

Chapter 3

Hamlet and The Tempest

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare, possibly the greatest dramatist of all time, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. A writer of great creative and poetic powers, his plays, written for small local theatres, are now read and performed in many countries. As his contemporary poet and dramatist, Ben Jonson, rightly says, Shakespeare ‘was not of an age, but for all time’.¹

Other writers may be creative and poetic but few could match the way Shakespeare weaves his diction and rhetoric to craft a variety of human situations with memorable images and convincing expressions. His plays command sympathy, elicit emotions and foster psychological participation. His works have been translated into different languages and performed in different cultural contexts far removed from Elizabethan England. In addition to his profound humanistic outlook, Shakespeare’s dramas are firmly engrained with biblical and Christian influence.

1. Ben Jonson in his poem ‘To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare’. ‘Shakespeare’s Genius’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shakespeares-Genius-1733556>.

A Christian philosopher, Shakespeare is

certainly not only a thinker and a Godly man in the broadest, truest sense, but a discernor and purveyor of heavenly light, of something far above ecclesiasticism, clericalism, creed, dogma, or doctrine. In his day, the Scriptures had been for the first time, over the objection of the established church, made available to the people. ... Shakespeare in fact brought the Bible to the theatre.²

In this chapter, we will discuss two plays by Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. In *Hamlet*, we examine the tortured personality of Hamlet, the Ghost in relation to his purgatorial status and the conflict of Claudius in the 'Prayer Scene'. With *The Tempest*, we investigate biblical allusions and Christian teaching on repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and regeneration.

The Tragedy of Hamlet

The play opens with Hamlet mourning his father, who has been killed, and lamenting his mother Gertrude's hasty marriage to his uncle, Claudius, within a month of his father's death. His father's Ghost appears and informs Hamlet that he had been poisoned by Claudius and therefore must be avenged. Hamlet seems doubtful about the Ghost's command, fearing it might be the devil provoking him to commit a heinous crime. Upon further investigation and with more visits from the Ghost, Hamlet decides to carry out the vengeful deed. Hamlet seeks to deceive Claudius and others by pretending to be mad; his melancholic nature makes his feigning believable.

Hamlet's close friend Horatio confirms that Claudius is guilty. In fact, driven by a guilty conscience, Claudius seeks to find out the cause of Hamlet's bizarre behaviour by employing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's acquaintances, to spy on him. Aware of their conspiracy, Hamlet acts like a lunatic in front of them. The pompous Polonius, an old courtier, thinks that Hamlet is lovesick over his daughter, Ophelia. Despite her sincerity, Hamlet believes that Ophelia is also contriving against him. He treats her harshly, feigning madness.

2. Quoted in Grace R. W. Hall, *The Tempest as Mystery Play: Uncovering Religious Sources of Shakespeare's Most Spiritual Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1999), p. 5.

To determine the guilt of Claudius, Hamlet arranges the staging of a play, *The Mousetrap* (also known as *The Murder of Gonzago*), with a group of visiting actors, in order to mirror the circumstances of his father's death, as narrated by the Ghost. The play confirms the guilt of Claudius, as revealed by his reaction. Hamlet, convinced of the treachery of Claudius, swiftly confronts his mother in the chamber regarding her relationship with Claudius.

Hearing a male voice behind the curtain, Hamlet stabs the person he assumes to be Claudius. The victim, however, turns out to be Polonius, who was eavesdropping to ascertain Hamlet's mental condition. This killing of Polonius convinces Claudius that his own life is at risk. He thus sends Hamlet to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with a secret order to the King of England to have Hamlet executed. When Hamlet discovers this secret plot, he alters the message so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are executed instead.

Upon his return to Denmark, Hamlet discovers that Ophelia is dead. It appears that she had gone mad due to the sudden death of her father, Polonius, and committed suicide. Her brother Laertes seeks to avenge the murder of Polonius through a duel arranged by Claudius.

