

Review

The significance of religion in *Hamlet*

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The tragedy *Hamlet* is one of the most important of Shakespeare's plays published and performed as part of the rainbow of world literature. This study investigates the role of religion in *Hamlet*, and attempts to provide a new interpretation to understand how religious beliefs influence the characters' motives. Text analysis shows Hamlet's social surroundings are receptive to metaphysical beliefs. Hamlet is fundamentally more religious than his religious community; therefore, he seems reluctant to take a position on his father's murderer because of his fearing to be a sinner. The paper concludes that, although Christianity is the main influence on Hamlet, the playwright also uses Hellenic religious symbols for purely rhetorical purposes. Hamlet, having suffered a psychological shock, re-evaluated events in light of his religious views. Even if the ghost's appearance is the result of mental illness caused by the trauma of his mother's marriage to his uncle and the story of killing his father is imagined, Hamlet's attitudes and behavior are religiously based. *Hamlet* reveals how Shakespeare uses rhetoric to create a religious message about the church and re-create the values of right and wrong according to his own view, so he punishes sinners by creating disastrous endings.

Key words: Hamlet, Shakespeare, religion, Christianity, hesitation, revenge, Hamlet's shock, Hamlet's faith.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, it is difficult to find free space on a battleground that thousands of horses' hooves have crushed; similarly, when researching *Hamlet*, one finds a plethora of papers in diverse fields including philosophy, religion, feminism, literature, psychology, culture, and history covering a wide range of aspects of the play.

The tragedy *Hamlet* was written by William Shakespeare in 1600 to 1601, (Shakespeare, 2005) in the Elizabethan era (referring to Queen Elizabeth I), a period when religious conflicts were much in evidence.

This study examines the function of religious beliefs for the people and for the events of *Hamlet*, offering a new perspective on the characters' motives. The essay discusses the actions and thoughts of the characters, especially the protagonist, to elicit the influence of religion on them. The central questions which this study addresses are: Are the characters believers? Was the main protagonist, Hamlet, a believer? Is faith given a positive or negative value in the play? To what extent does religion help to illustrate the play's events and help the readers to understand them? Was Shakespeare against religious phenomena in this play or not?

Religious environment

In general, this play is located in a context of religious beliefs, and the consideration of religion is very important in understanding the characters' motives. Horatio, for instance, prays for Hamlet when he emerges from his dialogue with the ghost:

HORATIO: Heaven secure him!
HAMLET: So be it! (*Hamlet*, I. 5. 116-117)

The speech by Hamlet's father's ghost, who describes himself as having been a sinful person during his life, reveals the depth of his faith, and includes advice about the sins that have been committed. He says:

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.
(*Hamlet*, I. 5, 127-128)

Describing how he wants his son to kill his brother, he talks about the 'murder' in the context of his faith and

justifies his request on religious grounds. He wants his son to kill Claudius for a supreme purpose:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest (*Hamlet*, I .5, 82-83)

Although *Hamlet* is considered “a tragedy of revenge” (Deutermann, 2011), the ghost does not primarily want to get revenge on his brother, but wants to stop the debauchery. It appears that the ghost is a Christian because he insists that Horatio and Marcellus should swear on the sword, which is in the form of a cross (*Hamlet* I .5, 155, 161, 181). Even Claudius is devout at times; he blames himself and asks for forgiveness in church (*Hamlet* III .3.37-49). In addition, most characters in this play, including Laertes (*Hamlet*, I.3.54), Polonius (*Hamlet*, I.3.56-60) and the clown (*Hamlet*, V.1. 22) are believers.

In *Hamlet*, vestiges of “the Ghost’s faith in the efficacy of the traditional sacramental system” (Stegner, 2007) emphasize that the faith of metaphysics affects the actions and moves the characters. For example, many “recent critics have observed the importance of confessional rites in *Hamlet*” (Stegner, 2007).

Was Hamlet religious?

Hamlet is in general a part of his community, and consequently his speech and his behavior reflect his religious faith. He does not commit suicide, because of his need to comply with the orders of his God:

Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on’t! ah fie! ‘tis an unweeded garden
(*Hamlet*, I.2,131-135).

