

## HAMLET AS SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**Abstract**

*Hamlet is often called an "Elizabethan revenge play", the theme of revenge against an evil usurper driving the plot forward as in earlier stage works by Shakespeare's contemporaries, Kyd and Marlowe, as well as by the .As in those works avenging a moral injustice, an affront to both man and God. In this case, regicide (killing a king) is a particularly monstrous crime, and there is no doubt as to whose side our sympathies are disposed. The paper presents the criticism of Hamlet as Shakespearean tragedy.*

**Keywords:** *Hamlet, Tragedy, Shakespeare, Shakespearean Tragedy*

As in many revenge plays, and, in fact, several of Shakespeare's other tragedies (and histories), a corrupt act, the killing of a king, undermines order throughout the realm that resonates to high heaven. We learn that there is something "rotten" in Denmark after old Hamlet's death in the very first scene, as Horatio compares the natural and civil disorders that occurred in Rome at the time of Julius Caesar's assassination to the disease that afflicts Denmark. These themes and their figurative expression are common to the Elizabethan revenge play genre in which good must triumph over evil. Throughout Hamlet we encounter a great deal of word play, Shakespeare using a vast number of multivalent terms ranging from gross puns to highly-nuanced words that evoke a host of diverse associations and images. While Hamlet can tell this difference between a "hawk and a handsaw," the play challenges the assumption that language itself can convey human experience or hold stable meaning. Lastly, Hamlet contains a great deal of sexual material and innuendo, one in which the charge of "incest" is openly uttered. The Freudian implications of Hamlet's "case" have been explored at length by literary critics and psychoanalysts alike (see Jones 1976). Without belabouring the point, some critics believe that illicit or unnatural sexual drives, particularly Hamlet's repressed desire to be the object of his mother's affection in place of his father, form a strong undercurrent in the text.

**Hamlet's Delay: An Objective and Subjective Analysis Compared**

One of the most perplexing problems of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and certainly one which has received a great deal of critical attention, is the question of why Hamlet delays the killing of Claudius. The Prince eventually succeeds in avenging his father's death, but this occurs only in the play's final scene. Before that point, Hamlet has numerous opportunities to accomplish his task: the prayer scene, for example, in which both characters come face to face alone. Yet Hamlet demurs. On this matter critical opinion is divided into essentially two schools of thought.

There are the "objective" critics who view Hamlet's delay as being externally determined: Hamlet does not act because of restraints which exist outside the workings of his own mind. On the other hand, there are the "subjective" critics who attribute Hamlet's delay to internal, i.e. psychological, forces operating within the Prince's mind. We shall now turn our scrutiny to examination of two explanations of Hamlet's behaviour, G. R. Elliott's argument in *Scourge and Minister*, representing the

objective school and Wedlock's essay "Anxiety, Tragedy and Hamlet's Delay" providing a subjective argument.

It is the delay of king and prince taking action against each other, each thereby laying up trouble for himself in the future. The King's postponing of action against the ominously hostile prince in the second scene prepares the way dramatically for the prince's postponing of action against the murderous king in the fifth scene. Hamlet's delay then, according to Elliott, is part and parcel with Claudius' delay, the two phenomena reinforcing each other as elements in the work's aesthetic design. To substantiate his thesis Elliott notes the similar states of mind evinced in the characters of Hamlet and Claudius during the pivotal prayer scene. Elliott analyzes the prayer scene in the following fashion: Hamlet's Delay: An Objective and Subjective Analysis Compared 119 Normally the king would have guarded himself at this juncture. Normally, but the point is that in the Prayer episode, as a result of the Play scene, Claudius's state of mind is abnormal, uniquely so, owing to a crucial conflict that is taking place within him. And the same is true of Hamlet.

