

## Doubts in William Shakespeare's Hamlet

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper revolves around the theme of doubts in Shakespeare's Hamlet, for doubts pervade through the entire play and are a significant yet witty beginning to trigger the action that results in the tragic end of the play. It is not only the doubts of the protagonist Hamlet, concerning the crimes of his uncle Claudius who had already usurped the throne after the death of King Hamlet, his brother, but also Claudius appears to be skeptical about Hamlet as to whether the latter doubts his crimes or not, not to mention the doubts of Polonius, the King's Chamberlain, about Hamlet's behavior. To add, Polonius also doubts the behavior of Laertes, his son. Even a minor character such as the character Marcellus, one of the royal guards, doubts the political situation of Elsinore when he says to Horatio after seeing the Ghost of the late king Hamlet the following: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Hamlet, Act I, Scene iv), which shows the character's belief that the appearance of the Ghost is ominous of something that had gone terribly wrong and that something would affect the moral and political situation of the state. Because of his doubts, Polonius has already employed spies to keep an eye on Hamlet and Laertes. This atmosphere blurred by doubts may point to Shakespeare's skill in handling one of the most important ingredients of the dramatic setting—the psychological and emotional setting. This does not only allow the dramatist to draw the main lines of his drama, but it also gives rise to the spectators' curiosity to trace and expect whatsoever significant happenings to be contained in the entire action of the play. The presence of doubts means the presence of cloudy awareness of certain situations and the need to trigger the action of the play into a particular course of developments contributing to the dramatic purpose planned by the dramatist, for doubts in drama and otherwise requires verifications. More importantly, doubts significantly contribute to building the canvas of the structure of the play in that they function as linking elements to push the action a step after another towards the resolution designed by the dramatist to serve his purpose in producing a well-knit structure of the tragedy.

**KEYWORDS:** *Doubts - William Shakespeare - Hamlet*

### Introduction

The character of Hamlet is regarded as the most famous of all the dramatic characters of Shakespeare's plays. It may be assumed that studies about the character of Hamlet have already been exhausted because they are many and various. Nevertheless, scholars today show the same interest in this character as they did in the past insofar as this character is timeless, universal and unique on the literary and artistic level. In his introduction to *Hamlet*, Bernard Lott writes a very good remark in this regard, emphasizing the fact that Hamlet is a character of utmost significance today as it was in the past. He asserts that "Hamlet must be the best known of all characters in the theatre of the

world. Interest in him and in Shakespeare's play about him is as strong today as it ever was, books continue to be written about him, and interpretations of his character on the stage are unending in number and variety" (Lott, 1973, ix).

It has been suggested that Hamlet's hesitations and vacillation between two decisive states—to take action against Claudius when it is proved that he is guilty or leave him when it is proved that he is innocent—are the Ghost's stimulated activity. Undoubtedly, whether informed by a ghost or a human being or any other rumor said by any identified or unidentified character in the play or in actual life, a prudent and wise prince like Hamlet will by no means leave the situation unverified; that is to say, he has to investigate his father's murder, otherwise he cannot take any decisive step towards revenge. It is against his own principles that he kills a human being without relying on true and sound justifications. How could a person like Hamlet avenge the death of his father, relying on remarks said by a ghost? The Ghost may represent good or evil as explicated in the play. There must be concrete evidence to prove that the suspect is guilty. Even if the alleged remarks about the murderer of Hamlet's father are said by a sane human being, Hamlet or any other sane person in his place will inevitably do what he is supposed to do—revenge—after he hears the remarks that prove the cause of his father's death. Germaine Greer comments in this respect, saying:

The audience has come a long way from the beginning of a conventional revenge tragedy, the breadth of the chasm between Hamlet's perception and Laertes' blind rage. The journey is impossible without the revenge convention which is the fixed point from which it takes off, and against which, personified in Laertes and Fortinbras, it constantly measures itself. What the audience has experienced is not simply the spectacle of a skeptic, but the actual stress of doubting and confrontation. (Greer, 1989, p. 59)

Hamlet is agitated by the appearance of the Ghost that demands of him that he should act in order not to "let the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (I. v. 82-83, in Harrison, 1968). At the same time, Hamlet is prevented by the Ghost from harming his mother for her incestuous hasty marriage with Claudius. The Ghost demands that Hamlet "leave her to Heaven" (I. v. 86). To Hamlet, what matters most are not the demands of the Ghost because the latter may be proved fake; it is Hamlet's nature represented by his sound behavior. He thusly determines to have all things set right. Therefore, the kind of struggle which arises in the play is one that is psychological; the struggle is between two forces—nobleness, the high moral virtue, and ignobility, the lack of honor and nobility—the one employs conscientiously all legal and moral methods to defend itself and obtain its rights, the other employs all illegal and evil means to bring about illegal results. Wrongs breed wrongs, for the unethical actions, mistakes, or negative situations create more of the same, often escalating problems through cycles of poor choices. In line with those representations, Lott remarks that

there is Hamlet's own nature. Noble of mind in an evil world, he alternates as any human being does between reason and emotion. His soliloquies are the fruits of reason; in them we find him relying on deliberation to settle for him the right course of action to follow. But they contain also impassioned outbursts sometimes immediately recognizable as such, but at other times veiled by the 'antic disposition' he puts on. (Lott, xii)

