

What a Piece of Work is a Man

By Michael Beck

At one level, it is apparent to all that mankind is admirable. Throughout history, there are undeniable moments of brilliance, intelligence, and goodness. Yet, in the very same history, man's unique cruelty and unspeakable evil are never too far out of view. An anthropology worth its salt must be able to give a satisfactory account of this tension. It is too easy to dwell on man's brilliance only, or his evil only, while sweeping the above paradox under the rug.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reinforces this need, highlighting the great tension between man's glory and man's shame. Therefore, in the brief essay that follows, I will consider a relevant passage from this play, showing how, when seen as a foil, this idea reflects the truthfulness and integrity of a biblical anthropology.

First, consider the following from Shakespeare. In the second scene of act two, Hamlet receives a contrived visit from his so-called friends.¹ Here, we read of the prince's great sense of disillusionment with all around him. He exclaims:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

While the above is directed toward a specific context, it is also true that, more broadly, it captures a universal truth—a truth that must be accounted for by anything that claims to know man's situation accurately. This broader idea is also famously set forth in Pascal's *Pensees*,² where he says:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earth-worm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe . . . Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness!

Indeed, an explanation of this matter is abundantly supplied in the Bible. So much so, that this was one of the things that first forced me to start taking Christianity seriously. In

¹ Shakespeare, *Plays*, p. 43.

² Pascal, *Pensees*, p. 34.

fact, I still think that this is one of the features of Scripture that most clearly commends it as the text of a “true religion”.³

More than merely account for the matter in its narrative of creation, fall and redemption, the Bible offers profound help to anyone who would find themselves wrestling, as Hamlet did, with this maddening tension. In this regard, when Hamlet asserts of man, “how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! . . . how like an angel!”,⁴ surely he reaches to capture something of Genesis 1, where, from the outset, the glory of humanity was set forth as a thing to be reckoned with.

Of all creation, mankind alone is said to be made in the image of God. Hughes states this well when he says, “Poetically speaking, Adam was ‘an august creature with all things put in subjection to him, wearing the very sun as a diadem, treading the very stars like unconsidered dust beneath his feet.’”⁵ Similarly, the author of Hebrews (2:5–9) says:

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, ‘What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.’

Shakespeare certainly apprehends much of the above. However, throughout *Hamlet*, he also holds man’s fallen state before his audience. Man’s glory, no matter how great, is shown to be marred at every turn. So disorienting is this reality that it leaves one feeling that all “mirth” is lost.⁶ Man, together with all otherwise wondrous creation, is at times reduced to nothing more than a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”.⁷

But here is where the Scripture helps most. More than merely account for this paradox, its message shows the way through this disorientation. In this, one might say that it offers an antidote to the kind of disillusionment expressed by Hamlet. Without denying the current tension in man’s predicament, it also shows the way back to glory, always calling us to keep eternity in view. As C.S Lewis says in view of the biblical message,⁸ we must always remember the following:

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ Shakespeare, *Plays*, p. 43.

⁵ Hughes, *Anchor for the Soul*, p. 57. Quoting Gossip, *Hero*, p. 122.

⁶ Shakespeare, *Plays*, p. 43.

⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, p. 45-46.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”

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