The two cases are designed by Shakespeare to play into, interpret and accentuate each other. To demonstrate this point Elliot turn to a close reading of the text. He observes that the King's postponing words "prepare" and "forthwith" in the opening of the Prayer episode are dramatic antecedents of the Prince's postponing words at the close of the scene, "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days." Both Claudius and Hamlet are experiencing sharp inner conflict at this point in the play, and their similar states of mind complement each other. What is essential is that both Claudius and Hamlet, while committed to ultimate action, give indications of further delay during the prayer episode, and that this mutual posture contributes both to the broad action of the drama and to the specific language employed by the two. He observes that, "inhibitions are also not limited to the pathological, but include the quite normal, useful, perfunctory restraints, as well, many of which arise from the needs of civilization." Such is the case in Hamlet's delay for, "Hamlet's inhibition against killing is the concrete social reality of his opponent, and particularly his friendly or smiling face." Central to Wedlock's argument is the emphasis which is put upon the visage of Claudius.

### **Criticism on Hamlet**

There is, perhaps, no well-known passage in Shakespeare that has been found so perplexing as that in which Hamlet communes with himself between the preparation of the play to catch the conscience of the king and its performance 'To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .' It can perplex for various reasons, one of them being the variety of different explanations of crucial phrases that can reasonably be made. Another reason is that the speech is almost too well-known for its features to be seen distinctly, as Charles Lamb said: I confess myself utterly unable to appreciate that celebrated soliloquy in Hamlet, beginning, 'To be, or not to be,' or to tell whether it be good, bad, or indifferent; It has been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it has become to me a perfectly dead member.

Perhaps we need not be too much dismayed; the meaning may be simpler—even if in some ways subtler than is commonly supposed. Since the speech is crucial I must ask

your indulgence whilst I read it, indicating as best I may the stopping of the good Quarto, which is considerably lighter than that in most current editions.

To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep No more, and by a sleep to say we end The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wished.

To die, to sleep; To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub. Hamlet, knowing himself injured in the most enormous and atrocious degree, and seeing no means of redress, but such as must expose him to the extremity of hazard, meditates on his situation in this manner: Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress, it is necessary to decide, whether, after our present state, we are to be or not to be.

That is the question, which, as it shall be answered, will determine, whether 'tis nobler, and more suitable to the dignity of reason, to suffer the outrages of fortune patiently, or to take arms against them, and by opposing end them, though perhaps with the loss of life.

It does not matter in Hamlet's mind the thought of suicide merges with the thought of killing the king; what matters is the quite unambiguous sense of health giving away to disease, a loss of purpose and a lapsing from positive direction. What the soliloquy does in short is to bring to a head our recognition of the dependence of thought on deeper levels of consciousness, and to make plain beyond all doubt that the set of Hamlet's consciousness is towards a region where no resolution is possible at all.

### **Hamlet and Revenge**

It has been harder to admit our intuitive judgment of Hamlet because his tragic choice commands not merely our sympathy but our admiration. In the first place, his situation is much closer to our own than that of Macbeth or Antony or Lear. All men hunger for revenge. The defiant refusal to submit to injury, the desire to assert one's identity by retaliation, the gnawing ache to assault injustice by giving measure for measure—these are reflected in our daily response to even the mildest of insults. In the serious drama from the beginning of time, the dilemma of the revenger has been one of the universal problems of man writ large. An even more important reason for our sympathy is the motivation that drives Hamlet. Macbeth, Lear, and Antony obviously violate moral law, and for selfish ends.

We suffer with them but for human reasons, for the agony they bring on themselves. Hamlet's motivation is far more complex and, to a great extent, we identify with him for solid moral reasons. In large part his course to the fifth act is the result of his moral sensitivity, his unflinching discernment of evil and his determination that it shall not thrive. We admire his hatred of corruption and his vision of what man could and should be. Even as he is engulfed by the evil against which he takes arms, we sense that he would have been a lesser man had he refused the challenge. At this point, the reader may object that my discussion of *Hamlet's* universal appeal contradicts my earlier insistence on the play's Christian perspective.