It can be suggested that Hamlet's doubts are regarded as the main reason for his tendency to delay revenge and take action against his uncle which result in unfolding the truth. However, his doubts about the Ghost are not the only reason for this delay, for he has to verify not only a mere ghost's remark, but in case his doubts turn to be true he has also to think of the way necessary for successful revenge when confronting a powerful yet formidable king like King Claudius. He has to face a great power which he might have failed to overcome had he not delayed his action. Naturally, Hamlet has to think of the right and suitable moment helpful for the fulfilment of his goals. He wants to snatch what he wants at the right moment. Hamlet makes preparations and does profound thinking as seen in his soliloquies. It takes a long time to prepare what he is going to do, especially when one considers his state of mind and his kind of feelings when left alone to confront and experience a very heavy task: he has to collect evidence, and he should employ all his skill, intelligence, and power—abstract and concrete—so that he can ultimately secure victory over his virtual enemies. In this regard, He declares: "How all occasions do inform against me / And spur dull revenge" (IV. V. 32-33). Wilson asserts the same point saying:

His doubts are certainly not the sole cause of his procrastination. Indeed, he seems to admit in Hecuba soliloquy that he has no real right to delay at all. But he assuredly has more excuse than any critic has yet perceived; and the excuse at least provides a strong motive for the introduction of the Gonzaga play, which the critics have hitherto been at pains to explain as mere device of a shuffler. (Wilson, 1964, p. 75)

Hamlet's declaration that all circumstances are against him indicates that he is still thinking of his duty and all the difficult tasks waiting for him. One can only imagine how a Wittenberg student immediately finds himself in front of a great evil power that has already practiced awful crimes of murder and adultery. Hamlet's delay to take action may be attributed by some critics to his inability to decide. This notion can be refuted by his immediate action when he kills Polonius mistaking him for King Claudius. Thus, Lott provides significant ideas in this regard:

Hamlet is so placed that urgent forces compel him in two directions at once. In the first part of the play he seeks and finds sufficient proof that his uncle murdered his father in order to become King himself. The Queen, his mother, has married his uncle. The experience is devastating, and his slow progress from some awareness of these wrongs to irrefutable proof of his

uncle's guilt changes his whole view of life. He is thoughtful and human, and finds at first the greatest difficulty in accepting the new situation and understanding its implications. Testing the validity of the Ghost's evidence is deliberately prolonged so that with it can go an acclimatization to the new situation. Far from taking action, he allows his uncle to get back the initiative and banish from the country.

(Lott, ix)

As it has already been indicated, Hamlet has to undergo a very heavy burden so that he can set all things right. Lott continues his argument and explores the second part of Hamlet's task:

In the second part of the play, he returns to Denmark, and, furious at the suicide of Ophelia, the woman he once loved, he takes the only action he can, killing the King and proclaiming the Norwegian prince successor to the throne of Denmark. But by this time, he is himself dying, as his antagonist in the fatal duel is too, and the Queen is dead already.  
(Lott, ix)

The Ghost's reappearance serves another purpose: in addition to the Elizabethans' belief in the existence of ghosts, the Ghost asserts his reality when it exhibits the same features, the same demands, and the same concern about Hamlet's mother. He also serves as an emphasis on the dramatist's assertion of Hamlet's delay. Bradley shares the same point of view as he says: "The ghost proves...his identity by showing the same traits as were visible in his first appearance—the same insistence on the duty of remembering, and the same concern for the Queen. And the result is that we construe the Ghost's interpretation of Hamlet's delay" (Bradley, 1964, p. 139).

