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How Lutherans Read the Bible

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The “Strange Acts of God:” The Hermeneutics of Concealment and Revelation in Luther and Shakespeare

By Tibor Fabiny

Abstract: Martin Luther called himself “God’s court-jester”. He saw history as one of the “masks of God,” and he understood God as hiding Godself often behind the mask of the Devil. Luther developed a paradoxical theology, a theology of the cross, that is surprisingly compatible in certain respects with the paradoxical artistic vision of Shakespeare, especially in *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*. Crucial motifs of Luther’s theology—the hidden God, indirect revelation, revelation by concealment, revelation under the opposite, the “strange acts of God,” God’s “rearward parts” (*posteriora*), and suffering (*Anfechtungen* and melancholy)—resonate with certain latent, even if at times blasphemous, theological motifs and themes in Shakespeare. They also resonate with the experience of the Lutheran church in Hungary both in its past under communism and today in post-communist Hungary.

Key Terms: Martin Luther, William Shakespeare, Hungary, hermeneutics, hiddenness of God, theology of the cross.

The apostle Paul’s set of paradoxical oppositions between folly and wisdom, concealment and revelation, and suffering and redemption in 1 Corinthians 1–4 is often interpreted as a foundational text of Luther’s theology of the cross. In this essay I propose that these paradoxical oppositions in Luther’s theology find striking parallels in William Shakespeare’s tragic vision.

The Hungarian Lutheran Experience

My interest in bringing Luther and Shakespeare together in this way is inspired in part by my

experience as a son of a Lutheran pastor who was brought up in Communist Hungary where I experienced severe betrayals and suffering within the Lutheran church. As an adult, I learned of a faithful remnant, a true church in that age that was “cruciform.” The church’s true leaders were confessors who were willing to suffer for Christ. Neither the world nor the secularized, state-promoted leaders of the official church of that time were able to perceive that insight. Becoming a Shakespearean scholar, I was fascinated to learn that many Shakespearean “themes” echoed in powerful ways with the life of the church in the context of the totalitarian state: “world turned upside down,” “appearance versus reality,” “usurpers versus the banished rulers,”

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de facto Bishop versus the *de jure* Bishop, "disguised figures," "undercover state-agents." On the one hand, the church was threatened by the brutalities of dictatorship, deception, manipulation, fears, taboos, and betrayals. On the other hand, the church was sustained by the courage and faithfulness of a small minority. Indeed, these four decades (1948–1988) of Hungarian church history resonate in remarkable ways with Shakespeare's great tragedies.

If one carefully reads the autobiography of the faithful confessing Hungarian Bishop Lajos Ordass (1901–1978), it is impossible not to be impressed by the succession of extreme heights and depths in his story; his life had a decidedly *dramatic quality* to it. The testimony of Bishop Ordass during Communism is a living example of faithfulness to the cross, an attitude seen as foolishness by his contemporaries. Ordass experienced the hidden, inscrutable and unknowable God at his show-trial in September 1948 when he was allowed to speak before the court as it was about to recess to decide its verdict in the case against Ordass. His speech is a dramatic example of his personal testimony to the hidden and loving God of his faith. He said: "If I am convicted, then the conviction will become a veil that hides God's will from me and renders it incomprehensible to me. But I will accept it from the hand of God without grumbling. One thing I know—namely, that whatever happens to me is God's beneficial will." This personal experience is the background of the following essay concerning concealment and revelation in Luther and Shakespeare.¹

"The Masks of God" and the Dramatic Nature of Luther's Theology

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a German theologian who lived and worked two generations earlier than William Shakespeare, the English poet and playwright. Both Luther and Shakespeare were creative geniuses who overwhelmingly contributed to the making of Early Modern Europe.

I hope to demonstrate that the dramatic theological world of Martin Luther and the theologically-inspired dramatic world of William Shakespeare wrestle with certain key themes that are similar. What I hope to show, for example, is that Wittenberg is not just an accidental place but a thought-provoking metaphor in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is my hope to strike a rather new and meaningful path.