Throughout the preceding pages, it may have seemed that I was forcing *Hamlet* into a straitjacket of Christian morality, thereby seriously restricting its meaning and impact. This has been far from my intention. Paradoxical as it may seem, I believe that we can

understand *Hamlet's* unrivalled power to move emotions and stimulate thought only when we grant the basic Christian perspective in which the action is placed.

To do so requires no knowledge of religious doctrine, no scholarly investigation into Elizabethan theories about ghosts or the meditations of Luis de Granada or archaic meanings of "conscience." Shakespeare gives us everything we need to know. In short, we must take the play on its own terms. Only when we cease searching for explanations outside it, whether in pagan codes or obsolete theatrical conventions, can we respond directly to the play itself.

### **Critical Review**

*Hamlet*, the character of Polonius prepares his son Laertes for travel abroad with a speech (ll.55-81) in which he directs the youth to commit a "few precepts to memory." Among these precepts is the now-familiar adage "neither a borrower nor a lender be" (l.75) and the dictum: "This above all: to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou cans't not be false to any man "(ll.78-80). The occasion of the speech has been established in advance, for in the previous scene, Polonius has told the King and Queen that he has granted his son permission to extend his studies in France. This seems to be an eminently reasonable decision by a father concerned with his son's welfare and the moralists that comprise the speech in question sound good.

Hamlet is a work in which words and acts are often at odds with each other, and in trying to discern what Polonius's most famous bit of advice to his son means, we must turn to their speaker and to his actions. The next time that Polonius appears on stage in Act II, scene i, we realize that he is not merely a concerned father, but a domestic plotter who does not trust his beloved Laertes to follow the precepts that he sets forth for him. Instead, Polonius dispatches his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes while the youth is in Paris.

He even supplies Reynaldo with a script, coaching him to bring up the subject of Laertes by saying "I know the gentleman, I saw him yesterday, or th' other day .. ." (II, i., 1.53). From this we can immediately glean that Polonius is something of a hypocrite: on the surface, he extends trust to Laertes and to the boy's willingness to act according to the platitudes of the "to thine own self be true" speech. In reality, Polonius does not trust his son nor the capacity of adage to keep him on the straight and narrow. Polonius appears in the next scene of Act II in a comic light. In the course of his report about Hamlet's behavior to Claudius and Gertrude, he proclaims that "brevity is the soul of wit" after and before long-winded passages that envelop this dictum. The clash between Polonius's praise of verbal concision and his actual verbosity is highlighted when the Queen urges him to get to the point with "more matter with less art," to which Polonius responds, "Madam, I swear I use no art at all" (II, ii., ll.95-96).

Immediately thereafter, Polonius becomes the butt of the "mad" Hamlet's humor, as the Prince directs insults toward this official of state who senses the animosity being sent his way but fails to appreciate its nuances. It is important to note that Polonius has already told his daughter Ophelia to cease all contact with Hamlet and to return his love letters. This behavior establishes Polonius as a stereotypical blocking character, a father barring the way between his daughter and a young man.

Shakespeare was certainly familiar with such characters from his reading of the Roman comedy playwright Plautus's works. Moreover, Polonius's characteristic penchant for empty talk proclaims him to be a stock character of the Italian *Commedia Dell-Arte* theater, a pompous "Pantaloon" modeled, in turn, upon the "irate father" figures of ancient Roman comedy.

### **Art of the Characterization**

Prince Hamlet—son of the late King, and of Queen Gertrude; nephew-stepson to King Claudius. The character of Hamlet dominates Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, yet Hamlet at the start of the play is not a commanding figure. Indeed, when we first see the Prince, his posture is defensive, Hamlet taking a passive, if resentful, stance toward the events that have befallen him.

Hamlet is the son of the King of Denmark. When Hamlet's father dies, his uncle Claudius becomes king and marries Hamlet's mother (Gertrude). Hamlet's father appears as a ghost and tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet is not sure that the ghost is really his father. He gets some travelling actors to perform a play which shows the murder of a king in the same way Hamlet's father said he was killed. When Claudius reacts badly to seeing this, Hamlet believes he is guilty.

