

*HAMLET, CONSCIENCE, AND FREE WILL*

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree  
With Honors in

English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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Abstract:

This thesis examines William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the historical conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. Shakespeare writes in a religious atmosphere heavily informed by the sixteenth-century religious conflict between the Protestant Church of England and Catholic ideology. While the Church of England controlled English religious thought through strict censorship of Catholic theology, the Church was unable to erase the Catholic history of the country. In *Hamlet*, these two opposing ideologies come face to face. Prince Hamlet, linked to the Protestant Reformer Dr. Martin Luther through an education at Wittenberg, demonstrates great courage through his trust in God's sovereignty. Hamlet finds his religious conscience crippled by the appearance of the Ghost of his father from Purgatory, a uniquely Catholic view of the afterlife. The confusion caused by Catholic theology continues when Claudius, responsible for the death of Hamlet's father, is unable to repent of his sins due to his belief in Catholic works-based salvation. Until Hamlet regains his Protestant faith in grace-based salvation and God's predestined control of fate, he cannot take his revenge. Once Hamlet regains his Protestant faith, his trust in predestined fate leads to death. In *Hamlet*, acceptance of predestination lead to the destruction of the individual.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reveals the historical conflict between free will and grace in Catholic and Protestant salvation. Prince Hamlet, a student at Wittenberg, returns home to Denmark to find his father dead and his mother married to his uncle. For the sixteenth century Church of England, the city of Wittenberg carried historical and theological significance as the academic home of the theologian Martin Luther and the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation. Hamlet's academic career creates an instant parallel between the character and Martin Luther. At the turn of the fifteenth century, Shakespeare wrote during a tumultuous religious climate of anti-Catholicism, established through heavy propaganda and intense English nationalism. Censorship of Catholic writings by the Protestant Church of England led to the rejection of the Catholic theological concept of Purgatory. Hamlet's interaction with his father's Ghost, trapped in Purgatory, shows a fundamentally Protestant figure grappling with the traditional Catholic theory. Part of the underlying conflict between Catholic and Protestant ideologies stems from the Christian concept of salvation through either good works or grace. Hamlet's inability to take revenge for his father's death reveals his struggle to accept the new grace-based Protestant faith which replaced a works-based Catholicism. Hamlet's uncle Claudius, trapped in a works-based salvation, is unable to repent of his sin. Claudius' inability to repent reveals the struggle among conscience, grace, and free-will in the play. When Hamlet returns from exile in England, he leaves behind his inner conflict. Unlike Claudius, Hamlet appeases his conscience by accepting Protestantism. Like Martin Luther, Hamlet rejects the concept of free-will. Hamlet's acceptance of a fatalistic view of predestination leads him to his death. For Hamlet, the acceptance of a fatalistic Protestant view of predestination is the death of free-will and action.

Prince Hamlet returns to Denmark from his studies in Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, and soon finds he has arrived to see his mother marry his uncle, Claudius. Claudius'

initial grief at his brother's death quickly transitions to his own personal desires: "That we with wisest sorrow think on [King Hamlet], / Together with remembrance of ourselves."<sup>1</sup> Caught up in their wedding as their inappropriate joy causes "mirth in funeral," his uncle and mother cannot understand Hamlet's grief at his father's death (1.1.12). Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, questions his "nighted color," or black clothes of mourning (1.1.68). Despite the grand marriage surrounding his return home, Hamlet continues to mourn his father, only "two months dead – nay, not so much, not two!" (1.2.138). Hamlet's intense grief at his father's death is exacerbated by his mother's remarriage to his uncle. Hamlet denounces his mother's marriage to his "father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152-153). Despite their confusion at Hamlet's grief, Claudius and Gertrude desire Hamlet to remain in Elsinore Castle rather than return to Wittenberg. Claudius rebukes Hamlet's "intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg" (1.1.112-13). Gertrude adds, "stay with us; go not to Wittenberg" (1.1.118-19). Hamlet reluctantly complies with his uncle and mother's wishes, and does not return to Wittenberg to continue his studies. Denied the ability to return to the safe academic haven of Wittenberg, Hamlet is trapped in the confusion of Elsinore. Wittenberg, "the first and most famous of Protestant universities," was the academic home of the Reformer Dr. Martin Luther.<sup>2</sup> The connection between Hamlet and Martin Luther highlights the religious conflict between the Catholic Church and the Church of England by introducing the theology of the Protestant Reformation.