It is a commonplace to suggest that Luther was far from being a traditional systematic theologian. Of his personal dramatic temperament (conversion, temptations etc.) I shall speak later. Now there was definitely a dramatic aspect in his theology. Eric W. Gritsch has shown us that Luther's self image in his address *To the Nobility of the German Nation* was that of a "court-jester"² (*Hofnarr*). Gritsch notes that Luther appears

to have worn his heart on his sleeve, tipping his cap to the troubled consciences of common folk, ringing his bells to warn the mighty in both church and world of God's unyielding power, and tapping his feet to the tune of the gospel's cheering and chilling news of Christ's lordship in a world nearing its end.³

Indeed, Luther seems to have radically appropriated and even enacted St. Paul's paradox about wisdom and foolishness especially in his theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) to which we shall return later.

Moreover, Luther very frequently used such dramatic terms in his theology as "game," "laughter," "theater," "disguise," and "hiding." In 1532 he lectured on the "laughter of God" in Psalm 2, suggesting that God's laughter was a way of hiding his wrath from the stupidities of humankind. This should teach us, Luther argued, to laugh at our enemies in times of storm: "Then it will come about that we shall laugh at the fury of the Turk, the popes, tyrants, sects, heretics, and all the adversaries of Christ's kingdom, as a comical spectacle."⁴ In Luther's non-dogmatic dramatic theology, the polarities of comedy and tragedy, laughter and weeping, concealment and revelation, hiddenness and recognition are in a complementary relationship with each other. He knew the truth of what

Reinhold Niebuhr said in the 20th century: "Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer."⁵

The Various Masks of God

Luther never failed to emphasize the difference between the revealed and the hidden God (*deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*). The real God (*deus per se*), or, the naked God (*deus nudus*) is never identical with what we experience of him either in his revelation or his hiddenness. Luther frequently agrees with the apostle Paul (1 Cor 4:9) that Christians have become a "spectacle" for the world (*theatron to kosmo*). In this "theatre of the world" (*theatrum mundi*) where Satan and his angels disguise themselves as angels of light (2 Cor 11:14) and the Pope and the hypocrite clergy pose as representatives of God, it is necessary for God also to hide Godself under various masks.

Luther says: "When God reveals Himself to us, it is necessary for Him to do so through some such veil or wrapper and to say: 'Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me.'"⁶ One of his favorite quotations was Isaiah 45:15: "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself." Luther comments on this passage: "For under the curse a blessing lies hidden; under the consciousness of sin, righteousness; under death, life; and under affliction, comfort" (LW 4, 7).

Luther also spoke about creation and history as the "face or mask of God" (*larva dei*). "Now the whole creation is a face or mask of God. But here we need the wisdom that distinguishes God from His mask. The world does not have this wisdom. Therefore it cannot distinguish God from His mask" (LW 26, 94). For Luther God governs this world by secular roles and authorities: "those masks of judges, magistrates, teachers, doctors, and lawyers are necessary; ... it is God's will that under these masks you should serve His ordinance and man's need ... Without these masks peace and discipline could not be preserved." The whole world is a *Mummenschanz*, a masquerade and while a "masked

God may frighten others, Christians know that behind every divine mask there is a gracious God."⁷

God hides himself beneath human worldly powers (LW 9, 41) and human achievements about which humans are never meant to boast: "He should regard all such preparation and equipment as being the work of our Lord God under a mask, as it were, beneath which he himself alone effects and accomplishes what we desire." (LW 45, 331), "He uses our effort as a mask under which He blesses us" (LW 9, 96).

However, it is not only in creation or in our own efforts where God hides Godself but in the very word of God as well. With God's promises as masks, God protects human beings from the absolute, naked God. Concerning Psalm 51 he warns the reader not to interpret them as the words of the absolute (naked) God. David is "speaking with God as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name "God" we cannot exclude Christ ... We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us. This God, clothed ... in such a pleasant mask ... this God we can grasp and look at with joy and trust. ... Satan is busy day and night, making us run to the naked God so that we forget His promises" (LW 12, 312).

One of Luther's favorite biblical heroes is Joseph from the end of Genesis. Joseph was sold by his brothers and through much sufferings and afflictions he got to the court of the Pharaoh. "God allows Joseph to be crucified, hurled in prison" (LW 8, 30). "For he saw God's back and waited until God should reveal and show forth His salvation" (LW 7, 103). This Joseph who had been tortured both by his brothers and his God concealed his identity from his brothers when they came to Egypt. Instead of vengeance he, as Luther says, plays a "very pleasant delightful game" by hiding a cup in his younger brother Benjamin's sack (LW 7, 237). The brothers are afflicted just as he was tortured and tried by God. "At the end of the trial, however, they see the greatest goodwill and love. 'Ah, how friendly our brother Joseph meant to be to us!'" (LW 7, 237). For Luther Joseph thus becomes a God-figure: "After our liberation we have the same feeling

