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## What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Stratford-upon-Avon?: The Protestant Reformation in Hamlet

### Keywords

Hamlet, William Shakespeare, Protestant Reformation

**What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Stratford-upon-Avon?:  
The Protestant Reformation in *Hamlet***

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Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* may be analyzed with a number of critical approaches, focuses, and positions. In fact, some have claimed that "no other work in English literature has had as much written about it as *Hamlet* has" (Wofford 181). *Hamlet*'s flexibility stems from the diversity of thematic topics contained in its lines. Evidence of insanity, libertarianism versus determinism, the role of the conscience, the domain of the supernatural, and feminine autonomy are just some of the legitimately-targeted ideas from the play. Yet, one issue absent from many classroom discussions is the mechanism through which the entire plot moves. As the ghost of Hamlet's father inspires and even entices the action of the play's central figure, the explanation of this spiritual visitation, purgatory, requires

an in-depth investigation. Such an investigation reveals a number of dynamic positions toward the intermediate state of divine retribution. These positions coupled with the distinct relationships characters maintain toward the city of Wittenberg identify a veiled, but nonetheless important, discussion within the text: the Protestant Reformation.

Two distinct positions toward the Catholic doctrine of purgatory emerge in *Hamlet*. King Hamlet promulgates the reality of this place of purging and heavenly preparation as his entrance in the play is made possible through the doctrine. Upon the inquiry of his identity, he answers:

I am thy father's spirit,  
 Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
 And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,  
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
 Are burnt and purg'd away. (1.5.9-13)

The ghost's first substantial lines center on his purgatorial position. The position appears explicitly Catholic in that his confinement to the fires is "for a certain term," which will terminate when his "foul crimes... are burnt and purg'd away." Describing this place of confinement as a "prison-house" (l. 14) also implies a Catholic view. Old Hamlet's position on purgatory emulates that of Henry IV, formerly Henry Bolingbroke, in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. Bolingbroke's motivation for crusading assumes a Catho-

lic purgatorial conception. The play's closing monologue displays this assumption:

I protest my soul is full of woe  
 That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow.  
 Come mourn with me for what I do lament,  
 And put on sullen black incontinent.  
 I'll make voyage to the Holy Land  
 To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.  
 (5.6.45-50)

Bolingbroke sees the necessity of restitution for sins, and such restitution is not found in the emphasized repentance and faith of Protestants, but on an accrument of virtue, precisely the ingredient for release from heaven's portico.

However explicit the purgatorial allusion appears in *Hamlet*, critics have still waged some debate on the imagery. Christopher Delvin chronicles the dispute between two mid-twentieth century literary critics: Roy Battenhouse and Dover Wilson. Battenhouse refuses to understand the ghost in Catholic terms for a number of reasons; chief of these reasons is the fact that King Hamlet did not haunt his family for the typical Catholic purposes of requesting intercession and warning of judgment, but rather for revenge (45). This purpose hardly reflects the character of someone in the process of purging. Battenhouse's interlocutor, Dover Wilson, anticipates this objection by describing the ghost not "as fitted out to the prescriptions of St. Thomas Aquinas and the

Council of Trent, but as fitting in with the average Catholic notions of the day [of Shakespeare]” (44). Stephen Greenblatt settles the matter by affirming the traditional Catholic motivations for “spectral visitations” and amending purposes for haunting not as common, including disclosure of “hidden wrongs” and exhortation of “the restitution of ill-gotten gains” (41).

King Hamlet maintains an obvious, static stance toward the doctrine of purgatory, but his displaced heir has a complex and dynamic relationship with this method of divine retribution. Initially, Prince Hamlet attests to the honesty of the ghost, affirming its purgatorial status. To Horatio, he swears by St. Patrick—the patron saint of purgatory (Greenblatt 233-4)—to the legitimacy of the spiritual visitor (1.5.136). In the same scene, Hamlet utters the Latin phrase *hic et ubique* under the compulsion of the ghost. This phrase, translated “here and everywhere,” directly quotes a Catholic requiem prayer for the alleviation of purgatorial suffering (Greenblatt 235). Yet, this affirmation comes under fire in Act 2, Scene 2:

The spirit that I have seen  
 May be a dev’l, and the dev’l hath power  
 T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. (ll. 578-83)

Now Hamlet doubts the origin of the spirit: is it a familial spirit from purgatory or a tempting demon from hell?

This doubt subsides by Act 3, Scene 3—except for a few lines in the first scene of the act, wherein the Prince denies the possibility of ghosts, saying that from death “no traveller returns” (l. 79)—with Hamlet’s sparing of the King. Claudius bows penitently, and Hamlet enters with the perfect chance to fulfill the ghost’s commission. What prevents his retribution for Claudius’s crime? “And am I then revenged,” muses Hamlet, “To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season’d for his passage? / No!” (ll. 84-7). He resolves to delay his revenge until the King is in the midst of some act “that has no relish of salvation in ’t” (l. 92). A clearly Catholic conception of the afterlife shapes Hamlet’s lack of action.