Some of Hamlet’s words show him to be pious and strongly against immorality. He criticizes the spread of inebriation and debauchery in his society:

This heavy-headed revel east and west makes
us traduced and tax’d of other nations: They
clepe us drunkards, and with swinish Phrase
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes. From our
achievements, though perform’d at height,
(*Hamlet*, I.4, 17-21).

In the author’s view, Hamlet is as much a believer as anyone in his community. However, he becomes more pious after the shock of the illegal marriage. Why did the community consider this kind of marriage illegal? How do we know that Hamlet was affected by this?

Claudius is described as lewd and lascivious, not because he killed his brother but because he married his brother’s widow. This kind of marriage was considered illegal at the time, and is described as ‘damned incest’. Accordingly, one of the main reasons for Hamlet’s aversion to his uncle is this ‘damned incest’, a religious reason. It is worth noting that some religions today, such as Islam, consider this kind of marriage legal. Our suspicions are confirmed that Hamlet had feelings of frustration and anger before his conversation with the ghost of his father. In my opinion, Hamlet’s feelings about this culturally unacceptable marriage control him and direct his behavior.

It is suggested that the main evidence for the change in Hamlet after the shock of the ghost’s revelations is his relationship with Ophelia. Before the shock, Hamlet tries to give Ophelia gifts and develops a relationship with her, but he changes his opinion of her because he changes his opinion of all women. Hamlet, in a conversation with Ophelia, advises her to be chaste, and then says:

Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a
breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent
honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things
that it were better my mother had not borne me
(*Hamlet*, III. I, 121-124).

The ideal woman for Hamlet now appears to be one in a ‘nunnery’, and the dialogue between him and Ophelia reveals that Hamlet may have decided to become celibate and to see all sexual relationships as degenerate. His mother’s betrayal of his father, evidenced by her marriage to Claudius, has made him lose trust in women in general. Therefore, when Ophelia describes ‘the initiation’ of his play, prepared by Hamlet, as ‘brief’, Hamlet answers her ‘as women’s love’ (*Hamlet*, III.2, 162-163).

Religion is the framework through which a pious believer looks at the universe and judges right from wrong. Religion also helps the believer to remain balanced when he receives a shock; usually disasters cause the believer to become more pious and ascetic. The shock Hamlet received causes him to regard himself not just as a believer, but as a savior:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let’s go together (*Hamlet*, I.5, I I. I,
188-190).

We appear to be left with an unanswered question. If Hamlet knew everything that his uncle did, why does he seem hesitant? To answer this, we must explore why Shakespeare repeats the ‘crowing of the cock’ without obvious significance.

Hesitation and concern are the most prominent

characteristics of the protagonist's personality, including his uncertainty about the nature of the ghost. During the Middle Ages, the cock was an important Christian symbol. It crowed at the birth and death of Christ, and it heralded the dawn that "brings light to the sins of the night and rouses men to the worship of God" (Guiley, 2008). Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (a Roman Christian poet who was born in Spain in 348) sang: "the night-wandering demons, who rejoice in dunnest shades, at the crowing of the cock tremble and scatter in sore affright" (Summers, 1973). The 'cock crowing' appears to be an important symbol in the structure of *Hamlet*, because Marcellus, the officer, tells Hamlet that the ghost of his father "faded on the crowing of the cock" (*Hamlet*, I.1. 158). As Hamlet holds the belief that the 'cock crowing' disperses demons, he wonders if this ghost is just a demon. Hamlet remains bewildered and his comments show his indecision over the ghost's essence:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from
hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
(*Hamlet*, I.4, 39-43)

Hamlet is not naturally indecisive. However, he is a believer and through his faith tries to control his behavior, balancing his feelings of rage with his religious beliefs. He says:

The spirit that I have seen
may be the devil: and the devil hath power
To 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 (*Hamlet*, II.2, 596-601)

To the author, Shakespeare makes the 'cock crowing' an implied reason for Hamlet's hesitation and because of it, Hamlet seems indecisive. In the same context, the spirit of Hamlet's father warns Hamlet of the murder.

