

Fearful Symmetry: Shakespeare's *Dramatis Personae* in *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This research aims to make a parallel and determine the symmetry between the main male characters of the Shakespearian play “The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”. For this purpose, each important character is analysed in-depth with the use of the primary text and other critical views. The approach used in this paper was based on the primary source, by the employment of quotes and lines, verses and how they manage to be interpreted regarding the portrayal of the cast. There are a variety of ways in which quotes like “A little more than kin and less than kind” might be emphasized, and through the stylistic art of interpretation, the reader as well as the critic can bring new senses and meanings to a certain something. There are also the religious and philosophical aspects of the characters that are exploited in the paper and analysed through metaphorical and figurative language. Applying a developed conceptual framework combined with the opinion of other critics of Shakespeare leads to the multiple interpretations and variables of this play. Not only is it full of symbols and presents an aspect of universality unlike any Shakespearean tragedy, but it also introduces the reader to a combination of Baroque Disenchantment and typical Elizabethan drama. The emphasis of the paper is on the specific characteristics of each character in relation to the general frame and in relation to the other characters. The aim of the paper is to dissipate the blurred lines between appearance and essence and to focus on the in-depth analysis of the characters, who create the symmetry and parallelism which widens the Shakespearean universe of knowledge and literary creation. “Hamlet”, as a literary piece, is Shakespeare’s most complex tragedy. The rationale for choosing it is to highlight the universality of the play, to make the reader sympathise and look at their own reflection and think about the instances where their actions overlapped or coincided with the characters’. Tragedy, like any other literary genre, was born out of real-life situations, and readers should be aware that fiction can surpass the page and turn into reality.

Keywords

Character Development, Symmetry, Shakespeare, Personae, Construction of Individualism

1. Introduction

Audiences do not get to read lists of *dramatis personae*, and the editions *in quarto* and *folio* of Shakespeare's work did not contain them. Thus, Elizabethan readers and theatregoers of any time discover the name of characters one by one, as they are pronounced in the play. Modern readers, however, might be struck from the very beginning by a list of characters containing Germanic names like Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and such Latin, Greek, and Romance names as Horatio, Ophelia and Claudius, which do not fit in the frame of reference of a play set in Denmark. By diversifying the names of *Hamlet's dramatis personae*, Shakespeare makes the play universal: it can happen anywhere, at any time and to anyone. This inversion of textual hierarchy of the characters is eloquent for one of the main principles of Shakespearean tragedy, as Adrian Papahagi notes, "The old generation destroys the young one, winter confiscates summer, at Denmark's court there will be neither weddings nor births, only funerals" (Papahagi, 2021). Hamlet even says the following to Ophelia in the nunnery scene "we will have no more marriages" (III.1, 146).

2. Incipient Urgency and Tragic Elements

2.1. The Relevance of Tragic Atmosphere

The setting from Act 1 scene 1 is very relevant for the atmosphere of the tragedy, as there is a state of confusion and darkness engulfing the characters, like a thick fog in a winter's morning "Tis bitter cold/ And I am sick at heart" (I.1, 7-8). The disorientation is appropriate and typical for the shadowy, somber characters, each of them corrupted in a certain manner, to a certain extent. The numerous references to sickness and illnesses further suggest the plague of demoralization that has infected Denmark following the murder of King Hamlet.

2.2. Concepts of Conflict, Continuity and Composition

The moment that triggers the conflict of the play is the first interaction between the ghost of King Hamlet and the Prince. The former King and the Prince of Denmark share the same name. The name is a legacy lent down from father to son, an honour that young Hamlet has to restore by taking revenge in the name of the late monarch, which means killing Claudius, his murderous uncle. Hamlet is now in a very complicated position, as he does not know whether his "father's spirit" (I.5, 9) speaks the truth or is just a projection of "devilish mocking" (Papahagi, 2021). Hamlet realizes that interacting with a ghost is a sin, but he wants

to believe the ghost, because he thinks that Claudius's marriage to his mother is unnatural, "a little more than kin, but less than kind" (I.2, 9). In the following acts, readers may distinguish groups of parallel and complementary characters, reflecting each other. The first group is Claudius, the late King Hamlet, the late King Fortinbras and Polonius. They are part of the old generation of sinners, who have poisoned both the country and the young generation.