Carnage follows, with Hamlet dying of a wound inflicted by the sword of Laertes, which had a poisoned tip given to him by Claudius. In the scuffle, Hamlet realises what is happening and forces Laertes to exchange swords with him. With the poisoned sword, Hamlet kills Laertes. Present at the duel, Gertrude unwittingly drinks from the poisonous cup which Claudius places near Hamlet to ensure his death. Before he dies, Hamlet stabs Claudius and forces him to drink the poisoned cup. Having fulfilled his mission to kill a tyrant, before he dies Hamlet entrusts Horatio with the duty of telling his story.

Character of Hamlet

Hamlet's existence is one of perpetual ambiguities as he struggles with his insecurities. Confronted by his father's Ghost, Hamlet decides to act, but doubts torment him. He understands that his father's spirit cries for revenge, yet when he is alone, he rejects what he witnesses:

*The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,*

*As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.*

(2.2.585-90)³

It seems that Hamlet has to make a critical decision in a very difficult situation but lacks a moral compass. His choice would have serious consequences for his people and his kingdom, in which he is the rightful heir. Essentially a relativist, Hamlet vacillates in his decision to act.

According to Aquinas, ‘man is principally the mind of man’.⁴ In other words, human beings are rational animals endowed with reason. Hamlet exclaims: ‘What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason’ (2.2.298-99). When Polonius urges his son Laertes ‘to thine own self be true’ (1.3.78), it entails a fidelity to one’s selfhood, which is based on reason. But for Hamlet, truth is relative – he says, ‘for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’ (2.2.245-46).

Hamlet also holds that the mind is a prison as the individual is confined to a ‘course of thought’ (3.3.83). Subjected to bad dreams and hallucinations, ‘the very coinage of your brain’ (*Hamlet* 3.4.137), Hamlet’s thought is controlled by the exigencies of his existence. ‘How all occasions do inform against me’ (4.4.32). His course of thought is prompted by circumstances; how one thinks will determine who one is. Just as circumstances influence our thinking, our thinking also in turn influences our individuality.⁵

In spite of Hamlet’s rather bizarre behaviour, it seems that his intention is not motivated by hatred. According to David Beauregard, Shakespeare portrays Hamlet as a character exhibiting ‘virtue ethics’ rather than ‘duty ethics’ which is based on adherence to the law.⁶ Virtue ethics, however, involves acting with good intention, right reason and prudent evaluation of the situation. The Ghost commands Hamlet: ‘howsoever thou pursues this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul

3. Quotations from *Hamlet* in this chapter are taken from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, annotated by Burton Raffel (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

4. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, [https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FS/FS029.html#FSQ29OUTP1, ST I-II, Q29, A4](https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FS/FS029.html#FSQ29OUTP1,ST%20I-II,Q29,A4).

5. Eric P. Levy, ‘The Mind of Man in “Hamlet”’, *Renascence* 54, no. 4 (2002), p. 221.

6. David Beauregard, ‘Great Command O’Ersways the Order’: Purgatory, Revenge, and Maimed Rites in *Hamlet*’, *Religion and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (2007), p. 52.

contrive' (1.5.84-85). Thus Hamlet must carry out the revenge, not driven by hatred but for the sake of justice and the common good.

Tyrannicide, the killing of a tyrant, was encouraged in antiquity. Aristotle asserted that great honour is bestowed on the one who kills a tyrant; for tyranny is an abuse of power and acting against the government's goal of forging the common good. With absolutely no regard for the public interest, the tyrant's purpose is for pleasure and to enrich himself by force or fraud.⁷ This applies to Claudius, who admits to fratricide, taking over Gertrude and the throne: 'Of those effects for which I did the murder: My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen' (3.3.54-55). His acknowledgement of his ambition reveals him to be a despot of the worst kind.

