

# Elizabethan era



In the Elizabethan era, religion was very important. The Roman Catholic Church had gained enormous power and influence over the centuries.

It claimed to be a gateway to Heaven and could send those it wanted to Hell. To the Roman Catholics there was also such a thing as Purgatory, the place where the soul is sent to be cleansed before entering Heaven. The Protestant Church, another powerful religion during the era, rejected the belief of Purgatory. In *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare introduces a ghost and illustrates the characters' perspectives and beliefs. While in the opening acts, Shakespeare seems to favour spirituality, in fact, in *Hamlet*, he demonstrates that a balance between carnal and spiritual concerns is essential to success. Indeed, Claudius's excessive concern with carnal pleasure and Hamlet's spirituality mislead them, whereas Horatio thrives from his ability to strike a balance between extremes. Shakespeare illustrates the dangers of excessive carnal passion through Claudius. This king cannot resist power and material gain, manipulating and even killing the people that stand in his way.

After watching "The Mousetrap", Claudius feels guilty of having committed regicide in order to obtain his crown, his kingdom, his wife. Kneeling in a church, praying for forgiveness, Claudius confesses, "I am still possess'd / Of those effects for which I did the murder, / My crown, mine own ambition and my queen" (3. 3 54-56). Claudius knows that nothing he has accumulated in this world will carry much weight in Heaven. Everything he has done to gain a good life has damned his soul. He realizes how he has made a mistake, but his carnal nature will not allow him to part with what he has gained – it means too much to him: "May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?" (3. 3 57). He asks God if he can be pardoned but still keep everything he has.

This line sums up Claudius character because we see how materialistic he is. As the scene ends he states, “ My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3. 3 98-99). Although he prays and claims to regret what he has done, he knows that his prayer is insincere and that God knows that. He has accepted his fate. Later, when Laertes later storms the castle with a mob, thinking that Claudius is to blame for his father’s death, Claudius calmly tries to prove his innocence: “ We will our kingdom give, / Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours,” the King promises in order to show his sincerity in the matter, “ To you in satisfaction” (4. 5 204-206). Claudius stakes materialistic goods when he tries to convince Laertes that he did not kill Polonius, convinced that if he wagers such big things, such meaningful things, Laertes will immediately know that he is telling the truth.

After all, his kingdom, his crown and his lifestyle is all that he possesses. Now that Laertes is angry at his father’s death, Claudius knows he can manipulate him. To begin, he asks how much he loved his father and speculates about how time can make that love become less and less visible : “ And nothing is at a like goodness still, / For goodness, growing to a pleurisy,” Claudius warns, “ Dies in his own too-much” (4. 7 117-118). Ironically, Claudius fails to listen to his own words. Even a good thing can grow too big and die from its own excess. When Hamlet later duel Laertes, Claudius demonstrates his need for praise when he makes a big show of toasting to Hamlet’s health and dropping a pearl in the goblet – which is covered in poison. Gertrude takes the goblet and drinks to Hamlet’s health as well, refusing to listen to Claudius when he tells her not to.

She is poisoned and dies – Claudius knows she is dead and still pretends that she's just fainted and has no remorse for what he's done. He claims to love her, but now it seems he only cares about his reputation. Hamlet is outraged and forces Claudius to drink the poisoned wine. Claudius is served with poetic justice. After the deaths of Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet, Horatio remembers Hamlet's request to tell his story. When Fortinbras and the ambassadors come in, Horatio says “ so shall you hear / Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, ...

And, in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' heads.” (5. 2 73-78) Horatio speaks of Claudius' desire for carnal pleasure, like how he committed fratricide for the crown, and consequently, it ended up killing him. Shakespeare proves through the character of Claudius that being too carnal does lead characters to their downfall. On the other hand, Shakespeare demonstrates Hamlet's exorbitant spirituality, which eventually misleads him as well. In the beginning of the play, Claudius rejects Hamlet's request to leave and go back to Wittenberg. At this point, Hamlet is very resentful towards Gertrude and Claudius because of their sudden relationship.

Angered, Hamlet wishes “ That the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon ' gainst self-slaughter!” (1.

2 131-32). Hamlet does not give in to suicide because he knows it is against God's will. This is typical of Hamlet, he does care for his soul and is worried of afterlife. When the Hamlet Sr.'s ghost appears, Hamlet wonders if it's sent from heaven or hell. “ O all you host of heaven! O earth!” Hamlet concludes when he learns of purgatory, “ What else? / Shall I couple hell?” (1. 5 93-94). When Hamlet explains the notion of purgatory to Horatio, he proclaims, “

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy” (1.

