

Hamlet's Procrastination is contrived from Puritan obedience

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present Hamlet's examination of his life and the unavoidable postponement of vengeance as a result of puritanical humiliation. It analyzes that Hamlet is religious and Christian. He believes in God and all the Christian belongings including chastisement for sin and damnation. It is not supposed, theoretical or hypothetical for him, rather all part of his veracity, and the question he asks, and the fears he has are also bona fide and solemn for him. He is not using religion as justification in the way of making excuses, but trying to remain a puritan emphasizing total depravity.

Key words: Puritanism, puritan obedience, Calvinism, procrastination, vengeance, free will, sin, damnation.

Hamlet is a “character in a play, not in history” (Weitz, 107) who talked with the grave-diggers, and moralized on Yorrick's skull, but he is too “sensitive to avenge himself” (Grebanier, 159), because his world is one where religion is existent, God is true, the hereafter is valid, and what one does in earthly life is very much a preparation for the next. He is the school fellow of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Wittenburg; the friend of Horatio; the lover of Ophelia, who is “more sinned against than sinning”. Everything in him ‘seems only’ that “to be or not to be” becomes a “question” for all concerned around him, besides “he feigns madness for political purpose” (Dr. Ferriar). He is very self-scrupled, but ‘calm’ and focused to kill the king and get the throne and follows his father's (Ghost's) orders to “taint not *his* [thy] mind” that leads to his inaction and postponement.

As the paper explores the contribution of puritan obedience on the psychology of Hamlet and its subsequent effects on his decision making, we need to concentrate on elaborating some of the most influential terms and theories which explicate Hamlet's procrastination.

Calvinism is a type of Protestant theological system and an alternative approach to the Christian life. This Reformed tradition was developed by several theologians such as Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Huldrych Zwingli. This branch of Christianity bears the name of the French reformer John Calvin, because of his noticeable influence and because of his role in the confessional and ecclesiastical debates that happened throughout the 16th century. The system is best known for its doctrines of predestination and total depravity, stressing the total contingency of man's salvation upon the absolute sovereignty of God.

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The **Puritans** were a significant group of English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries, including, but not limited to, English Calvinists. Puritanism in this sense was founded by some Marian exiles from the clergy shortly after the accession of Elizabeth I of England in 1558, as an activist movement within the Church of England. Puritanism accepted the interpretations of John Calvin (1509-64) on the nature of man, free will and predestination. They believe in the concept of ‘Original Sin’ which was done by Adam and Eve in the heaven. Man cannot exercise free will since he suffers from hereditary corruption. They believe in strict discipline in life and obedience of laws, conventions and customs. Hamlet delays to kill Claudius because he believes in all the basic principles of Puritanism and he is obedient to puritan laws and conventions.

There are many controversial speculations regarding the use of religion as a justification for Hamlet’s inaction, but one might just brush over the fact that Hamlet is too constrained by puritan aesthetics. Puritan theology is based on Calvinism – asserting the basic sinfulness of humankind, but also declaring that God has determined that someone will be saved despite their sins. Perhaps knowing there is a chance of purgation and entry into paradise, Hamlet restrains himself from killing his incestuous father (uncle) Claudius, while he was praying. He is not using religion as justification in the way of making excuses, but trying to remain a puritan emphasizing *total depravity*. The inaction therefore being the revenge of his father’s death is a determined attempt to “taint not Hamlet’s [thy] mind”.

“Hamlet was restrained by the conscience or a moral scruple; he could not satisfy himself that it was right to avenge his father” (Bradley, 80). He does not act on instinct, rather tries to understand through meditation and prepare for a fitting response. This idea runs deep into the developing plot as we find him incessantly trying to justify his vengeance

Many perceive Hamlet to be mad. Polonius (father of Ophelia), King Claudius and Queen Gertrude were convinced through his behavior, but on the contrary he was quite a sensible man who knew exactly what to do and when to do in what circumstance. “Till then sit still my soul” (1.2.256) evinces his true intention, which stresses upon self-discipline, another of puritan code of belief that adds to suspension of his action, but for the right reason i.e. to avoid hasty scruples also evinced by Gertrude’s marriage with Claudius. He is a thorough observant, a thinker and perseverant. Just as his spiritual is committed to reflect all these characteristics whether consciously or unconsciously, he is embodying the cloak of sainthood. Hamlet, perhaps, very surely knows that those who are predetermined as elect inevitably persevere in the path of holiness to deserve paradise. Even more strengthened spiritually, he embodies the very essence of Puritanism by committing to morality, a form of worship, and conforming to God’s commandments.