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1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Ed. Robert S. Miola. NY: Norton & Company, 2011) 1.1.6-7. Act, scene, lines will be in parenthetical citations hereafter.

2. Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton University Press, 1984) 19.

Hamlet's struggle to act mirrors Martin Luther's own struggles to conceptualize grace and salvation. Martin Luther began his spiritual journey as a monk in a Catholic institution, beginning as a friar and becoming the Head of Theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1512. Like most devout Catholic monks, Martin Luther sought to please God through "fasting, scourging, the minutest self-examination and every form of self-discipline known to the strict order he had joined."<sup>3</sup> Luther's zeal for justification, or the manner in which person could be absolved of sin, made righteous before a holy God, and escape eternal damnation, led him to follow Catholic spiritual disciplines like fasting, self-examination, and repeated confessions of even seemingly minor sins. The Catholic Church's "works-righteousness" rested on the belief that justification could be earned through constant repentance and good works.<sup>4</sup> Luther's initial reliance on works for salvation led to despair and hopelessness. He was "tormented by the recognition of his own sin, and by the question, 'Have I fasted, watched, prayed, confessed enough?'"<sup>5</sup> Luther's conscience, continuously convicted of new sin, compelled him to confess each of these sins. In 1588, an introduction to Luther's commentary on Galatians describe Luther's "his zeal without knowledge, understanding no other justification but in works of the love and merits of his own making."<sup>6</sup> Luther felt trapped by the knowledge of his sin coupled with an inability to do enough penance in exchange. Luther feared that his good works could never be enough to cover the totality of his sins to earn God's grace and forgiveness.

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3. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1957), 20.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 20.

6. Martin Luther, *A Commentarie of M. Doctor Martin Luther Upon the Epistle of S. Paule to the Galathians* (London: Ludgate, 1588) 4.

Luther's despair of salvation led him away from Catholic traditions and directly to the New Testament Scriptures. In the introduction to Luther's commentary on Galatians, the editor writes that Luther's conscience was filled with "remorse and feeling of sin, his mind with fears and misdoubts, whereby he was driven to seek further: So that by searching, seeking, conferring, and by reading of S. Paul, some sparks of better knowledge began."<sup>7</sup> Luther studied the Scriptures to alleviate his fear, searching for answers regarding the nature of repentance, justification, and salvation. In the New Testament Scriptures, Luther found that the biblical command to repent "meant 'to be repentant in the heart' rather than 'to do the prescribed acts of penance,'" in direct contrast to the Catholic Church's interpretation.<sup>8</sup> In his commentary on Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians, Luther condemns the idea of salvation through good works, proclaiming that "justification" comes "not by ourselves, neither by our works, which are less than ourselves, but by another help, even the son of God Jesus Christ [through whom] we are redeemed from sin, death, the devil, and made partners of eternal life."<sup>9</sup> The means of a soul's justification, or being righteous before a holy God, became the main theological difference between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. Luther believed justification was a gift of God's grace, given through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and accepted through faith in God's grace. Luther goes so far to write that "either Christ died in vain, or else the law justifieth not. But Christ died not in vain; therefore the law justified not."<sup>10</sup> If one could be justified through good works in obedience to the law, then Christ's death could accomplish

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7. Ibid., 4.

8. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 21.

9. Luther, *Galathians*, Fol 1.

10. Ibid., Fol. 91.

nothing in the heart of a believer. Luther's belief in salvation by God's grace through Christ's death became a foundational theological point of the Protestant Reformation. Convinced that repentance was an inner response to God's grace, Luther condemned outward actions which were not motivated by faith in God's grace. The only way to earn true salvation and escape eternal damnation was to trust in God's saving grace.

However, Luther's conviction of salvation by grace alone without works directly opposed the Catholic belief of earning salvation. A sixteenth century Catholic theologian, Jean d'Albin de Valsergues, writes a defense of Catholicism for a "learned Protestant."

