

# APPENDIXES



*Hamlet:*  
 “What Is a Man?”

This passage (IV.iv.33 ff.) is one of the several in *Hamlet* that show Shakespeare's literacy in the lore of body and soul and its application to self-knowledge. As Hamlet reflects on Fortinbras's march against Poland, he sees man and himself as part animal, part rational being. In agreement with the demands of moral *decorum*, as the Renaissance derived them from Cicero's *De Officiis*, Hamlet argues that man must set his course of action by overcoming his animal nature and by listening to the dictates of reason:

How all occasions do inform against me,  
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,  
 If the chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!  
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capability and godlike reason  
 To fust in us unus'd.

(IV.iv.32-39)

Hamlet's words have a close resemblance to a passage from the beginning of Cicero's *De Officiis* (I.II), the *locus classicus* for the special obligation of man, as contrasted with animals, to fulfill his duties. But the parallel becomes even closer when one consults a sixteenth-century edition of *De Officiis*, such as the Paris edition of 1560, which has the traditional headings, marginal notes, and commentaries. In this edition, Erasmus introduced the passage as being from the *sententiae* that concern the chief good that proceeds from nature: “Ex veteris Academiae & Stoicorum sententiae, qui summum bonum a natura proficisci putant” (Cf. Hamlet's “the chief good and markets of his time”). The text follows:

Quid intersit  
inter hominis  
propria &  
beluarum

Rationandi  
vis hominis  
propria

Principio generi animantium omni est a natura tributum, ut se vitam, corpusque tueatur, declinetque ea quae nocitura videantur, omniaque quae sint ad vivendum necessaria anquirat & paret: ut pastum ut latibula, ut alia generis eiusdem. Commune item animantium est coniunctionis appetitus, procreandi causa, & cura quaedam eorum quae procreata sunt. Sed inter hominem & beluam hoc maxime interest, quod haec tantum quantum sensu movetur, ad id solum quod adest, quodque praesens est, se accommodat, paulum admodum sentiens praeteritum aut futurum: Homo autem quod rationis est particeps (per quam consequentia cernit, causas rerum videt, earumque progressus, & quasi antecessiones non ignorat, similitudines comparat, rebusque praesentibus adiungit atque annectit futuras) facile totius vitae cursum videt ad eamque degendam praeparat res necessarias.<sup>1</sup>

The obvious similarities between the two texts are heightened by the marginal notes in the 1560 edition, which provide the structure of Hamlet's reflection: Hamlet poses the question, What is man? (*quid intersit inter hominis propria & beluarum*); and he answers that man's possession of reason sets him off from the animals (*rationandi vis hominis propria*)—the *rationandi vis* of the note designates more specifically the mental process Hamlet calls "discourse" than does the *ratio* of the text.<sup>2</sup> The properties of animals in Cicero are *ut pastum ut latibula ut alia generis eiusdem*; in Hamlet they are "but to sleep and feed" (in the balanced structure of the passage, Shakespeare used hendiadys and mentioned only these two major "good and markets"). Hamlet's phrase "large discourse, looking before and after" summarizes Cicero's *homo autem quod rationis est particeps . . . totius vitae cursum videt*; "large," in particular, glances at *totius vitae cursum*; for looking, Cicero has *videt* and *cernit*; for "before and after," *praeteritum aut futurum*. Hamlet's "god-like reason" is accounted for by *rationis est particeps* and by the note *cujus (ut alio loco ait Cicero) prima homini cum Deo conjunctio est*. This note would also account for Hamlet's making God rather than nature the source of man's reason, but such change was to be expected in the appropriation of pagan wisdom in the Christian Renaissance. It may be added that Betuleius's commentary interprets the whole passage in the sense of a reproach for man as Hamlet applies it: "To our shame we must say that no animal neglects the law prescribed by its kind, nor does it have to be

goaded to it; man, however, cannot be provoked even by the spur of conscience." <sup>3</sup>

There were other versions of the commonplace available to Shakespeare in English.<sup>4</sup> But I have yet to see a passage that in general drift, structural correspondence, and verbal parallels comes as close to Hamlet's words as that in *De Officiis*. Shakespeare, I believe, must either have remembered it very clearly from his grammar-school days or consulted Cicero for the purpose of penning Hamlet's speech. Certainly no passage was more relevant in the Renaissance than Cicero's for emphasizing the conflict between the rational man of theory and the bestial man of experience—a conflict Theodore Spencer has called an essential part of Hamlet's conscience.<sup>5</sup>