

'hamlet, the romantic rebel'

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



During the Renaissance period, the universe, the state and the family were thought to follow a hierarchical order that could not be altered by any means. God, king and father occupied the top of these analogous systems respectively, and the rest of the individuals were placed below them. It was claimed that Providence had organised the world in that manner and that any disruption of the established order would result in chaos. This pyramidal distribution of the universe is also known as Providentialism and it is important because it is omnipresent throughout Hamlet.

Although all the characters in the play seem to follow Providentialism blindly, Hamlet brings it into question and successfully challenges it with the culmination of his death. Claudius, king of Denmark, gives permission to Laertes to depart for Paris. His authority overwhelms that of his biological father, Polonius, because as head of state and following the tenets of Providentialism, he can interfere in private matters and exercise his power over Polonius's family.

Right after this, Claudius enquires Hamlet about his gloomy appearance and behaviour because, instead of being joyfully celebrating the marriage of his mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius, he is mourning his father's death yet. That Hamlet does not share the general mood is perceived by Claudius as a threat against his position. He calls Hamlet stubborn and urges him to forget about his father: "[...] to persever/ In obstinate condolment is a course/ of impius stubbornness [...]" (Shakespeare 2009: I, ii, 94-96).

According to Providentialism, Hamlet should be respectful and obedient to Claudius because now he is his stepfather and king, but at the same time he should have been the successor to the throne, not Claudius. Hamlet finds

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himself in this difficult situation, but nevertheless, he is unwilling to adopt none of these positions since these are roles “ to be played for others but not felt for himself” (Leverenz 1992: 132). He is an anachronistic character in the sense that he is ahead of his time and shows personal characteristics that belong to a later and more modern period: Romanticism.

He rejects socially and externally imposed roles and focuses instead on his subjectivity, his inner self, but he can never fulfil that introspection because it belongs “ to a historical order whose outline has so far only been sketched out” (Barker 1992: 164). His avant-garde attitude makes him an outsider, a marginal character, and causes instability and subversion (Dollimore 1989: xxvi). That rebellious disposition inevitably exposes the flaws of the system which is “ neither natural nor divinely ordained” (Dollimore 1989: xxxvi).

Hamlet's feigned madness also poses a danger to Claudius's position as king and to society in general because he becomes uncontrollable, so in order to maintain the status quo, Claudius decides to send him to England where he will be murdered: “ I like him not; nor stands it safe with us/ To let his madness range. The terms of our estate may not endure/ Hazard so near's as doth hourly grow/ Out of his brows” (Shakespeare 2009: III, iii, 1-7).

All in all, Hamlet's questioning of the system and his madness are two powerful ways of subversion which, according to Barker, are extinguished in the end and Hamlet is reinserted into the system (1992: 166). Following this New Historicist perspective, it has also been argued that the fact that Hamlet dies after having challenged the system is an example of subversion being contained – his dissidence leads him to death, whereas Fortinbras's reward for supporting Providentialism is his coronation.

However, it must not be ignored that Hamlet's unwillingness to become the successor to the throne is made clear from the outset, so the only choice he has left in order to avoid his monarchical duties after having killed Claudius is to die. Therefore, Hamlet's death turns out to be efficiently challenging, since it is his sacrifice what allows him to go against Providentialism.