In addition, religious passion influences the time of the killing; Hamlet does not kill his uncle when he is asking for forgiveness in the church (*Hamlet*, III.3, 37-49), because he does not want to send him to heaven. However, his religious passion affects his desire for revenge. He could have sent Claudius to his death without the opportunity to atone for his sins, as Claudius did with his brother.

Finally, did Shakespeare want to send a religious message through this play?

Shakespeare's religious belief is not clear in his literary works; however, some writers believe that Shakespeare

"did not follow or support any one religion" (Baylis, 2010), and others think that it would "be helpful to characterize Shakespeare formally as a religious dramatist. The fact is that he chose, by and large, to leave religion alone" (Murray, 2000). In fact, too much emphasis on Shakespeare's religion leads "to a reductive appreciation of his art" (Voss, 2002). However, no-one can understand *Hamlet* without considering the role of religion. Denmark was Catholic during the period in which *Hamlet* was set, and many writers think Shakespeare could "have been a Roman Catholic" (Jamieson n.d.). Furthermore, there is some evidence that suggests Hamlet's environment was Catholic (Baylis, 2010). The text has been analyzed without any prior consideration about religion. We can determine something of Shakespeare's religious opinions from his characters. Shakespeare does not criticize religion, and his view of right and wrong depends on religion, or, at least, is not incompatible with it. Shakespeare praises chastity, for example, through Laertes (*Hamlet*, I.3, 16-20), Polonius (*Hamlet*, I.3, 101-103), and Hamlet (*Hamlet*, III.1. 111-115). In addition, the tragic end for all the sinful characters strongly suggests that Shakespeare has a moral opinion, and wants to express his disapproval of evil and immorality. In general, this play provides an ascetic view of life, especially in the conversation with the clowns. For instance, they discussed in depth Christianity's attitude towards burying the suicide victim (*Hamlet*, V.1, 86-180).

Shakespeare also hides some criticism of the church and clergy. Ophelia, for example, warns her brother not to do "as some ungracious pastors" (*Hamlet*, I.3, 47). Shakespeare shows the harsh face of the church when the priest refuses to treat Ophelia in the same way as those who died naturally. He considers that she lost her right to be buried in consecrated ground when she took her own life:

As we have warranties: her death was doubtful;
And, but that great command o'ersways the
order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers,
Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on
her;
Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,
Her maiden strewments and the bringing home
(*Hamlet*, V.1, 223-229)

Moreover, Shakespeare employs Grecian religious figures, for example, Hyperion (*Hamlet*, I.2, 140), Niobe (*Hamlet*, I.2, 149), and the God of sun (*Hamlet*, II.2, 181-182). These symbols have rhetorical functions; they do not however, function in the structure of this play. In general, Shakespeare includes a religious message and a meditative view of life. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare reveals

the role of religion in his worldview.

Conclusion

Christianity is the principal influence on Hamlet, and on the other characters from Danish society in this play. In addition; however, the Grecian religious symbols do not have a fundamental significance in the structure of the text as does Christian religion. Shakespeare's most important formative influence was the town's grammar school, as it was there he learned to read, speak, write, and think in Latin from his early years (Spencer, viii).

Shakespeare, by the power of his rhetoric, is able to make us sympathize with the protagonist. However, aside from the rhetoric, when we re-evaluate the behavior of the protagonist in the context of his religious values, we find that he kills Claudius, Polonius, and Laertes, and he causes the deaths of Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, his mother and himself.

There is an additional insight. Hamlet, after the shock of his discoveries, becomes virtually another person and re-evaluates the situation in accordance with his religious views. Perhaps the ghost is just an illusion or mental disorder making him imagine this tale, and the murder of his father is illusory because he is not able to accept this kind of marriage and he wants to justify his crimes. In addition, Claudius's asking for forgiveness in church could be re-interpreted. Perhaps, he simply feels bad about the marriage as it was not particularly acceptable culturally. Following this interpretation, the play raises many questions, and leaves an open door for answers. It can be said that religion must be a starting point for any literary analysis of *Hamlet*, or at least that it must be used to highlight the characters and their actions, enabling us to form deep and logical interpretations.

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