Hamlet settles his vacillating position on purgatory in the final two acts of the play. After the murder of Polonius in the third act, Claudius demands of Hamlet the whereabouts of his courtier’s corpse. Hamlet’s answer clearly precludes the possibility of purgatory: “In heaven, send thither to see; if your messenger find / him not there, seek him i’ th’ other place yourself” (4.3.32-3). Hamlet upholds a clearly Protestant conception of the afterlife, by focusing on two possible locations: heaven and hell. He further upholds this conception in the play’s final scene. Whereas the early portions of the play were marked by Hamlet’s commission to avenge his father’s murder, Hamlet omits the fulfillment of this commission in his

final words to the king: “Follow my mother” (l. 309). Rather than positing an Oedipal explanation to this phenomenon, the importance of these words lies in the complete lack of mention of his father.

Although Hamlet eventually settles on a single purgatorial position, the reader must question why his position wavers throughout most of the play. A decent conjecture rests on the insanity of Hamlet; the absence of coherence in his theology stems from his mental instability. The problem with this hypothesis consists in its assumption of Hamlet’s madness. One can build a case that Hamlet feigns madness for personal and political leverage. Instead of developing the negation of this hypothesis, alternate explanations merit investigative energy.

A historical approach to this question solves much of the quandary over Hamlet’s vacillation. Shakespeare composed this great tragedy in an Elizabethan England that formally denied the idea of purgatory. The Thirty-Nine Articles, an Elizabethan religious confession, called the doctrine “a fond thing vainly feigned, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God” (Matheson 385). Yet, this formal repudiation would not entirely eliminate the belief in England or in Shakespeare’s audience (Greenblatt 235). Delvin notes that “prayers for the dead lingered nostalgically in England long after their official prohibition” (31). In fact, Shakespeare’s father, John—who probably died in 1601, the same year *Hamlet* was produced—left a written request

that the Catholic traditions aimed at alleviating purgatory be used in his case (Greenblatt 249).

Even prior to the Anglican denial of purgatory, Protestants attacked the concept of purgatory. Simon Fish's 1529 anonymous publication *A Supplication for Beggars* criticized the Catholic clergy of the day, focusing on their extortion and rapacious sexual behavior. Accordingly, "in Fish's account their place at the center of the vast system of pillaging and sexual corruption relies upon the exploitation of a single core conviction: Purgatory" (Greenblatt 13). Similar attacks came from Protestants in subsequent years, including William Tyndale and Barnibe Googe (11, 24). Yet, even in context of these clear denials, the political and theological head of the Reformation maintained an intellectual relationship with the doctrine of purgatory congruent to Hamlet's. In the 1520s, Luther left open the possibility of purgatory, while confessing it was not provable from scripture or reason (33), but by 1530 he rigorously denied the idea. This historical data suggests that post-Reformation theological categories are not as simple as Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant. With this suggestion in mind, Devlin concludes: "As to young Hamlet's religious views, the impression that one gets is that they were typically Elizabethan; he was a conforming Protestant, with Catholic inclinations counterbalanced by an increasing tendency to skepticism" (50).

Another set of data adds a layer of meaning to Catholic and Protestant representations in *Hamlet*. The play makes frequent

reference to the seat of the Reformation: Wittenberg, Germany. Before specific relationships to this city are explored, it must be asked if these references are necessarily Protestant-minded. Wittenberg could be a city known simply for the educational prowess of its academies; therefore, Shakespeare could use this reference without the intention of alluding to the Reformation, and his audience could also hear the name of the city without making Protestant connections. However, evidence exists that the Reformation is key to these Wittenberg references.

First, Matheson argues that Hamlet's intended Wittenberg education "may be Shakespeare's original contribution to the story, since there is no mention of this in the surviving sources" (391). If Shakespeare includes these references without inspiration from the sources, then it is pertinent to ask why such an inclusion is made. Furthermore, the Wittenberg references make use of an important sociopolitical religious event:

Shakespeare may also show a knowledge of recent history in associating the university with sixteenth-century Danish politics. After spending time at Wittenberg, the Danish monk Hans Tausen returned home to preach Lutheran doctrine in 1525, and the Reformation movement in Denmark was furthered by King Charles II (another visitor to Wittenberg), who ordered the production of a Danish Bible. (391)

Historically, Wittenberg's connection to Denmark reflects the spread of Reformation Protestantism.

A third piece of evidence deals with an allusion to a significant early Protestant moment. The confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius concerning the body of Polonius produces this allusion. Hamlet tells Claudius that Polonius has gone to supper, and the King asks where Polonius dines. "Not where he eats" answers Hamlet, "but where 'a is eaten; a certain / convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet [...]" (4.3.19-21). Hamlet's answer forms both an allusion and a pun: Polonius is the diet of worms, which is also the name of an early council that launched the political revolution associated with the Protestant Reformation. This allusion, the political and historical impact of Wittenberg on Denmark, and Shakespeare's original inclusion of the Wittenberg references make them assuredly Protestant.