about God, who allows us to be tried and afflicted in order that we may prove what His good and pleasing will is (Rom. 12:2)" (LW 7, 237). Joseph acts in strange ways with his brothers just as God also acts in strange ways with afflicted human kind. "He afflicts us with evils and misfortunes of every kind" (LW 7, 237). Job in his sufferings also accuses God with lying. It is not God but we are the liars, says Luther. "For we hide our sins; we do not want to be guilty of the sins we have perpetrated. . . . God plays with us and says: 'Because you are well pleased with your hypocrisy, flatter yourself, and dream that you are cleansed of every sin, I will disclose to you and show you what kind of person you are in My sight and will remove from you that mask of smugness and hypocrisy'" (LW 7, 237).

Thus Joseph played the *deus absconditus* ("the hidden God") with his brothers; he tortured them to make them repent. His brothers were frightened, Luther relates, because they thought they were being confronted by the devil. But in the final recognition scene, Joseph reveals that "I am your brother Joseph" just as God had revealed his true self and true work (*opus proprium*) to Joseph after his "strange acts" (*opus alienum*). Like God, Joseph reveals his mercy and love for his brothers in an indirect way.

If the world is a huge masquerade where both God and Satan wear masks to hide themselves, the greatest problem for the believer is to recognize God under the mask. Thus Luther comments on Isaiah 45, 9:

The children of God have all the afflictions. The ungodly children of Satan enjoy the highest state of well being. Everything seems the opposite of what it should be. The godly are maltreated, the ungodly receive gifts. In this vein the flesh blasphemes the work of God. So today we see our word and God's Word to be futile, everything seems exactly the opposite of what it should be, and then we see God's work to be unjust. So God and Satan weary us with masks and external spirits so that we are led to believe that what is of God is Satan, and what is Satan is of God, and then we say in our heart, 'I wish I had never been born' (LW 17, 127).

Commenting on Galatians 5,11 Luther again remarks:

Thus God wears the mask of the devil, and the devil wears the mask of God; God wants to be recognized under the mask of the devil, and He wants the devil to be condemned under the mask of God (LW 27, 43).

God hides himself in the mask of his opposite. The culmination of God's hiddenness, according to Luther, is on the cross where the glory and the beauty of God is hidden in ugliness. It is where the Son of Man takes on the humility and ugliness of a "worm" with the words of Psalm 22 as quoted by Jesus from the cross. This worm, says Luther in his commentary on Psalm 8:4 "is mocked, spit upon, scourged, crowned, and crucified. . . . His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the sons of men. He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men" (LW 12, 123). The American Luther scholar Kenneth Hagen says: "The meaning of Christ as worm on the cross carried the connotations of Christ being abject, the object of contempt, forsaken, nauseating, abominable, rotten stench, scandal, offensive or, simply, rotting worm."⁸

The most horrible mask of God's Son is that of the worm. But that is not the end of the story. Commenting on the Genesis story of Sarah's death, Luther remarks:

It has pleased God to raise up from worms, from corruption, from the earth, which is totally putrid and full of stench, a body more beautiful than any flower, than balsam, than the sun itself and the stars (LW 4, 190).

Luther's Theology of the Cross

The theatrical metaphor, the idea of the mask, and the notion of revelation by concealment are not accidental images for Luther. They form a coherent theology that scholars have come to call *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross.

What is then, the subject matter of the theology of the cross? Against many misunderstandings and

misconceptions, Gerhard O. Forde says that "it is a particular perception of the world and our destiny, what Luther came to call looking at all things through suffering and the cross."⁹ He says that "it is so radical and deep for its time that it is still vital for our time,"¹⁰ This is a story that "claims us"¹¹ and wants us to become theologians of the cross.¹² It teaches us "to say what the thing is," "to call a spade a spade"¹³.

Luther first formulated his theology of the cross in the 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*. He called his theses "theological paradoxes" which was the reformers' new way of forming arguments against the traditional syllogism of scholastic theologians.

The central notion, the great divide between the way of glory and the way of the cross, is described in theses 19–21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*.