3. In-Depth Analysis of the Main Characters (the Old Generation)

3.1. King Claudius

Claudius's name comes from Latin, it is derivative of the verb "Claudio", meaning "to limp", which is significantly linked to the way he gained power. Usually, in Elizabethan drama, physical handicaps were associated with spiritual unbalance (Papahagi, 2021). For instance, in the scene of the prayer, Claudius confesses that his ambition of becoming king of Denmark and Gertrude's husband was greater than the love and respect for his brother "[...] what form of prayer/Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder?'/That cannot be, since I am still possessed/Of those effects for which I did the murder:/My crown, mine own ambition and the Queen." (III.3, 51-55). His very name suggests that something is wrong with him spiritually, as he has his brother's blood on his hands. After committing fratricide and becoming King of Denmark, he goes on to marry his late brother's wife and Queen of Denmark, Gertrude, an action which in the Elizabethan age was considered incestuous. This chain of maneuvers and corrupt operations indicate the further contagion, the moral plague of Denmark as a whole.

3.2. King Hamlet

Hamlet, the late King of Denmark, materializes into a ghostly apparition, unable to rest in peace because he left this world perversely and now is trapped in Purgatory. His soul is neither fully on Earth, nor completely in Heaven or Hell (there are theories which suggest that King Hamlet is in Purgatory; the concept of Purgatory (Papahagi, 2021) does not exist in the Anglican Church, but it does in the Catholic Church, which leads many scholars to believe that either Shakespeare or one of his parents were Catholics in hiding). "I am thy father's spirit,/Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,/And for the day confined to fast in fires/Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purged away." (I.5, 9-13). He comes to Elsinore to discuss solely with his son, and when they meet, he tries to convince Hamlet Jr. to kill Claudius "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damned incest" (I.5, 83-84). This infamous deed, at a larger scale, infects Denmark as well, for Prince Hamlet, as heir to the throne will go on and plan the murder of the King, thus starting a cycle of revenge that will end in the deplorable death of everyone, more or less guilty, and will result in Fortinbras becoming king of Denmark.

3.3. Old Fortinbras

Old Fortinbras was the former King of Norway and the father of young Fortinbras. Even though the characters come from Norway, their name is not Norwegian. It comes from French, and the form of the expression would be “fort en bras”, which would be translated into “strength in arms”, which is relevant for their military power. Although the king is not present in the play, it is known that King Hamlet had killed him in a duel long before the events of the tragedy, hence setting up another rationale for revenge before even young Hamlet was born. Therefore, the theme of revenge is current long before the start of the play, the course of retribution having been already started somehow, in another distant fictional past, and now the characters, especially the protagonist, have on their shoulders a “burden” (Dover, 1959) of the former generation, leading them to their impending doom.

3.4. Polonius

Polonius is, according to Victor Gollancz (Dover, 1959), an illustration “de optimo senatore”, “the best counsellor”. His original name in the first quarto, also considered the “bad” quarto, was Corambis, which comes from Latin. It is a derivative from “crambo” and means “reheated cabbage”. In vulgar Latin, as an idiomatic expression, this means “boring old man” (Papahagi, 2021). Another significance of the name might come from the combination between “cor” and “ambis”, which means “heart” and “both” in Latin, suggesting that he was loyal to both Kings, Hamlet Sr. and Claudius. He, alongside Claudius and Gertrude, manipulated Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Ophelia to spy on Hamlet when they feel he is up to something: “And I beseech you instantly to visit/My too much changed son.” (II.2, 36-37). Polonius opposes the marriage between Hamlet and his daughter, Ophelia, and he tries to control her, like a puppeteer does with a doll “At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him./Be you and I behind an arras then;” (II.2, 161-162), anointing himself as another member of the old generation who tries to dismantle the youth. Even before his death, his last role is that of an “undercover agent”, the usurper of secrecy and of youth’s intimacy “My lord, he’s going to his mother’s closet./Behind the arras I’ll convey myself/To hear the process.” (III.3, 27-29).