Hamlet’s soliloquy about suicide (O’ that this too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!” (i.ii.129-130) ushers in what will be an essential predicament leading to his reluctance, cowardice, and disinclination. He finds that the world is painful to live in, because if one commits suicide to end that pain, one damns oneself to eternal suffering in hell. Therefore, even with the severest of desire, Hamlet hesitates and forsakes the attempt to end his pain,

because “the Everlasting had [not] fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (i.ii.131-132). Just as a saint in the making, he can already feel, as Marcellus says that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (i.iv.67). He proclaims to be omniscient not with the slightest of doubt, rather more with absolute buoyancy when he says, “I see a cherub that see them” (iv.iii.47), teases Guildenstern and Rosencrantz with his knowledge of their purpose of arrival in Denmark, and demonstrates his supernatural ability to prophecy, foresee, and anticipate things happening around him. Moreover, he is a believer, strong one, without compunction. His intellect is matchless, and perfect, because he can comprehend what is and what is not in heaven and earth as he advocates that “[T]here are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / [T]han are dreamt of in *one's* [your] philosophy.”

In regulating external conduct, the general aim of the state, in Calvin's view, is to ensure justice or equity in society at large. The play, *Hamlet* was written around the year 1600 in the final years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who had been the monarch of England for more than forty years and was then in her late sixties. The prospect of Elizabeth's death and the question of who would succeed her was a subject of serious apprehension at the time, since Elizabeth had no children, and the only person with a legal imperial claim, James of Scotland, was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and therefore represented a political bloc to which Elizabeth was opposed. When Elizabeth died in 1603, James did inherit the throne, becoming King James I. It is no surprise, then, that many of Shakespeare's plays from this period, including *Hamlet*, concern transfers of power from one monarch to the next. These plays focus particularly on the uncertainties, betrayals, and upheavals that accompany such shifts in power, and the general sense of anxiety and the fear that surround them. The appearance of the ghost gives physical form to the fearful anxiety that surrounds the transfer of power after the king's death, seeming to imply that the future of Denmark's future, comparing it to the supernatural omens that supposedly presaged the assassination of Julius Caesar in ancient Rome (and which Shakespeare had recently represented in *Julius Caesar*). The ghost functions as a kind of internal foreshadowing, implying tragedy not only to the audience but to the characters as well. “If king is murdered the truth is murdered too, and king Hamlet's assassination would be impossible to prove” (Grebner, 111-113). His aim is not to kill the king and get the throne. He is primarily concerned with punishing the murderer of his father, punishing him under the shelter of justice. Therefore, “he feigns madness for political purpose.” (Dr. Ferriar). Hamlet is the man who would have inherited the throne had Claudius not snatched it from him. He is a malcontent, someone who refuses to go along with the rest of the court for the sake of the greater good of stability. The question of the moral validity of suicide in an unbearably painful world will haunt the rest of the play; it reaches the height of its urgency in the most famous line in all of English literature: “To be, or not to be: that is the question” (iii.i.58). In this scene Hamlet mainly focuses on the appalling conditions of life, railing against Claudius's court as an “unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (i.ii.135-137). Throughout the play, we watch the gradual crumbling of the beliefs on which Hamlet's opinion has been based. Already, in this first soliloquy, religion has failed him, and his warped family situation can offer him no solace.

All the beliefs about the ghost are based in religion or at least religion related superstition. The problem with Gertrude's marriage to Claudius being incestuous is grounded in religion – it was

sinful to marry Claudius. When Hamlet speaks to Horatio of his father, and in his scorn of his mother's neglect of that noble shade and in his tenderness, says that his picture comes that very moment to his mind. He speaks as any sorrowing son would speak; his father is before him, but he does not pretend that it is the spirit of his father. There is no delusion, and he is not insane at any time. Besides, his obedience to the ghost is highly rewarding and conspicuous. "It is as he is flesh of his flesh that Hamlet is bound (by nature) to act on his father's behalf" (Dodsworth 59), though there is deep-seated skepticism. Hamlet has contemplated profoundly at Wittenberg, where liberal contemplation was the trend, but he has not attempted, like Benvenuto Cellini, to raise spirits. Hamlet's plain duty, in the tragedy, is to obey the command of his father's spirit. The Elizabethans accepted it in this way. It was obvious, according to their moral values, that Hamlet's struggle was a struggle in opposition to sense of duty, not a virtuous disbelief as to whether it was right for him to annihilate the intelligent, kingly, deceitful, and understated criminal whose sin in marrying his brother's wife, coupled with the rumor of a more ghastly and clandestine offense, vulnerable to curse the whole state of Denmark. It did not astonish the English of the beginning of the seventeenth century that the murdered king should come back from the state of purgation in which many Englishmen still believed. It is impossible to kill the vital beliefs of a nation by mere edicts; and the announcement of King Hamlet that he had been murdered without a chance to confession, with his sins upon his soul, did not imply, as it would have implied to the Puritan mind, that he was either in heaven or in hell. He was in the middle state, suffering terribly, knowing, too, that his beloved kingdom of Denmark was in the grip of a monstrous usurper, and that, if his son were not awakened to the danger of the moment, his dynasty must pass, perhaps forever, from the throne. The auditors in Shakespeare's time took the Ghost seriously. He was not merely a piece of perfunctory stage machinery; he was the better part of a good man - - not a saintly man - and of a noble king. He had sinned, but he had not died in mortal sin; he was suffering in purging fire, with the torment of an awful secret upon him, fore-knowing that as a kind and a patriot, he ought to reveal this secret to the Prince, his son.