4 167-68). Hamlet has opened his mind and realizes that he has more to learn about life and afterlife. This is peculiar because at this moment Hamlet becomes more spiritual than philosophical, agreeing that there are things that you cannot see that do exist. He accepts that there is more in life than what the Bible tells us. Half way through the play, Hamlet finally realizes how much time has passed and how little he’s done to revenge his father’s death. “ That I, the son of the dear murder’d, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,” Hamlet recapitulates, and he concludes: “ Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words” (2. 2 281-83). All Hamlet does is stand around.

He realizes that he’s been inactive and regrets it. When he finally decides to take action, Claudius appears alone at prayer. Hamlet, ready to take action, approaches Claudius silently. About to kill him, Hamlet hesitates, “ To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season’d for his passage?” Hamlet groans, “ No” (3. 3 86-88). Hamlet’s idealistic views on religion have forced him to retreat. He does not want Claudius to go to heaven before his own father, which Claudius murdered. The ultimate irony : Hamlet should have killed Claudius – which would have saved him.

After this scene, Hamlet goes to see Gertrude in her chamber. Hamlet is very hostile; he accuses his mother of incest and accomplice to regicide. She denies it, and has no idea what has happened. Hamlet explains, “ Such an act, ... makes marriage vows / as false as dicers’ oaths: O, such a deed,” he

rages, “ As from the body of contraction plucks / The very soul, and sweet religion makes / A rhapsody of words” (3. 4 42-50).

Hamlet speaks of the murder of his father and the incest of his mother and Claudius. To him, she has done a deed that takes the soul out of marriage and turns religion into nonsense. “ Confess yourself to heaven,” Hamlet urges, “ Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come” (3. 4 151-52). At this point, it is shown that Hamlet has a renewed faith in God and his mother. He worries about her soul and tells her to stop sinning. Still in his mother’s chamber, after killing Polonius, Hamlet reports that he is now God’s “ scourge and minister”. He takes this responsibility to heart, and he knows that he will meet his downfall in order to restore order in the world – that is God’s will.

When Hamlet is finally sent to England, he realizes yet again how little he’s done to revenge his father’s death and how he now lacks of opportunity. Feeling a little defeated, but still confident in God’s plan for him, Hamlet sets sail. After having defeated many obstacles, Hamlet returns home to accomplish his task. Explaining to Horatio how he escaped, Hamlet explains, “ There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5. 2 10). Hamlet believed that everything that leads him to this point has been God’s destiny. When Hamlet couldn’t sleep and found the letter for his execution in Rosencrantz’s bag, when he had his father’s signet, the pirates – “ Why, even in that was heaven ordinant,” Hamlet quips (5. 2 48).

Hamlet knows that to restore order he will have to die – it is God’s will. Shakespeare clearly demonstrates that Hamlet’s redundant spirituality leads

him to his demise. On the other hand, Horatio, possesses an idealistic balance between carnal and spiritual values. At the very beginning of the play, after seeing the ghost, Hamlet's good friend does not know how to act. " Before my God, I might not this believe," Horatio confesses, " Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes" (1. 1 56-58). He is a very philosophical man, who believes in what he sees – hence, he believes more in facts and science than in religion. When the ghost reappears and Horatio is with Hamlet, he tells Hamlet not to follow it.

" What if it tempt you" Horatio proclaims, scared that the ghost is from hell and will attempt to steal Hamlet's soul (1. 4 69). This is particular because Horatio does believe in heaven or hell and is worried about his friend's soul. Later in the play, when Hamlet accepts to duel with Laertes, Horatio is worried. He tries to convince Hamlet not to proceed with the match: " If you're mind dislike anything, obey it" Horatio pleads (5. 2 208). Here Horatio is being more carnal; he wants Hamlet to listen to his instincts – to do what his mind is telling him at this very moment. Hamlet does not listen, and while dueling Laertes, he is defeated and poisoned.

After Hamlet's death, Horatio pleads: " Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (5. 2 353). Again, we see Horatio's spiritual side, asking God to send Hamlet to heaven. Through Horatio's character, Shakespeare demonstrates that a balance between carnal and spiritual is essential to success. In sum, Shakespeare outstandingly demonstrates how excessive passions can mislead, and how balance is the key to achievement. In Hamlet, Shakespeare demonstrates that a balance is needed not only in carnal and spiritual matters, but in others such as: passion and reason, youth and

authority, duty and personal agenda, and so on. Through the struggles of many characters in the play we see these matters and being excessive can be misleading. Is there really a way to balance all of these concerns? “What a piece of work is a man!” Hamlet expresses (2.

2 303). Shakespeare makes the audience realize, through his work, that there are no perfect people in the world, everyone has flaws; but the ones who succeed learn to overcome them.