

I. RENAISSANCE AND CLASSICAL HEROISM IN *HAMLET*

“What a piece of work is a man!”

Time and again this course has brought me back to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the challenge here is irresistible: to demonstrate how this play assists an understanding of the ideology of the society of the Renaissance, with reference to Italy. The play gives the Renaissance a very human and three dimensional face. The story is set in Denmark, the author is English, and so perhaps the ideology is more generally European than specifically Italian; but that generality does not preclude the play's bearing on the Italian Renaissance, especially when it is remembered that the general Renaissance sprang from and leant on the Italian one. Because of the constraints of word limit, this essay will confine its exploration to the character of Hamlet himself to exemplify the play's reflection of the Italian Renaissance.

Hamlet is set up as a spirit of Renaissance against what Machiavelli would have seen as medieval Northern barbarism. Hamlet has received a humanist education which he recurrently demonstrates, and which he extends by virtue of his own intellect through his experience. Classical allusions, similes and metaphors litter his speeches and dialogue as evidence of his extensive reading of the classical authors and his learning on how to use them to exemplify as all the humanist writers do. He also takes great pleasure in the player's speech from a classically-styled play which “pleased not the million [and was] caviar to the general” concerning heroism in the Trojan War, whereas Polonius finds it “too long”. He clearly has a thirst for knowledge and learning, being reported as an avid reader; and he is free and independent enough to apply his own judgement to what he reads, as he does with the “slanders” in II.ii. Above all, Hamlet has read Pico della Mirandola on the Dignity of Man, and has faith in the power of free will and reason. Thus the highest praise he can confer on his dead father is “He was a man, take him for all in all”. In II.ii he expounds,

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!

In IV.iv he asks,

What is man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability and godlike reason To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on the event [...] I do not know Why yet I live to say this thing's to do.

The end of this quote also indicates Hamlet's very human problem and a very real consideration for the humanists and humanistically trained public men of the Renaissance. He has to apply the education he has received, and his reason, to the real world and the *vita attiva*, not merely to philosophical contemplation. In attempting to do this he actually applies the respected Renaissance quality of “prudence”, which is why Hamlet is often accused of indeed “*thinking too precisely on the event*”. As Giovanni Rucellai wrote, “*It does not please me to act hastily in any matter, but rather to do everything prudently and after taking thought.*” In III.ii Hamlet admires Horatio for his ability to move through life applying cool “judgement” rather than intemperate passion.

Hamlet is reported in the play as having been a perfect Castiglionian courtier, and he also demonstrates qualities which Machiavelli advised for princes, so that “*he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal.*” As Ophelia says, Hamlet's is “*a noble mind*”, that he is “*the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, The expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion and the mould of form, The observed of all observers* and that he has a “*noble and most sovereign reason*” and the “*unmatched form and feature of blown youth.*”

Just as his speech demonstrates his classical knowledge, so it does too his wider education, showing him comfortable in playing with language and grammar, writing for a play and for statecraft, and within the areas of music, plays and acting, history, theology and religious doctrine, morality, the art of warfare, sailing and ship terminology, law, medicine, hunting and sports, gardening, and more. He has a talent for comedy and is witty and entertaining when he wants to be. He despises Claudius and, for much of the play, his mother, but he always treats both with courtesy in public (except in the extremities of the night of the play within the play). He treats all his social inferiors, except those who betray him, with equal generous courtesy, and he is “*beloved of his inferiors*”.

His letter to Horatio and his beating of the much-praised Laertes at fencing show that his knowledge is not merely theoretical, but that he is also “valorous” and brilliant in practise. In his lines about the court’s excessive revelling under Claudius, and in his dying speech, he demonstrates his value of “temperance” and his genuine concern for the condition and welfare of the state. Although he is privately troubled, everything he does in public is accomplished with sprezzatura (calm, relaxed and not anxious) and he “*shon[s] Affectation*”. Hamlet makes a clear distinction between sexual love and the neo-Platonic spiritual bonding favoured by Castiglione and humanists. He offers the latter freely to those he respects, but eschews the former throughout the play. Physical love and marriage, he thinks, should “wait upon the judgement”.