Hamlet tells his mother that he knows about the murder. While there he kills Polonius, who is the king's advisor, because he thinks he is Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were Hamlet's childhood friends. Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet to England to have Hamlet killed, but their ship is attacked by pirates who take Hamlet prisoner but then return him to Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are taken to England where they die.

Ophelia is Polonius' daughter. After her father, Polonius, is killed by Hamlet she goes mad. Then she falls into a river and drowns. Hamlet returns just as her funeral is happening. Laertes, her brother, decides to kill Hamlet in revenge. He challenges Hamlet to a sword fight, and puts poison on his own sword. Claudius makes some poisoned wine for Hamlet to drink in case that does not work.

At first Hamlet wins the sword fight, and in the mean time his mother drinks the poisoned wine without knowing, and dies. On the other hand Laertes falsely pierces Hamlet with a poisoned blade, but then stabs Laertes with the same sword. Laertes tells Hamlet about the plot and then dies. Hamlet kills Claudius with the poisoned sword. Horatio, Hamlet's friend, tells everyone about the murder of the old king. Hamlet tells everyone that the Norwegian prince, Fortinbras, should be king, and then dies from the poison. When Fortinbras arrives, Horatio recounts the tale and Fortinbras orders Hamlet's body borne off in honour.

Slow to the conviction that the ghost is his dead father and that Claudius is guilty of regicide, Hamlet does not go straight to the task at hand. Hamlet's delay or procrastination is something about which critics have wondered and that the character himself agonizes, his self-reproach reaching an apex in Act IV, scene iv, which concludes with the words "O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

### **Plot Construction**

On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited

the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius.

Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn. Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father's death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause.

They employ a pair of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of travelling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theatre, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying.

Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once. Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry.

Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

### **Conclusion**

Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, which means we're in for a killing spree. At the end, almost every character with a name has been offed in one gruesome way or another. But all's not lost. Sure, the royal court has been utterly wiped out—and then in saunters Prince Fortinbras to claim the throne, restoring order and continuity to the court. Plus, Horatio survived the mass killing, and he's promised to tell Hamlet's tragic story. He makes good on his vow as Hamlet dies: "Good night sweet prince," he says, "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

Horatio, whose name recalls the Latin term "orator," interprets Hamlet's death and salvation in the most elegant terms. The voices of angels, Horatio seems to suggest, will carry Hamlet to his heavenly "rest." Shakespeare seems to be making an explicit connection between Hamlet's eternal afterlife, the angelic voices that "sing," and the storytelling that Horatio undertakes at this moment. Because Hamlet's story will be told, he'll live on for eternity.

Hamlet is emotionally shaken, and consumed by his master plan to kill Claudius, but at no point is Hamlet mad. Hamlet is determined to make Claudius suffer his punishment for eternity, so he restrains himself until the perfect time for the murder. The murder of Polonius is a sheer accident, Hamlet acts with his reflex and Polonius happens to be in the way.

Hamlet is suffering from the loss of his father, and of his true love. Therefore, considering suicide is unavoidable, he is reasonably very tempted. Hamlet knows that it is a shortsighted decision and chooses not to. Hamlet recognizes that the Ghost is not necessarily good, just because it has the appealing shape of his father. Hamlet demands stronger evidence that Claudius is the murderer, before making a rash decision.

This is a logical precaution. The Ghost being a figment of Hamlet's imagination does not make him crazy, it is an expression of his vivid memory. Hamlet is always true with Horatio, and he warns him that he will be acting strange in the future, to trick the minds of the public. Hamlet's mask of insanity is merely a component of his plan.

Hamlet is burdened with the task of killing his uncle, and he is determined to do so. This puts Hamlet under a lot of pressure. Making logical and well calculated decisions throughout the entire play is a testament to Hamlet's sanity. As for his acts of madness, that is simply an outlet to justify any less-than-reputable mistakes that he makes when carrying out his plan.

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