Drawing on sermon notes from first-generation pastor Thomas Allen, Harry Stout describes the term *jeremiad* refers to a sermon or another work that accounts for the misfortunes of an era as a just penalty for great social and moral evils, but holds out hope for changes that will bring a happier future. It derives from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who in the seventh century B.C. attributed the calamities of Israel to its abandonment of the covenant with Jehovah and its return to pagan idolatry, denounced with "lurid and gloomy eloquence" its religious and moral iniquities, and called on the people to repent and reform in order that Jehovah might restore them to his favor and renew the ancient covenant. In Act I Scene I, a general discussion between Marcellus and Horatio provides ample insight into the state of affairs of Denmark, especially after the death of Senior Hamlet, and coronation of King Claudius. Just as Oedipus Rex, pointed out that calamities had befallen due to moral iniquities.

Hamlet is stricken not by external scruples of any sort, rather they are internal more accurately as such his self-conscience which doles like a free pendulum much without will but more for the design and make-up. He suffers from a self deluded predicament in regards to Claudius 'to be or not to be' the murder of his father. This quandary becomes a quagmire never to set him free until death, but during entire length of the play he seems to be questioning "what should be the fear?"

Bradley states, "When Hamlet mentions, as one possible cause of his inaction, his 'thinking too precisely on the event', he mentions another, 'bestial oblivion' as there is preparation for disciplining the exasperated soul.

Hamlet meditates unlike any normal person, as if he was Christ because Thomas Hooker (1586–1647), in *The Soules Preparation for Christ* (1632) deems: "It is a settled exercise for two ends: first to make a further inquiry of the truth: and secondly, to make the heart affected therewith", both of which Hamlet meticulously adheres to first by staging a mousetrap play for gathering information about the murder of his father and second by feigning madness and obeying the ghost as if he was meant to by virtue of God's will. He relentlessly struggles to discipline his blood seeking soul. There is no urgency, rather tardy and sluggish, approach to plot out a premeditated retribution on Claudius. According to Ann Stanford, the process of meditation involves the "vivid picturing in the imagination of a scene called the 'composition of place.' The scene may be drawn from the Old or New Testaments, the details of the life of Christ, the terrors of hell, or a more present situation. . . . After imagining a scene, or seeing the subject of meditation before one in the fields, the meditator draws arguments from it regarding eternal truths or his own relation to God. The last step is a colloquy with God or with the creature, theoretically involving the will, in which the meditator determines to have more faith, to cease from sin, to abide by God's law, or comes to some moral discernment" ("Anne Bradstreet" 50). Evidently, Hamlet's postponement of revenge is a result of his overindulgent thinking i.e. premeditation in search of truth for rationalization of the punishment that he wishes to plan for Claudius. He is no ordinary human being who would stoop to action to further complicate the state of affairs. He wants to be absolutely sure that the punishment is puritanically just so that it is pragmatic to his sense of objective faith. He achieves this through comparing and gathering information by staging the mousetrap play which according to Richard Baxter, *The Saints* [sic] *Everlasting Rest* (1650): "There is yet another way by which we may make our senses serviceable to us, and that is, by comparing the objects of sense with the objects of faith; and so forcing sense to afford us that medium, from whence we may conclude the transcendent worth of glory, by arguing from sensitive delights as from the less to the greater."

To sum up, religious writings, and bibles are no more the things to be put up on walls as show pieces as was the case in *Measure for Measure*, rather more a matter of mundane learning for spiritual guidance. People in Denmark were profoundly responsive to religion as Mr. Boswell argues that "the sentiments which fall from Hamlet in his soliloquies, or in confidential communication with Horatio, evince not only a sound but an acute and vigorous understanding." Similarly, Dodsworth states, "Hamlet regards the Ghost as eminently 'questionable' (43), that is, 'which invites question' as Jenkins has it, but more pertinently 'uncertain, doubtful" (Dodsworth, 58). Such skepticism is contemptuous on the part of Hamlet, but not without optimistic rationalization. But, "Even when he doubts, or thinks he doubts, the honesty of the Ghost, he expresses no doubt as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out to be honest" (Bradley 80), because he wishes to ground his madness on this impeccable but conceited predicament of 'to be or not to be.'

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