- 19 The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be theologian. (*Non ille dignus theologus dicitur, qui invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspicit.*)
- 20 The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian. (*Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.*)
- 21 The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross says what a thing is.¹⁴

The theology of glory wishes, with human achievement and free will, "to see through" the cross in order to find, by speculation, a "transcendent meaning" (virtue, wisdom, goodness, and the like) and contemplate the invisible greatness of God. But Luther believes that "peering into 'invisible things of God' only 'puffs up, blinds and hardens.'"¹⁵ But the cross teaches us to see differently. The cross is not transparent. We cannot look behind it. The cross is a mirror, and we have to look at it. We cannot explain the cross, but we do have to preach the cross. The theology of the cross reveals that things are not what they seem; it makes us recognize that there is a crucial discrepancy between appearance and reality. According to the theology of the cross, it is the cross that reverses our way of seeing.

Only by faith is it revealed that God concealed himself in the form of its opposite: in the shame of the cross. The cross cuts down the wisdom of the wise, the vision of the theologian of the glory. It is only through suffering and the cross that we can come to know God. Only through this suffering can we learn what things really are, that a spade is a spade.

The idea is that "God's revelation can take place in the form of opposites, *sub contrario*. God does his alien and wrathful work before he does his proper and loving work; he makes alive by killing, brings to heaven by going through hell, brings forth mercy out of wrath."¹⁶ The alien work is the *opus alienum* and the loving work is the *opus proprium*. In Isaiah 28, 21 it is called "the strange work" and "the strange act" of God. It is God who assaults and inflicts us; God causes the terrors of temptation, the *Anfechtungen*. In Forde's words: "Knowledge of God comes when God happens to us."¹⁷ Luther even goes so far as to suggest that God, in his alien work, becomes the devil for us before becoming God for us: "God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil. All that God speaks and does the devil has to speak and do first."¹⁸

Alister MacGrath mentions five marks of the theology of the cross:¹⁹ 1) *theologia crucis* is a theology of revelation rather than a theology of speculation. 2) This revelation must be regarded as indirect and concealed; 3) This revelation is to be recognized in the sufferings of the cross of Christ. 4) This knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation is a matter of faith. 5) God is particularly known through sufferings. God makes Godself known through sufferings. God is the source of *Anfechtung*. God assaults humans in order to break them down and thus to save them. It is significant that God is hidden, cloaking divine mercy under divine wrath.

Theological Potential in Shakespeare's Dramatic Art

What happens when we approach some of the tragedies of Shakespeare with Luther's unique theology

of revelation on our minds? A central premise of our argument is that several of Shakespeare's plays make implicit epistemological claims, both about the knowledge of self and the knowledge of reality. It should be noted that Shakespeare probably had no access to Luther's theology, and it is obvious that many of Shakespeare's core concerns were very different from those of the Wittenberg theologian. For Shakespeare's epistemological concerns about knowing reality and the discrepancy between appearance and reality, show and substance, concealment and revelation as well as themes of hiding under the mask of the opposite, the world turned upside down, wrong perception (blindness), the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God), the paradox of wisdom and foolishness, and suffering as means of self-knowledge—these all seem to have much in common with Luther's theology of the cross.

In what follows, we shall illustrate these issues of knowing reality in some of Shakespeare's plays. We will explore how the logic or mechanism of Luther's theology is very much present in the bard's plays, despite Shakespeare's apparent lack of overt interest in such matters as salvation, redemption, justification, and the like.

If we begin with Luther's interpretation of Joseph as a God-figure in Genesis, we may find in Shakespeare's plays several Joseph-like God figures who hide themselves under a mask or disguise in order to reveal themselves. We shall be concerned with the figure of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Prospero in *The Tempest*, and analyse some intriguing connections between Luther and *Hamlet* who is both Prince of Denmark and Student of Wittenberg.

Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*

The most ancient source of the plot of *Measure for Measure*, according to J.W. Lever's Arden edition, is the Latin letter written by the Hungarian student Macarius in 1547 (in the possession of the Hungarian National Archives). However, the

underlying story is actually much older. The story line is this: a wicked man pledges not to execute another man as long as his wife sleeps with the wicked man; but after lying with the other man's wife, the wicked man reneges on his promise and executes the man anyway. The same basic story also captured Luther's imagination as early as 1523.²⁰ Luther mentions that the story goes back to St Augustine's commentary on the Sermon of the Mount of the Lord (*De sermone Domini in monte*).²¹

Shakespeare, of course, made the story somewhat more complicated than his sources. He invented the figure of the Duke who disguised himself as a Friar to create order out of disorder, to test or even to torture his people so that they should gain a new understanding of themselves. By means of human standards his game was hazardous and even inhuman as he "by direction" was finding "directions out."