3.5. Partial Conclusions and Remarks

The tragedy’s narrative would not have developed if the four old men had not made some cruel decisions. They say words and do actions that poison the beauty around them and work their infectious and degrading way in two plans: exterior (such as Hamlet Sr. killing Fortinbras Sr. or the scenes of the espionage) and interior (the words that the characters utter, the repetitions of words regarding sickness, illness, which further demonstrate the putridness and deterioration of their innermost selves), at a smaller scale, and, at a larger scale, of the Kingdom of Denmark itself.

4. Short Mention of Dover Wilson's "Burden"

The burden of Prince Hamlet, according to Dover, is to choose between his birth-right as future king and to let life continue its natural course, which implies that, as heir apparent to the throne, he has to assure that his family bloodline continues to rule in Denmark. On the other hand, as a dutiful son, he has to pay respect to his father and to reestablish a sense of justice, to take vengeance by killing his uncle and becoming himself a murderer, decentralizing the balance of the Universe, and, also, the state of Denmark. "It is instructive to glance at the history of the matter in Shakespearian criticism. Dr Johnson and most other eighteenth-century commentators, living before the days of modern democracy and constitutional monarchy, shared the Elizabethan standpoint and always spoke of Hamlet as robbed of his rightful inheritance" (Dover, 1959).

5. In-Depth Analysis of the Main Characters (Young Generation)

The younger generation consists of a group of male characters who can be considered parallels to one another, and they are Hamlet Jr., Fortinbras Jr., Horatio and Laertes, all contributing to further unravel the tragic line of actions through the continuation of the revenge cycle, sparked by their fathers.

5.1. Hamlet

Hamlet is a philosopher, a cerebral and highly insightful character, whose wisdom and capacity for making rational choices are being turned upside-down by the will of his father to murder Claudius in order to get vengeance. It can be said that for Hamlet Sr. to transcend from the Purgatory and to ascend, or descend, into one of the other spiritual universes of Christian belief, Hamlet Jr. needs to lose himself, to surrender his soul's purity and to commit the capital sin, which, might mean trapping himself into Purgatory and possibly taking his father's place. For one Hamlet to be at peace, the other one has to engulf in chaos. He becomes untrustworthy and secretive, full of anxiousness and starts depriving himself of the beauty in life. Thus, Hamlet's soul dies before his body, as he is more and more immersed in his obnoxious conspiracy, which, instead of bringing justice and clearing away the clouds of poison set by Claudius's fratricide, further darkens the state of Denmark. As one critic wrote, Hamlet is bewildered "by the gap between the material world and the ideal world and by the impotence of moral rationality" (Yang, 2009), and so, when an impossible choice must be made, he hesitates, he tries to evaluate his options, but this over-inspecting of his and everyone else's behavior and plans lead to his internal frustration and, inevitably, madness, fact which he later admits in the fifth act, before his duel with Laertes "Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet./ If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,/And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,/Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it./Who does it then? His madness." (V.2, 218-222). Hamlet's despair and uncertainty is conveniently

detected in his soliloquies “To be or not to be: that is the question:/Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,/And, by opposing, end them.” (III.1, 56-60). Throughout the play, and especially after his return from England in Act IV, Hamlet’s character slightly changes visions, perceptions and behaviour. Maybe the explanation is that he became closer to his inner self “no longer afflicted by mourning and melancholia, by murderous jealousy and incessant rage” (Hui, 2013). He is a procrastinator: he nudges aside his tasks and enters this vicious circle of thought—attempt at action—anxiety—crisis, losing himself on the way and in-between the lines of his existential self-questioning, or as W. H. Auden puts it: “He lacks a basic sense of a reason for existence at all. [...] Consequently he must define his existence in terms of others, e.g., I am the man whose mother married his uncle who murdered his father” (Auden, 2002).