He knows he cannot work alone, but he is very selective about who he has to aid him. As though following Castiglione’s advice “*To gete him an especiall and hartye friend to companye withal*”, he selects Horatio; and following Machiavelli, he seeks the help and advice of Horatio, whose wisdom, honesty and plain-speaking he respects, shunning the mediocre flattery of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius. Yet he is wise and competent enough himself not to subdue his own will and judgement to Horatio’s when they do not agree. In addition, in his craftiness, his ability to remove adversaries, his ability to “*be cruel to be kind*”, and his ability to lie convincingly to achieve his ends and what he believes is a common good, Hamlet demonstrates his princely potential. As Machiavelli also said, anyone who would act up to a perfect standard of goodness in everything, must be ruined among so many who are not good. It is essential, therefore, for a Prince who desires to maintain his position, to have learned how to be other than good, and to use or not to use his goodness as necessity requires.

Finally, in his attitude to death and the purposes of life before it, Hamlet also reflects the ideology of renaissance society. He begins the play rather disillusioned with life because death is inevitable and he finds mortality vulgar (I.ii.72-76 and 129ff, and II.ii.295-310). In the course of the famous soliloquy, “*To be, or not to be ...*” he complains that the possibilities of life are not fulfilled because of fear of death (III.i.78-88). But in Act V he comes to embrace a broader Renaissance view of death. Girolamo Savonarola, preaching on death, encouraged people to visit cemeteries and “*to take a skull in one’s hand and contemplate it often.*” Shakespeare, explicit as ever, has Hamlet actually do exactly this to come to an acceptance of the inevitability of the reality of mortality (V.i.174-209). He is then able to move beyond fear and horror of it to the renaissance vision that life, more than just a preparation for death, was also a period in which something of value could be achieved and passed on to the future, allowing the individual even to live on through fame.

Thus Hamlet faces and accepts death in general, then the death of Ophelia, and still goes on with his life to plan and achieve his purpose, the death of Claudius; and he even displays a degree of humour whilst he knows he is risking his own death. He accepts, too, that the timing and manner of it must be left up to “providence”. And when he does come to die, he has two concerns: his own future name, and the future welfare of the state (V.ii.215-220, and 343-345, and 349-363). It is commonly said that a good life brings a good death ... reason constrains me to die willingly, and so may it please the Lord God to concede me the grace so to do.

II. CHRISTIANITY IN *HAMLET*

In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father and swears to avenge his death by killing his uncle Claudius who both killed Hamlet's father and married his mother. He is maddened with grief and struggles with the terms of this promise, to the point that he contemplates suicide. He lives on to fulfil the oath to his father, but continues to struggle through the life decisions that define him as a person. Hamlet falls back on his morals and beliefs when making these decisions. His Christian values play a significant role in the tragic ending of the play.

Hamlet's faith is first tested with the appearance of the ghost of his father. Christianity forbids followers to seek out spirits for advice or communication, so Hamlet's encounter with his father's spirit calls all of his religious values into question. However, Hamlet holds onto these values and is cautious towards the ghost. Though Hamlet had suspected that his uncle (and now step-father) Claudius was a part of his father's death, he doesn't take the ghost's words for truth. Hamlet has to prove to himself that Claudius killed his father by setting him up to admit his guilt before he decides to fulfil the promise that he made to the ghost; to avenge his father's death and murder Claudius. The knowledge that Hamlet gains following the confirmation of what the ghost conveyed to him changes the rest of his life and sets the tragic plot of the play in motion. Standing by his religious beliefs in a time when he could have easily believed the ghost and instantly avenged his father emphasizes the strength of Hamlet's Christian values and foreshadows the affect that these values will have throughout the play. At the opening of the play, Hamlet is found to be grieving for several different reasons. This grief leads to him becoming suicidal. But what could make a man so dejected from life that he would wish to kill himself? "*It was not his father's death... still less was it the loss of the crown... it was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature*" (Bradley 170) when she remarried a mere month after his father's death. Not only did she remarry, but she remarried to her late husband's brother!

[...] and yet, within a month--Let me not think on't--Frailty, thy name is woman!
A little month, or ere those shoes were old With which she follow'd my poor
father's body... married with my uncle, My father's brother, but no more like my
father than I to Hercules. (Shakespeare 11).

Throughout the play Hamlet questions whether this grief is a legitimate reason to take his own life.