The Duke's figure is interpreted by István Géher as a real madman.²² Other scholars see the Duke as re-entering Vienna "like power divine" (5, 1, 367), revealing the wickedness of the human heart and the end of the play. In an earlier discussion of the play, I have argued that the play is

structured on the principles of hiding and uncovering, concealment and revelation, closure and disclosure. The structure of this play is similar to the structure of a symbol in so far as Duke Vincentio conceals himself in disguise not only to learn about his people, not only to test them, but because he also wants to teach them. He does not merely wish to "know" but he wishes to "let them know." What he cannot achieve directly and manifestly, he will be able to accomplish by concealment and deception, in secrecy and disguise. Only by hiding himself as a *deus absconditus* can he uncover the vices of Vienna. Only by concealing his identity can he reveal the truth about the real impulses of the human heart. The last scene is a successive revelation in the course of which he is gradually liberating the oppressed truth from the chains of a pseudo-reality. The Duke is indeed the deputy dramatist, if not the dramatist himself. The Duke as plot-architect or director wishes to hold truth up as a mirror to human nature so that after the repentance

of his puppet-figures he can practise his merciful generosity. Shakespeare's play is at the same time the Duke's grand "game" which he is to win, although from time to time he might find himself on the verge of losing it. His name (Vincentio, ["conquering"]) is an adumbration of that victory which he is meant to manifest.²³

Now, this image of the Duke as a God-like figure does indeed conform to the God of "strange acts" in Luther's *theologia crucis*. Luther's God likewise puts on "an antic disposition," wears a mask, and plays with human beings by afflicting and torturing them with *Anfechtungen*, trials and struggles of various sorts. But under God's "alien work," God is hiding his "proper work." The Duke conforms to Luther's interpretation of Joseph's story as God hiding Godself under a mask apparently to confuse and frighten those whom God loves but whom God also wants to be changed from within. As with Luther's God, so also the Duke acts out a strange game with his people for the sake and benefit of his people. Steven Marx in *Shakespeare and the Bible* confirms our reading: "Like the gods of *King Lear* and the Book of Job, the God-figures of *Measure for Measure* and the gospels are hidden from the people they tempt, torment, and test."²⁴

Hamlet

For reasons unknown to us, Shakespeare seems to have been obsessed with the figure of Luther in *Hamlet*. There is one curious and puzzling textual allusion that has long been noticed and deserves our attention. It is in one of Hamlet's usual puns in Act 4, Scene 3 where we have an indirect, playful allusion to Luther. Hamlet is responding to the question about where he put the dead body of the murdered Polonius:

Not where he eats, but where he is eaten;
a certain *convocation of politic worms* are e'en at him. Your *worm* is your only *emperor* for *diet*: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves

for maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table—that's the end." (4, 3, 19–25)

Critical editors of the drama since the 19th century have not only conjectured but recognized in the "emperor" a direct allusion to the Emperor Charles V, and in the "politic worms" and the "diet" a reference to the Diet of Worms. Harold Jenkins, the editor of the Arden *Hamlet*, says in a footnote: "There is a play on *diet*, council, with reference to the Diet at the German city of Worms, presided over by the *emperor*. In 1521 it pronounced its ban on Luther after his famous refusal to recant."²⁵ Though the allusion seems to be obvious, it would be a futile attempt to attribute any sense to the probably senseless pun.

One can take a step further, however, and recognize some parallels between the personality of Luther and Hamlet. Recently two scholars have taken up the "Lutheran thread" in the play's texture. In an article entitled "Lutheran Hamlet,"²⁶ Raymond Waddington proposed a speculative possibility that "Shakespeare used Martin Luther as a prototype in constructing the character of the prince."²⁷ A more compelling parallel is the impact of melancholy on Luther and Hamlet. Luther's melancholy or *Anfechtung* (spiritual temptation, assault by the devil, insomnia, depression) as it became known from Eric Erikson's psychobiography²⁸ strikingly corresponds to Hamlet's frequently discussed melancholy, the Elizabethan malady. Luther said of himself. "Sadness (*tristitia*) causes disease. For when the heart is ill, the body becomes weak. The true diseases are those of the heart, such as sadness, grief and temptation. I am true Lazarus who is quite tempted by diseases."²⁹

In *Hamlet*, the King says of the Prince.