5.2. Laertes

Laertes is a courtier. He leads a gallant life in Paris, as he requested permission from Claudius to leave for France in the first act of the play: “My thoughts and wishes bend again towards France,/ And bow them to your gracious leave and pardon.” (I.2, 55-56). His name comes from Ancient Greek and, as his legendary namesake, Ulysses’s father, he is vigorous and apt for fighting whenever necessary. According to “The Odyssey” (Homer, 2018), Laertes was a figure in Greek mythology, and in Homer’s *Odyssey*, and he is the father of Odysseus. After his son’s departure to fight in the Trojan War and the death of his wife, Anticlea, he falls into depression. When his son comes back from war, they go to Odysseus’s home to confront the families of the dead suitors. He is gifted agility, strength, and endurance by the goddess Athena, in order to fight. He comes to duel Hamlet after the prince kills Polonius, but after the show-down of death in the last act of the tragedy, he politely absolves Hamlet and forgives him for his mistakes, and he himself apologises for poisoning his sword. In “articulo mortis” (Papahagi, 2021), he says that Claudius “is justly served: It is a poison tempered by himself./Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet: Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee, /Nor thine on me./[*He dies.*]” (V.2, 320-325).

5.3. Fortinbras

Fortinbras Jr. is the Prince of Norway. He invades Denmark to avenge his father, who had been killed by Hamlet Sr. before the play started. He is the ‘Hamlet reversed’, who prefers to recur to action rather than thought, and he arrives at the most opportune moment, in the final scene of the tragedy, to claim the Kingdom of the Danes. He serves as the military counterpart of Hamlet, and, even though he does not appear in the play before the very end, “a mere hologram” (Papahagi, 2021) [trad. n.], he is mentioned from the beginning and associated with a distant threat by Claudius in his monologue; “We have here writ/To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras /Who, impotent and bed-rid, scarcely hears/Of this

his nephew's purpose to suppress/His further gait herein, [...]” (I.2, 27-31). In the final scene, when he arrives after the carnage at Elsinore Castle, he says: “Let us haste to hear it,/And call the noblest to the audience./For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.” (V.2, 379-381), which suggests his conquering nature, but, simultaneously, his need for vengeance. He is another parallel to Hamlet, as he managed to complete the journey of revenge in his father's name, or, as Adrian Papahagi says: “Providence attributes to Fortinbras the throne that birth-right had destined for Hamlet” (Papahagi, 2021). He is “[...] The chosen one who, between a victory and a funeral, will be crowned king” (Papahagi, 2021).

5.4. Horatio

Horatio is the skeptical and contemplative counterpart of Hamlet, the “punctum indiferens”, as none of his actions influences the other characters negatively. “Horatius” means “timekeeper” in Latin, which is relevant for the character, as he is amongst the only ones who manage to survive at the end of the play. He is a mirror for Hamlet, in the sense that both of started out pure in the play, but, Horatio's decision to stay away from trouble and not to interfere saves him from a tragic end. Horatio's last interaction with Hamlet is suggestive for the manner in which he manages to dissipate the tragic atmosphere and to utter words of beauty that would accompany Hamlet to his never-ending sleep “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” (V.2, 352-353). Horatio is a connoisseur of human behaviour, as he helps Hamlet interpret Claudius's facial expressions during the play organized by Hamlet in the third act, to elucidate the mystery of the murder: “I did very well note him” (III.2, 281). Frank Kermode affirms that “Horatio [...] is a somewhat chameleonic figure—a stranger or habitué of the court as the need arises” (Kermode, 1973), because whenever there is a pivotal moment in the tragedy, Horatio is there, a “sapiens fortis”, who manages to add bits and pieces of his judgment for the help of the other characters, as, for instance, in Act I, scene I, when the Ghost is first seen: “Question it, Horatio” (I.1, 46).

5.5. Partial Conclusions and Remarks

Hamlet tries to be all of these: a scholar like Horatio, a gallant courtier like Laertes, and a warrior like Fortinbras, but, ultimately he fails. He was a soldier only by title, courtier by upbringing and scholar by nature, but he should not have interfered with behind-the-scenes corruption of the state. If he had remained just a “prospector videns”, like Horatio, he and the many victims of his plot would have survived.

6. Final Conclusions and Remarks

By figure of thought and deep philosophical maneuvers, Shakespeare creates in his tragedy the illusion of similitude, which, in comparison to his other works, is highlighted by the symmetry of the characters, which complete one another per-

fectly. By individualizing the scopes of character development and construction, it can be regarded as a reversed bildungsroman, as the characters do not choose the path of evolution, but involution. *Hamlet's* list of *dramatis personae* is like a mirror. Through his symmetrical cast of young and old male characters, Shakespeare manages to take us through the looking glass.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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