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;
(Shakespeare 53)

In this quote Hamlet analyses his existence. He deliberates whether it is more appropriate to kill himself and end his agony or to endure his pain. The last line makes it evident that Hamlet wishes he could simply end his life.

He reveals that he would have no difficulty in embracing suicide if he were a pagan, that is, if he believed that death is effectively the end of life. But he is troubled by visions of what lies beyond the finite horizons to which the ancient world limited. (Cantor 119)

"*Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!*" (Shakespeare 10). Hamlet's desires for death are hindered by his realization that suicide is an unforgivable sin and that he would go to Hell if he did kill himself.

Just because he doesn't kill himself, however, doesn't mean that Hamlet is unaware of the sins and character flaws that he will have to live with. This is conveyed within Hamlet's conversation with his love interest Ophelia.

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. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all. (Shakespeare 55)

These lines not only exemplify Hamlet's opinions of himself, but also that of the society that he lives in. Hamlet is fully aware of the corruption going on around him and judges both his society and himself by the way that God would judge them. He doesn't even think people should get married because they will breed additional sinners. These lines mix Hamlet's Christian values with his depression; he shows no sign of hope for the moral recovery of mankind and doesn't seem to understand that God will forgive him for his sins if he asks repentance. The Christian values that seemed to make up a large portion of his morals in the beginning of the play seem to be losing prominence at this point in the play; this is a sign that Hamlet's grief and depression are outweighing his values and distorting his opinions and actions. This distortion of Hamlet's Christian values has a drastic impact on his plot to avenge his father's death. Several times throughout the play, Hamlet has the opportunity to kill his step-father, primarily when Hamlet walks in on Claudius while he is "praying". In actuality Claudius was confessing his guilt to God, though he wasn't asking for forgiveness. However from Hamlet's point of view Claudius is at his most vulnerable moment, on his knees, yet he still doesn't kill him. Why?

At this crucial juncture, Hamlet's religious beliefs intervene to complicate his view of revenge in a peculiarly diabolical manner. He feels that he must act in such a way as to ensure, not just the destruction of Claudius's body, but the damnation of his soul. (Cantor 120)

Claudius killed Hamlet's father in a cruel manner. He poisoned him while he was asleep, so that he never had the opportunity to ask forgiveness for his sins. This is why he returned to earth as a ghost; his soul hadn't been forgiven for the sins he committed while he was alive. Hamlet's ruthless drive for revenge made him want to destroy Claudius in the way that Claudius had destroyed his father. He wanted not only his body but his soul to suffer, which is why he plotted to murder Claudius at a more appropriate time; when he was sinning or at least when he had not had the opportunity to be forgiven for sins he had committed. Hamlet's distorted Christian values make his plot additionally wicked and sinister, by causing him to wait in order to ruin Claudius's soul in addition to his body. This plan inadvertently leads to the deaths of eight characters in the play. Had Hamlet killed Claudius while he was "praying" the tragic end of the play wouldn't have occurred. Instead, while Hamlet arguing with his mother he stabbed Polonius, one of Claudius's men, because he thought that he was Claudius. Polonius was listening in on Hamlet's conversation with his mother, but Hamlet assumed it was Claudius so he stabbed at the man before realizing who it was that he was stabbing. Had Polonius not died Ophelia wouldn't have gone mad and committed suicide and Laertes wouldn't have murdered Hamlet and accidentally killed himself. Had Hamlet killed Claudius during his initial opportunity Claudius wouldn't have been able to seek to have Hamlet killed (and inadvertently caused Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to be killed), and Claudius wouldn't have accidentally poisoned and killed Hamlet's mother Gertrude. All of this death and tragedy dates back to Hamlet's Christian beliefs and how those beliefs warped his plan to avenge his father.

This raises the questions of "what if?" "What if" Hamlet had killed Claudius when he was praying, even if in Hamlet's opinion he would be repentant? Would that vengeance have been Christian? This matter is decided by each reader and their interpretation of Hamlet's behaviour and beliefs. In my opinion it would have been more Christian than his plan to wait in order to send Claudius to Hell. That plan used his Christianity as more of a weapon than a faith. He used his religious beliefs to make his plan additionally destructive, instead of a way to make peace with his father's death. Had Hamlet killed Claudius while he was praying he still would have been violating one of the Ten Commandments, but even that sin would have been forgivable with repentance.