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger" (3, 1, 167–169).

Luther's conversion from his *Anfechtungen* and Hamlet's conversion from his melancholy have been compared by Steve Sohmer: "Young Martin Luther suffered a long period of guilt and depression

(*Anfechtung*), and eventually found conversion through humble surrender to God and his pre-ordained providence. Hamlet undergoes a similar course of spiritual development, from lamenting his 'too sullied flesh' to believing there's a 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow.'³⁰

Moreover, both Luther and Hamlet are associated with Hercules, who is also an emblem of heroic melancholy after the pseudo-Aristotelean *Problemata*. Luther was depicted in a cartoon attributed to Holbein as "Hercules Germanicus." Herder said of Luther: "Like a true Hercules, he attacked the spiritual despotism which undermines or dissolves all free wholesome thinking."³¹ Hamlet's burden to carry out the revenge is as heavy as Hercules' "load." In recognizing his fate he has to fight with Nemeon's lion's nerve (1, 5, 83) as Hercules (5, 1, 286), thus becoming both the fighter and the victim.³²

However, parallels can be drawn not only on the basis of personality but also philosophy and doctrine. Hamlet's self-understanding as being being both "scourge and minister" (3, 4, 175) evokes Luther's belief in the Christian being *simul iustus et peccator* (saint and sinner at the same time). As Luther rejected the "whore reason," so the Ghost in *Hamlet* also speaks about Claudius' "wicked wit" (1,5,44). Luther despised Aristotelean philosophy, especially in approaching God (*coram deo*). Hamlet experience of encountering the Supernatural occasions a similar "anti-Aristotelean" lesson to Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
(1, 5, 174-75)

Luther especially warned against applying reason to heavenly matters and thereby confusing the two realms.

The Lutheran notion of the priesthood of all believers finds an illustration in *Hamlet's* "closet-scene" in Act 3, Scene 4. Hamlet tries to make his mother repent and thus behaves as a priest in the biblical and Protestant sense of the word.³³ Hamlet is not being cruel but rather generous to his mother when he fervently holds up a looking-glass to her and tries to make her confess her sins. Roland Mushat Frye in an article "Hamlet and the Protestant Confessional"³⁴ writes:

Within the Protestant frames of reference of the sixteenth century in England, Hamlet's reproaches of his mother are skillfully designed to express the ultimate kindness, even through a seeming cruelty, or as he put it 'I must be cruel only to be kind' (3, 4, 179) ... Shakespeare's dramatization of Hamlet's private consultation with his mother, in addition to its poetic qualities, provides a fine example of how the 'priest-hood of all believers' was expected to operate at the end of the first Protestant century.³⁵

Richard Marius in an interesting article³⁶ suggests that the whole play reflects the English understanding of Luther as conveyed through the writings of Thomas More. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, according to Marius, is "a mirror held up to religious confusion," especially in regard to Purgatory, a doctrine deliberately rejected by Luther and the English Protestants. Stephen Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory* has also pointed out that Reformation theologians regarded⁷ ghosts and supernatural visitations as diabolical.³⁷ Luther even avoided talking about hell, and he saw death (just as Tyndale did) as sleep until the day of doom.³⁸ However, as Marius notes, Hamlet never repents, never feels Protestant guilt and never resolves the tension between faith and doubt which reflected the Elisabethan audience who often believed in contrary things.

Marius' main point is that instead of a pure Protestant faith from Luther's Wittenberg. Shakespeare took the idea of predestination and equated it with Greek fate.³⁹ Luther in his polemics against Erasmus claims that fate is more than the endeavours of humans as "no man's plans have ever been straightforwardly realized, but for everyone things have turned out differently from what they thought they would"⁴⁰ Marius observes that "*Hamlet* seems to build on this Lutheran insight."⁴¹ and goes on to show that the play is nothing but a series of failed projects. At the end of the play Hamlet "understands to the full that the world is an unintelligible plaything of fate where human beings are incapable of effecting their will."⁴²

Whether Marius' thesis is right or wrong, it is not my intention to decide. I only wish to show that an important aspect of Luther's theology, without being

misread by More, is still compatible with Shakespeare's tragedy. This aspect is the idea of the theology of the cross as we have presented it above through the lenses of Forde and McGrath.

