

# Religion in hamlet

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare is one of the most famous and influential tragedies of all time. Shakespeare wrote Hamlet—and most of his other tragedies—at the beginning of his career in the early 1600s (Shakespeare’s Career). The tragedy genre was developed long before Shakespeare. A central idea of the tragedy genre is that the audience must favor the protagonist, but the protagonist must be flawed and capable of both good and evil (Revenge in Hamlet). In the tragedy, Hamlet thinks instead of simply turning to rage for his revenge. The plot of the play is that Hamlet is unable to commit revenge on Claudius. Hamlet’s inability to take revenge—avenging the death of his father—creates a plot where Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all die in the process (Jamieson). The reason for the destructive nature of Hamlet’s revenge was not caused by the delay—or the fact that he was taking revenge alone. In The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Shakespeare does not portray revenge as either acceptable, nor does he make a statement on whether revenge is better taken with careful thought or without delay. Shakespeare’s only clear statement is that revenge should not be taken against members of one’s own nation. A crucial part of history of England—still fresh in the mind of Shakespeare—was the drama between clashing monarchs on religion. The official religion of England kept switching between Catholicism and Protestantism before and during Shakespeare’s life. There was a clash between these two religions. This caused disunity between the members of the royal family and those in power. That disunity caused a schism amongst the people (Bassett). This disunity caused some hard times and bloodshed. The revenge plot begins when Hamlet is approached by the

ghost of his father. Hamlet says to the ghost, “ speak, I am bound to hear”. The Ghost says to Hamlet, “ So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear” and “ revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. Hamlet accepts the Ghost’s request, “ As meditation or the thoughts of love/ May sweep to my revenge” (1, 5, 7-31). When Hamlet starts talking to the Ghost, he feels it is his obligation to listen to him. The Ghost taking advantage of this duty, tells him that his duty is to take revenge on Cladius. The Ghost takes in father in saying that if Hamlet ever loved his father, he will take revenge on Cladius. This takes Hamlet on a wild and pointless revenge plot against his own nation that results in destruction, loss of power, and loss of many lives. This revenge plot is much like the drama over the national religion is real life England during the time. In both cases the drama is unnecessary and distracting from real, external issues like war–and in real life England, disease. Time passes and Hamlet has still not avenged the death of his father. He is angry at himself for thinking instead of acting. He goes into a siliquoy, “ Oh Vengeance/ Why, what an ass am I? (2. 2581-582). After this, Hamlet still tries to delay action further. He begins to plan the play that will test Cladius in order to see that if the Ghost in telling the truth. Hamlet is beginning to put all his thoughts and energy into this revenge plot, distracting him–a signifier that all of Denmark’s elites are doing the same–from real issues like the imminent war. The play seems to prove Cladius’s guilt. When Hamlet goes to take his revenge, he sees Cladius praying and says, “ Now might I do it Pat, now he is praying/And now I do’t and so he goes to heaven”(3. 3. 73-74). Hamlet is clearly getting caught up in too many factors. His focus is now completely drawn away from reality and put

into the question of if and how to take revenge. The mental toll this is taking on him is exemplified in his conversation with Ophelia. He is talking about the issues with men and says, “ I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious”(3. 1. 123). He is describing to Ophelia how man—including himself—are not worth dealing with. The revenge plot is making Hamlet hate himself. This unnecessary distraction definitely comparable to the unnecessary religious drama is real life England. The revenge plot gets more and more complex and entangling. By the final scene it is out of hand. Before the fencing match, Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for killing his father. Laertes says, “ I am satisfied in nature...to my revenge: but in terms of my honour/ I stand aloof (5. 2. 244-247). Hamlet is now fighting Laertes for Laertes’s honor. This revenge plot has gotten so far from the initial problem. Destruction and chaos has affected all of the major players. This is very comparable to how no one in England could remember—or ever knew—why the initial split between Catholicism and Protestantism in England occurred, but the schism continued to cause chaos and distract from real problems. Shakespeare does not approve or disapprove of revenge; his only view is that it should not be taken against members of one’s own nation. This is shown by contrasting Fortinbras to Hamlet. Hamlet takes revenge against his own people. He ruins his life and weakens his country by doing so. Fortinbras takes revenge against external forces and succeeds in conquering Denmark (Revenge in Hamlet). It is arguable that Fortinbras was successful because he had a plan and did not delay revenge; therefore, Shakespeare could be making a point to not delay action. This argument is false. Laertes also did not delay revenge. The reason way he was unsuccessful—dying before his revenge took

place-in taking revenge was because he was taking revenge against his own people. Shakespeare's message in Hamlet is nationalism and priorities.

Hamlet and the elites of Denmark were focused on petty revenge on each other, when they should have been focused on big picture external issues.

This is much like the royalty of England focusing on petty religious disagreements and fighting with people within England, instead of focusing on issues like disease and poverty. From this message, it could be taken that Shakespeare does not see religion as necessary-unlike most people of the time.