One must realize that Hamlet suffers from an inward chaotic thinking, contradictory ideas and conflicting ideals, and at the same time he suffers from an outward chaotic situation—his mother's adultery and the subsequent hasty marriage, the death of his father being killed by a murderer, and Claudius usurpation of the throne, not to mention the mysterious circumstances beyond that horrible act of murdering his father, which culminates into the appearance of the Ghost that represents his father and that points to the alleged murderer. To make the situation worse than what it is for the time being, Hamlet has already killed Polonius, which makes him the target of Laertes, Polonius' son, who will soon appear in order to avenge the death of his father. Hamlet's task is twofold then; he must verify the murder of his father, and the credibility of the Ghost's remarks. Thus, Hamlet confronts a situation from which there is no way out—either to proceed in his business to set all wrong things right or die in the attempt. The entire situation has been completely imposed upon him, and he has to suffer, reason things and then act at the right moment. Jan Kott comments on the same point, saying that Hamlet "is more than the heir to the throne who tries to revenge himself for the murder of his father. The situation does not define Hamlet, or at any rate does not define him beyond

doubt. The situation has been imposed on him Hamlet accepts it, but at the same time revolts against it. He accepts the part, but is beyond and above it" (kott, 1975, p. 55).

Some may think of the notion that the Ghost of Hamlet's father unfolds the circumstances during which he has been killed should be taken for granted and that Hamlet should act according to them without taking into consideration any reasonable and profound thinking for an issue that is most serious and significant. Rather, such a visionary being as the Ghost on the stage adds uncertainty to Hamlet's suspicions as to whom his father's murderer is ascribed because the Ghost may be a damned devil and not the image of his father, as Hamlet himself declares. Consequently, the Ghost serves as a means of illustrating what a character is thinking of and what kind of psychological path it may assume.

On the other hand, Hamlet is to stand alone upon his feelings, mind, and action. His feelings arouse the pathos of ancient tragedy and the real struggle in the play that is made between his spirit and the task he has been imposed upon himself. It is the inner struggle in the mind of a meek, kind, generous and peaceful human character whose main concern in life is to avenge the murder of his father. One can only imagine the pressure of the heavy burden of the crime of one's own relative; "a fairly simple pattern of events is thus overwhelmed by complications beyond human range, and the hero submits to Providence (or 'Heaven', as it is often called in the play)" (Lott, xiii). Of course, concrete evidence is urgently needed, and thus Hamlet's delay is accounted for by the fact that he should first verify his suspicions and the Ghost's remarks, so that he will be able to decide and act accordingly.

To add to Hamlet's predicament and his moral responsibility as Prince that is supposed to be a legitimate heir of a usurped throne, one is to take into consideration the fact that he alone is made conscious of the moral blindness of not only his mother but also of the entire members of the community of Elsinore that favor the coming of a usurped King as they show their connivance to his coronation. This indicates that Hamlet's task is very immense and multitudinous insofar as he has to eradicate all the iniquity done to him by his uncle, mother and the entire nation of the state. Greer displays a very good elaboration and systematic analysis in this regard:

The actual disease of Denmark is not a giant conspiracy but rather a lack of curiosity and concern about matters unseen. The Elsinoreans are content to keep up appearances and muddle along, keeping in the good graces of the powerful. Their apathy has permitted the usurpation of the throne by a truly evil man. When Hamlet sets about to wring his mother's heart, he is trying to awaken her moral sense. His real opponent is not Claudius's criminality, but the spiritual blindness which allows him to exist. To dispel that blindness (and sharpen the moral sensibility of the audience) it is not sufficient to take a life for a life.

(Greer, 58)

Therefore, Hamlet can by no means be blamed for his delay, and doing so is to do him a grave harm. Had the Ghost's remarks been told by a human witness, they would have been verified. To make matters worse, Hamlet falls into the domain of a dangerous situation the moment he gives hints at his doubts concerning the suspected murderer of his father, a situation in which he may be damned and eventually killed. Hamlet's true conscience to fairly deal with the suspect at the moment he is able to kill him is reflected in his failure to take a decisive step in this regard. Had he killed Claudius at this moment, the play would not have become a tragedy, for the pattern of tragedy, in this case would not be fulfilled. Therefore, as part of the pattern which the hero of the play should achieve is the element of verification. In order to proceed in the remaining steps of that pattern, Hamlet appears to be in the position of the hunted rather than that of the hunter.

Undoubtedly, Hamlet is to get even by means of murder. Hence, there arises in his mind the conflict between his nature as a noble sensitive Christian and the demands of the Ghost's claims which may appear to be true. Therefore, Hamlet should fulfill a task disharmonious to his nature. Most importantly, it should be noted that Hamlet has some doubts about the real murderer of his father before he meets the Ghost. This is not to reduce the Ghost's role in the play. Rather, this idea is to strengthen the significance of both Hamlet's doubts and the Ghost's remarks, for if Hamlet had been just informed of all the circumstances of the crime at the time he did not have any idea about the doubts, he might have abandoned the Ghost's remarks or done something else. So, Hamlet is moved by the Ghost because the latter echoes his doubts about his mother's and uncle's guilt.

Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia "truth to be a liar" (Act II, scene ii) can make available the clue necessary to disclose his doubts to not only the Elizabethan audience but also to the people of Elsinore. The audience has no reason to doubt Hamlet's standpoint concerning the entire situation of his suspicions towards his uncle, a situation in which Hamlet should, according to his personality as a righteous prince, act scrupulously. He should investigate the supposed crime in the way he finds helpful to uncover all the hidden facts which he wants to know. According to Greer, Hamlet is gradually taking

the role of probe, searching the body of Elsinore for the source of its corruption. If we doubt his right to be 'scourge and minister' to Denmark's disease, the play collapses into chaos, but if we forget the dangers of sliding into solipsism, which is always present when we trust to our own reason for a guide, we have not understood the nature of the case. The drama of Protestantism in its finest hour was the heroism of insisting upon the sovereignty of the individual conscience. (Greer. 56)

After having explored the many examples of revenge tragedies and talked about the great psychological insight that accompanies the inner state of the avenger, one can recognize the most significant points in the play—the importance of conscience that should prevail over material loss

when presenting Hamlet as a revenge doer in the play. This is something higher than the other materialistic stand posed in other revenge tragedies, and as Lott puts it in his own words:

Shakespeare chose a theme which deals with a duty higher than the others, a son's revenge for the murder of his father. There is, too, much psychological refinement, even upon Kyd's fine play, since conscience has taken over from physical impediment as the deterrent, and the play therefore moves in a higher plane of significance, through the reflections of the hero and through his relationship with the outside world.

[Lott, xix]

Among the retarding forces that hinder the course of Hamlet's action is the power of fate. The potentialities of man as seen throughout the intellectuality of Hamlet are restricted by the powers of fate and accidents, and man cannot but try to rehabilitate himself according to what powers may confront and try to defeat him. Lott remarks that Hamlet envisions that "men are not what they think they are; their potentialities are far from limitless. They can cope with what is around, with their physical environment, and the greatest of them can confront what is within, but time and accident frustrate both reason and emotion" (Lott, xii). Thus, the player King provides his remark in this regard: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/ that our devices still are overthrown" (III. ii. 199-200). Hamlet himself says: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to/ come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet/ it will come/ The readiness is all" (V. ii. 203-5). According to Kott, most writings on *Hamlet* are devoted to dealing with the reality of its protagonist, and as he puts it:

Traditional nineteenth-century hamletology devoted itself almost exclusively to the study of the problem of who Hamlet really was. The traditional scholars charge Shakespeare with having written an untidy, inconsistent and badly constructed masterpiece. Whereas modern essays consider *Hamlet* from a theatrical standpoint. *Hamlet* is not a philosophical, moral or psychological treatise; it is a piece for the theatre, that is to say, a scenario with parts. (Kott, 57-58)

To regard the delay of Hamlet as a point of weakness in his character is to do harm to both this character and the dramatist himself. The dramatist has to direct this character in the line drawn for it as a revenge seeking character; that is, it has to follow certain steps necessary to cover the representations of its dramatic genre, and at the same time the dramatist has to place it within the domain of revenge tragedies whose pattern, as a matter of fact, is identical with and reflected in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and other revenge tragedies written by the Roman Tragedian Lucius Seneca:

Among the English antecedents of *Hamlet* in this style the most famous is Kyd's *The Spanish tragedy* (1587); here a father, Hieronimo, avenges the murder of his son. The son has been done to death by an ambitious brother who favours his rival, a Portuguese prince, in the wooing of a high-born

lady, Belimperia. The father delays, often lamenting his lot in passionate outburst akin to madness. (Lott, xviii)

It is worth mentioning that *Hamlet* should be looked upon as a work of art that is of a particular genre and written for the sake of entertaining a particular audience—the Elizabethan.

### **Conclusion**

*Hamlet*, from the start, is intended to be a revenge tragedy, and its beginning shows that the late King Hamlet has already been killed by his brother Claudius as explicated to Hamlet by the Ghost. As a sane and sound character, Hamlet finds it necessary to verify the Ghost's remark, for he doubts the Ghost's account concerning the murder of his father. The significance of his doubts lies in the fact that the doubts trigger the main course of the development of the action of the play—a course that encompasses the genre of the play as a revenge tragedy, directing the action to the intended resolution and the fulfillment of all the ingredients leading to it. Moreover, the respective doubts point to the fact they tremendously contribute to the delay of the steps to be adopted by Hamlet towards revenge, and therefore the notion that Hamlet is hesitant and delays action for no reason is unjustifiable. As to the cohesive elements of the play, doubts play a significant role in this respect, for they act as cohesive elements of all the events and are then structural.

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