We should remember that Hamlet also rejected traditional speculation in favour of a new type of revelation: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt in your philosophy" (1, 5, 174–75). This is an echo of the Wittenberg Reformer. For Luther, God conceals Godself in the form of opposites in order to reveal God's true self. Hamlet also "plays God," plays the role of the madman, and uses indirect means to find truth out. An example is the mouse trap scene:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.
(2, 2, 600–601).

This corresponds to McGrath's description of the theology of the cross in which God's "revelation must be regarded as indirect and concealed."⁴³ On the topic of indirect revelation, we recall Polonius' advise to Reynaldo when he commissions someone to spy on his son Laertes:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
And does do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and and with assays of bias,
By *indirections find directions out.* (2, 1, 63–66)

What is the common between the radical theological vision of Luther and the radical artistic vision of *Hamlet*? Both of them are radically committed to searching and seeing reality as it is, "things as they really are," without seam, pomp or circumstance. Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is an initiation into another dimension of reality, a rather naked and chilling reality. Hamlet is passionately driven towards the revelation of this reality. In order to gain new knowledge, he is even willing to endure the "blasts from hell:"

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts
from hell ...
... I will speak to thee. (1, 4, 39–40, 43)

In Luther's theology of the cross, the cross functions to reverse our way of seeing. *Hamlet* can help us

readers and audience to reverse our way of seeing through the hero's painful tragedy.

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.
(1, 5, 196–198)

To conclude, we can say that *Hamlet* is not strictly a "Christian" play as we hear nothing directly about Christ or the necessity of the cross. Marius is correct that Hamlet never repents. Yet, I think, we can find more in it than simply Senecan fate as suggested by Marius. Key elements of the theology of the cross appear in Shakespeare's play: knowledge by revelation rather than speculation, the dialectics of concealment and revelation, the paradoxical way of thinking, indirect revelation, suffering (melancholy or *Anfechtungen*), and the reversal of the ways of seeing. *Hamlet* is probably best understood as an unconscious, literary echoing of some of the themes of Luther's theology of the cross but without the essentials of cross and Christ. Only in retrospect, after understanding the theology of the cross, can we see that some of its motifs can be discerned in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* does not take us to the cross, but it takes us towards the cross by twisting us out of our wrong orientations, by challenging the direction of our gaze, by reversing our seeing. Within the play, a radical reversal does take place. But the reversal comes not after the encounter with the One "who had no form or comeliness ... no beauty that we should desire him" (Is 53, 2) and from whom we "hid our faces." In *Hamlet*, reversal comes only from a Ghost who revealed the truth but then called for revenge. Hamlet only confronted the *opus alienum*, the "alien work" of God, never the *opus proprium*, the "proper work" of God, the gospel that gives life.

One Final Insight

Let me end with a typically provocative and radical insight from Luther. Concerning the identity of what makes a true theologian, Luther said, "Living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating"

(*vivendo immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando*).⁴⁴

Shakespeare's tragedy portrays Hamlet, Prince of Denmark and Student of Wittenberg, as one who lived, died and was probably damned. To that extent he was on his way to becoming a theologian. If we were to use Luther's theology of the cross as a diagnostic tool, we would affirm that God did "happen to" Hamlet. But God hid God's real face behind a mask, and thus Hamlet experienced only the "strange acts" of God, God's "rearward part." Even so, Hamlet's dramatic story of life and death can at least begin to twist our gaze toward a new reality, whether in modern-day Hungary or in countless other places around the globe.

