, and he had the skill to practice it. He who, according to Francis Meres, distilled in his poetry “the sweet witty soul of Ovid,” also knew how to quintessence philosophic commonplace. In doing so, he imprinted his poetic genius on material, conventional in kind, with which the labors of theologians and humanists and, more directly, of preachers and schoolmasters had provided him in the hope that he might thus learn to know himself.