If the Ghost is a spirit from Purgatory, his cry for vengeance is morally justifiable. Claudius must be brought to justice since he is a tyrant who seizes the throne illegally. This principle is supported by Aquinas:

the avenger's intention be directed chiefly to some good, to be obtained by means of the punishment of the person who has sinned (for instance that the sinner may amend, or at least that he may be restrained, and others be not disturbed, that justice may be upheld, and God honoured), then vengeance may be lawful, provided other due circumstances be observed.⁸

Vengeance is, thus, a special virtue if it is performed with the purpose of removing harm or preventing evil. Aquinas also asserts that the avenger must be motivated by charity, not hatred. This is in accord with Hamlet's thought late in the play, to avoid evil by killing Claudius:

*Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,
Popped in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage – is 't not perfect
conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is 't not to be
damned*

7. Nicole M. Coonradt, "'To Be or Not to Be?': Hamlet and Tyrannicide", *Religion and the Arts* 25, no. 3 (2021), pp. 243–44.

8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST II-II, Q108, A1.

*To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?*

(5.2.64-70)

Further, Aquinas describes vengeance as a virtue with two opposing extremes, excess and deficiency:

Two vices are opposed to vengeance: one by way of excess, namely, the sin of cruelty or brutality, which exceeds the measure in punishing: while the other is a vice by way of deficiency and consists in being remiss in punishing, wherefore it is written (Prov. 13:24): 'He that spareth the rod hateth his son.' But the virtue of vengeance consists in observing the due measure of vengeance with regard to all the circumstances.⁹

In the play, we witness Hamlet wavering between these extremes: he is cruel towards Ophelia, Gertrude and Polonius, but appears to be relatively passive towards Claudius as his mind swings from certainty to scepticism. Only a Ghost from Purgatory can help him resolve his predicament.

Before the Ghost vanishes, he commands Hamlet, 'Do not forget. This visitation ...' (3.4.110). Hamlet is 'a fine, pure, noble and highly moral person, but devoid of that emotional strength that characterises a hero, goes to pieces beneath a burden that it neither support nor cast off.'¹⁰ Hamlet is a tragic hero, the embodiment of melancholic humour.

A Melancholic Mind

Hamlet suffers from a disease known to the Elizabethans as 'melancholy'. It is a mood associated with uncontrolled passion in between bouts of acute depression. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) speaks of religious melancholy, which has symptoms of faith such as doubt, anguish and exposure to trial and temptation.¹¹ Regarding

9. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST II-II, Q108, A2.

10. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 206.

11. Søren Kierkegaard and Walter Lowrie, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! And Three Discourses, 1851* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 44.

Hamlet, his soliloquies and speeches reveal a disturbed mind, struggling to ascertain the reality of his father appearing to him as a Ghost. Experiencing terror and anguish, he finds it hard to reconcile the request of the Ghost for vengeance with Christian teaching on forgiveness. This dilemma leads him to meditate on the meaning of human existence. Pulled in two directions, Hamlet struggles between his doubt about the reality of the Ghost's revelation and the duty imposed on him as a son. This conflict and confusion continue in the first three acts of the play.

Deeply aware of his inability to act, Hamlet also suffers from a guilt complex due to his neglect of duty. While conscious of the sinfulness of others as well as his own, Hamlet laments his inaction: 'How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!' (1.2.133). It appears that the melancholic man does not want to forget his sins; he also does not want to remember that his sins are forgiven. Furthermore, Hamlet is obsessed with the sins of his mother and his uncle: 'O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! It is not, nor it cannot come to good. But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue' (1.2.156-59).

Aware of his hesitation to avenge the injustice done to his father, the conflict he feels within himself regarding his Christian belief and the corruption surrounding him are the cause of Hamlet's melancholic humour. As the play continues, his depression gets worse and worse, to the point where Hamlet contemplates suicide: 'O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!' (1.2.129-32). In his soliloquy, 'To be or not to be' (3.1.56), we find him questioning the value of life and the meaning of human existence. At the same time, Hamlet has a deep sense of responsibility towards himself as a human being created in the image of God: 'What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god' (2.2.298-301).