Endnotes

1. Cf. my articles: "Bishop Lajos Ordass and the Hungarian Lutheran Church," *Hungarian Studies* 10-1 (1995) pp. 65-98; and "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass during Communism in Hungary," *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, Winter 2004, pp. 435-454;
 2. Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester. Luther in Retrospect*, (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1991), 33.
 3. *Ibid.*, viii.
 4. Quoted by Eric W. Gritsch, "Luther's Humor as a Tool for Interpreting Scripture", Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (eds.) *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 188.
 5. Quoted by Gritsch, "Luther's Humor as a Tool for Interpreting Scripture", 187.
 6. Luther's Works American Edition, 115 (Henceforth: *LW*).
 7. Gritsch, *Court Jester*, 191 and 258, cf. *LW*. Eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 26), 95.
 8. Kenneth Hagen, "The Testament of a Worm: Luther on Testament and Covenant", *Consensus* 8 (1982), 19.
 9. Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross. Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), xii
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Ibid.*, 9.
 12. *Ibid.*, 4.
 13. *Ibid.*, 13.
 14. The English translation of theses 19-20 is given on the basis of Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 148 and the thesis 21 on the basis of Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 71. The translation of *posteriora* has caused the same conflict in the English translation as in the Hungarian one.
 15. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 77.
 16. *Ibid.*, 31.
 17. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 90.
 18. *Ibid.*, 90. cf. *LW* 14, 31.
 19. Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 149-151.
 20. "This story is told of Duke Charles of Burgundy. A certain nobleman took an enemy prisoner. The prisoner's wife came to ransom her husband. The nobleman promised to give back the husband on condition that she would lie with him. The woman was virtuous, yet wished to set her husband free; so she goes and asks her husband whether she should do this thing in order to set him free. The husband wished to be set free and to save his life, so he gives his wife permission. After the nobleman had lain with the wife, he had the husband beheaded the next day and gave him to her as a corpse. She laid the whole case before Duke Charles. He summoned the nobleman and commanded him to marry the woman. When the wedding day was over he had the nobleman beheaded, gave the woman possession of his property, and restored her to honor. Thus he punished the crime in a princely way.
- Observe: No pope, no jurist, no law book could have given him such a decision. It sprang from untrammelled reason, above the law in all the books, and is so excellent that everyone must approve of it and find the justice of it written in his own heart. St. Augustine relates a similar story in *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*. Therefore, we should keep written laws subject to reason, from which they originally welled forth as from the spring of justice. We should not make the spring dependent on its rivulets, or make reason a captive of letters." (*LW* 45, 128-129)
21. See Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 418-9
 22. Géher István, *Shakespeare olvasókönyve. Tükörképünk 37 darabban*. (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1991), 327.
 23. Tibor Fabiny, *The Lion and the Lamb. Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art and Literature*. (London, Macmillan, 1992), 123-4.
 24. Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 80.
 25. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, (London, New York: Methuen, 1982), 340.
 26. Raymond B. Waddington, "Lutheran Hamlet", *English Language Notes*, December 1989, 27-42.
 27. Waddington, "Lutheran Hamlet", 32.
 28. Eric Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, (New York: Norton, 1958).
 29. Quoted by Gritsch, *Court Jester*, 147.
 30. See Steve Sohmer, "Certain Speculations on Hamlet, the Calendar, and Martin Luther", *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2.1 (1996) 1-51.
 31. Gritsch, *Court Jester*, 207.
 32. Cf. Zsolt Almási, "Hercules alakváltozásai. Hecules-utalások Shakespeare Hamlejtében" (Transformations of Hercules. Allusions to Hercules in Shakespeare's Hamlet) Manuscript.
 33. See my article: "'The Eye' as a Metaphor in Shakespearean Tragedy: Hamlet, Cordelia and Edgar: Blinded Parents' Seeing Children", *Celebrating Comparativism Essays In Honour of György Mihály Vajda*, eds. Katalin Kürtösi and József Pál, (Szeged: Attila József University, 1994), 461-478.
 34. Roland Mushat Frye, "Prince Hamlet and the Protestant Confessional", *Theology Today*, Vol. 39, 1982, 27-38. Further studies on Hamlet and Protestantism (especially Lutheranism): Raymond B. Waddington, "Lutheran Hamlet", Richard Marius, "Fate and Providence: Hamlet's Take on Martin Luther" *WICK. The Harvard*

Divinity School Student Journal of Literature and Religion, Vol.1/1. 1997, pp.37-50. Jennifer Rust, "Wittenberg and Melancholic Allegory: The Reformation and Its Discontents in *Hamlet*", *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, eds. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2003), 260-284.

35. R.M. Frye, "Prince Hamlet", 30.

36. Richard Marius, "Fate and Providence: Hamlet's take on Martin Luther", *WTCK, The Harvard Divinity School Student Journal of Literature and Religion*, Vol.1/1. 1997, 37-50.

37. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2001).

38. Cf. Gordon Isaac, "Some Reflections on Luther's View of Death", Manuscript. See esp. LW 25, 310

39. Cf. Iván Nyusztay, *Myth, Telos and Identity. The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama*, (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2002), 63-70.

40. Luther's *De servo arbitrio*, quoted by Marius, "Fate and Providence", 46.

41. Marius, "Fate and Providence", 46.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Quoted in McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 152.