With this base, one can then go on to examine the specific relationships to Wittenberg. Three characters maintain three distinct views toward the city of Luther's famous 95 Theses. Horatio receives his education in Wittenberg, and throughout the play, he comes to represent a thoroughly Protestant mindset. For instance, upon hearing the report of the ghost, Horatio maintains, what Greenblatt calls, a "skeptical distance" (208). Furthermore, Hamlet assumes Horatio's skepticism toward a ghost from purgatory: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are

dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.166-7; Devlin 33). Horatio’s philosophy is one preclusive of purgatory, which is expected of one educated in Wittenberg.

Hamlet and Claudius present two different relationships with Wittenberg. Hamlet wishes to follow his friend Horatio to Wittenberg. Claudius, however, intends and pleads otherwise:

For your intent  
 In going back to school in Wittenberg,  
 It is most retrograde to our desire,  
 And we beseech you bend you to remain  
 Here in the cheer of our eye,  
 Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.  
 (1.2.112-17)

Claudius prevents Hamlet from going to Wittenberg. With these relationships in mind, these three characters can represent Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Horatio obviously images the Protestants, being educated in Wittenberg and skeptical of purgatorial ghosts. Hamlet may represent Anglicanism in that the influence of Catholicism (Claudius) prevents its (Hamlet’s) unity with the Reformed Protestant tradition stemming from Luther (Horatio). This Hamlet-Anglican equation hinges on the fact that prior to the 1534 Act of Supremacy and the Anglican separation from the Catholic Church, British Catholics spoke dismissively of Luther’s movement.

Amalgamating the above material on attitudes toward both purgatory and Wittenberg produces a relevant discussion on the trichotomy of Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Horatio, as discussed above, in his educational and theological identification with Wittenberg represents the Luther-lead Reformation. The Danish kings with Claudius's prevention of Hamlet's journey to Wittenberg and King Hamlet's purgatorial standing represent Catholicism. Finally, Hamlet's eventual rejection of purgatory and inability to journey to Wittenberg align him with the British contribution to the Reformation: Anglicanism. Notably, only one of these three representations survives the murderous rage of the play's final scene.

Some questions concerning Hamlet's non-Catholic tendencies may linger. Do not Hamlet's vacillations on purgatory cast doubt upon the Anglican label? If Protestantism appropriately subsumes Anglicanism, then demonstrating general Protestant tendencies in Hamlet will secure the case for his non-Catholic worldview. In the fifth act, Hamlet comes to endorse Reformed and early Protestant views on divine sovereignty. Early in the second scene of this act, Hamlet reflects upon his vicissitude, particularly his exile to England by Claudius. Rather than continuing to mourn the ill fate which he has endured, Hamlet sees a lesson to be learned in his lot:

let us know

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well

When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn  
 us  
 There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
 Rough-hew them how we will. (ll. 7-11)

Hamlet's claim is that humans may "rough-hew" their ends but divinity is the truly directive force in human affairs.

The concept of divine sovereignty emerges later in the same scene. With the prospect of a duel facing Hamlet, Horatio offers to seek its cancellation or delay. He rebuffs Horatio with a biblical allusion: "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (ll. 202-3). The verse alluded to is Matthew 10:29, which reads, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." Matheson contends that this "citation of the biblical text has everything to do with the relationship between the individual and God in Reformation Christianity" (394). He also points to the First Quarto's rendering of this line as reflective of early Protestantism: "there's a predestinate providence in the fall of a sparrow" (394). This manuscript also reveals that Shakespeare's acting company originally performed the play for universities, which adds significance to the original rendering: "*Predestinate* would be a resonant word in those settings—particularly at Cambridge, where advanced Protestant views were common" (394). Hamlet's reliance on the doctrine of divine sovereignty further aligns him with Protestantism.

From all this information about Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant reflections in *Hamlet*, a few relevant conclusions may be drawn. In light of the play's thorough discussion on purgatory, Greenblatt offers an intriguing synopsis of the plot: "[...] a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost" (240). For Greenblatt, the very character of Hamlet is shaped not just by the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy but by a conflict between the two major Christian divisions. Matheson presents another interesting implication of this religious material, claiming that "the history of Protestantism functions as a kind of subtext in *Hamlet*, surfacing occasionally in ways that are barely articulate" (391). For Matheson, the Catholic-Protestant conflict may not be as central to the character of Hamlet as Greenblatt argues. Matheson's conclusion, however, displays the complexity wherewith Shakespeare composed his plays. The Catholic-Protestant dichotomy provides one of a number of legitimate avenues of exploration and research. Detecting these strands requires careful attention to "barely articulate" intricacies.

Ultimately, this subtext of *Hamlet* points to Shakespeare's adroit playwriting ability. Members of the audience undoubtedly connected to Hamlet's religious evolution, even as many of them had waded through a similar doctrinal development. The Protestant Reformation also would have been indelibly imprinted upon the collective unconsciousness of the Elizabethan audience. After all, the Luther-led rebellion, and the consequent Anglican separation,

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