To Hamlet, human existence involves constantly making moral choices; he cannot observe life merely as a spectator. Kierkegaard asserts that 'pure thinking' is a 'phantom', and the person who merely thinks without acting is like a traitor.¹² There are moments when Hamlet feels he is a traitor and a coward: 'A dull and muddy-mettled rascal' (2.2.551). Unless he makes a leap of faith, he will always be trapped in

12. Shaakeh Agajanian, 'Problem of Hamlet: A Christian Existential Analysis', *Religion in Life* 46, no. 2 (1977), p. 219.

his own mind and will never find assurance in his attempt to do God's will. Hamlet makes the final decision only when he conceives of the mousetrap to catch the king. Telling Horatio to observe, he says:

*Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damnèd ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note,
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And, after, we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming*

(3.2.75-83)

Hamlet struggles with his conscience to make moral choices in a complicated situation. Believing in divine guidance, he says: 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends' (5.2.10); 'There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (5.2.205-06). As a Christian prince, his dilemma can be interpreted as a spiritual problem, a representation of the sinner in his struggle with the forces of evil. In the end, he asks for forgiveness from Laertes: 'Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong' (5.2.211). He forgives his mother too. Convinced of the truth of the Ghost's apparition, his mind is no longer divided. Next, we will discuss the Ghost's appearance from Purgatory. As observed in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Catholics believe Purgatory to be an intermediate stage after death.

The Ghost from Purgatory

Shakespeare makes it clear that the Ghost is not a fantasy but a reality:

*BARNARDO
How now, Horatio, you tremble and look pale.
Is not this something more than fantasy?
What think you on 't?
HORATIO
Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.*

(1.1.53-58)

In spite of the fear that the Ghost arouses, he is portrayed not as an evil spirit but as a murdered victim of Claudius. Killed by his own sibling, the Ghost describes his killing as ‘Murder most foul’, ‘unnatural’ (1.5.27-28), a violation of nature. The description of his murder elicits our sympathy, compassion and indignation. The Ghost speaks as he returns from Purgatory,:

*I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.*

(1.5.9-13)

Suffering in Purgatory, Hamlet's departed father is being purified for his sins before his entrance into Paradise. The Ghost laments that being cut off from his natural life by his own brother prevented him from making a good confession and receiving the last sacrament of extreme unction (anointing):

*Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,
Cut off, even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head*

(1.5.74-79)

Initially, Hamlet fears that the Ghost might be an evil and dishonest Spirit taking advantage of his melancholic state of mind in urging him to perform a heinous crime, a sin that would send him to Hell. Hamlet defers his revenge when he sees Claudius praying. As he meditates on murdering his uncle at this apparently perfect moment he says, ‘Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying’ (3.3.72). Why does Hamlet hesitate?

Prayer Scene

The ‘Prayer Scene’ in Act 3 is pivotal to the whole play because it provides new insights into the characters of Claudius and Hamlet through their highly ironical soliloquies. In fact, the scene is more significant in what *does not* occur rather than what has, namely, the decisions taken

by Claudius and Hamlet. Claudius has a chance to repent but refuses; Hamlet has a chance to kill Claudius but refrains. Shakespeare aims to enhance the dramatic effect by probing deeper into the minds and the motivations of these two protagonists, who oppose each other.¹³ The opening lines set the tones and reveal Claudius's state of mind:

*O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder*

(3.3.36-38)

Claudius's remorse and guilt are set within a religious framework. We are reminded of the killing of Abel by his brother Cain in the Old Testament. Aware of his sinfulness, the King seems to be trapped and unwilling to repent:

*Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent*

(3.3.38-40)

Acknowledging his villainy, Claudius is 'an instrument of evil, but not the very personification of evil'.¹⁴ In this prayer scene, we witness his predicament and often identify with his struggles:

*like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin
And both neglect*

(3.3.41-43)

Like his nephew, his conscience is torn between inclination and desire, and he admonishes himself for his inaction:

*What if this cursèd hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow?*

(3.3.43-46)

13. George C. Bedell, 'Prayer Scene in Hamlet', *Anglican Theological Review* 51, no. 2 (1969), p. 114.

14. Bedell, 'Prayer Scene', pp. 116–17.