

Hamlet: the elusiveness of certainty

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Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play of complexity and cunctation. Its central theme is the elusiveness of knowledge and certainty, and this is manifested in the fact that 4 acts of the play consist of the protagonist's hesitation and sadness, fear and anger. From its outset, the play establishes uncertainty through the interrogative dialogue between Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio. "Whos there" ... "Nay Stand and unfold yourself" ... "what, is Horatio there" ... "A piece of him" Having established a mood of fear and uncertainty, the apparition of a ghost sees Horatio state "It harrows me with fear and Wonder". This Antithetical placement of words heightens the paranormal and eerie setting of the play. The "portentous" Ghost acts as an omen for what is to come. In the grandiloquent monologue where Claudius implores his subjects to accept the validity of his marriage to the Old Queen Gertrude subtly hints that the King is putting on a façade. Claudius uses many oxymoronic terms to try and reconcile the death of Old Hamlet and Claudius' subsequent marriage to Gertrude such "With Mirth in Funeral and with dirge in Marriage". This syllabically balanced but semantically dissonant sentence serves to highlight that there is something suspect and "Rotten" in the state of Denmark. The question of what this is, however, will recur throughout the play. In this same way too, the relationship between the actions and internal machinations of human beings is evident in the scheming Polonius. He too is a man of little integrity and great deceit. He exhorts his son Laertes, "To thine own self be true" but at the same time enlists Reynaldo to spy on his son, stating, "Your bait of falsehood takes this Carp of truth" (2. 1. 61). This metaphor and Oxymoronic placement of "falsehood" and "truth" exemplifies the presence of duality in the play. He dismisses Reynaldo - "

You have me, Have you not". The uncertainty and lack of trust within the play is highlighted by the Chiastic (Chiasmus) syntax of this sentence, i. e., that even Polonius is distrusting of his servant. Particularly motifs throughout Act 1-3 allow the continuation of the ideas of Duality and deception. The historical allusions to ancient Greece and Rome that are scattered throughout the play are evidence of this. In Act 1 Sc 2 Hamlet, in a simile, compares his Father and Claudius "Hyperion to a Satyr". In Act 2 Sc 2 Hamlet has the Players recite lines referring to the "ominious horse" of Troy. In Act 3 Polonius talks of the betrayal of Julius Caesar. All three references contribute to the duality and deception evident in the play — Satyr = only half a man, Trojan horse heralded as most treacherous and deceitful means of conquest, Julius Caesar is murdered by people he thought loyal to him. (It is also a point of interest that etymology for the name Claudius stems from two words: 1) Clauo (verb) — " I imprison" 2) Claudus (adjective) — " disabled, wavering, uncertain") The arrival of the Players and their enactment of " The murder of Gonzago" in Act 3 sc 1-2 also demonstrate the duplicity within the text. In an example of mis en abyme, Hamlet modifies the play to reenact the murder of his Father. This dramatic device conjures up the notion of appearance vs reality. And so the duality of Claudius, Polonius, and Hamlet throughout Act 1-3 demonstrate the lack of certainty and absolute truth within the play. The perpetual search for meaning and questioning of the established order within the play highlights the unattainability of truth and certainty in greater society. Hamlets numerous soliloquys of self-questioning and self-loathing paint an image of a man overcome by excruciating self-observation. Hamlets speeches are a seminal

amalgam of existentialism (" How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world"), relativism (" For there is nothing good nor but, but thinking makes it so") and moral subjectivism (Vicious mole of nature... in their birth... wherein ... they are not guilty since nature cannot choose his origin"). Although the Greek Sophists had dabbled in these concepts, and Socrates had once said " The only thing I know is that I know nothing", this questioning of the societal and philosophical norms of the time was revolutionary and unparalleled. In a time where the Dogmatic canon of the Church and sovereignty of the Monarchy reigned supreme, Hamlets questioning of the afterlife, (To be, or not to be... what dreams may come), lamentation at the inequality in the world (Th' Oppressor.... that patient merit of the unworthy takes), and rejection of the superiority of the Monarchs... (" Our monarchs [the king at the time of Hamlets publication, James I, in his Baslikon Doron edict, affirmed the " Divine Right Of Kings" to rule], and outstretched heroes are.... Our beggars shadows" II. ii: 263), is a testament to the elusiveness of certainty and truth in the play. And So in summary, both the themes of duality and deceit and the search for meaning and order highlight the overarching message of Hamlet — the unattainability of certainty.