It is not enough to know Christ to be our refuge, our help and succor... we follow Christ and his Church, and show ourselves willingly to do that which the Church commandeth us. We must fast, when the Church commands us, and as it biddeth us: We mus pray as the Church instructesth us. We must do those good works that The Church teacheth us to do. In obeying the Church, we obey God: if we be disobedient to the Churche, we disobey God.<sup>11</sup>

Forsaking a doctrine of works-based righteousness is to disobey God, which ultimately leads to damnation. Justification, for the Catholic Church, could be achieved only through good works and obedience to the law of the Bible. For Jean d'Albin de Vasergues, "Christian men should be obedient to Christian ordinances" to ensure their salvation.<sup>12</sup> These Catholic ordinances included doctrines of penances and indulgences. If a person died with unrepentant sins, sins unconfessed

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11. Jean d'Albin de Valsergues, *A notable discourse, plainely and truely discussing, who are the right ministers of the Catholike Church written against Calvin and his disciples...with an offer made by a Catholike to a learned Protestant...*(London: Duaci, for Johannem Bellerum, 1575), 9.

12. *Ibid.*, 10.

and without penance, the soul of that person would go to Purgatory, an intermediary state between Heaven and Hell. Stephen Greenblatt writes that souls were sent to Purgatory “to be readied for bliss.”<sup>13</sup> In Purgatory, a person’s soul would be purged of sin through suffering, and could only be released after their souls had suffered the amount necessary to purify their souls for heaven. Luther’s spiritual revelation spurred him on to write ninety-five short propositions, known as the 95 Theses, which he nailed to the door of Wittenberg’s Castle Church on All Hallows’ Eve for debate among the academics. These theses condemned the selling of “indulgences,” or “remission of all or part of the temporal punishments due to the sinner for his sins.”<sup>14</sup> Because of his hard-won conviction of repentance and salvation through grace, Martin Luther strenuously opposed the selling of indulgences, taking particular action against a 1517 indulgence which “proclaimed that all sins and reconciliation with God, and would be completely out of danger from purgatory.”<sup>15</sup> His attacks on indulgences and corruption in the church challenged the Pope’s authority over the Christian church as a whole. Luther’s rejection of the Catholic concepts of salvation, repentance, and the After-life became hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther preached salvation through God’s sovereign grace, believing that forgiveness was a gift of God, who chose, called, and justified sinners through His sovereign will. In England, the Reformation took the form of Henry VIII’s “break with Rome and his assertion of royal supremacy over the Church of England, existing as a fundamental rebellion from the Catholic

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13. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 215.

14. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 23-24.

15. *Ibid.*, 24.



Church.<sup>16</sup> The Church of England was committed “to the doctrine of justification by faith and the English Bible.”<sup>17</sup> England accepted Luther’s “intense opposition to purgatory and prayers for the dead, images and the cult of the saints, clerical celibacy, and... the Mass.”<sup>18</sup> When Elizabeth became queen, the government-controlled Church of England increased in religious power. To oppose the Protestant Church of England was to oppose England herself, and this led to an intensity of nationalism founded in a common religion. Intense Protestant nationalism was spurred on by inflammatory anti-Catholic language in literature and politics. To create a cohesive national identity, “international Catholicism, especially in its militant Counter-Reformation forms, was cast by the hated and dangerous antagonist.”<sup>19</sup> Moretti writes that “[a]nti-Catholicism and Protestant nationalism were habits of thought which found foreign policy a natural area for comment and exhortation.”<sup>20</sup> Conflicts with predominately Catholic Spain made it necessary for Protestant England to become unified against “international Catholicism.”<sup>21</sup> In 1591, Parliament passed “an Act to ‘Retain the Queen’s Subjects in Obedience,’” which claimed to protect England from “such great inconveniences and perils as might happen and grow by the wicked

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16. Karl Gunther, *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England, 1525-1590* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Arthur Marotti, editor of *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), xiii.

20. Ibid., 96.

21. Ibid., xiii.

and dangerous practices of seditious sectaries and disloyal persons.”<sup>22</sup> Disobedience, or non-conformity to the practices of the Protestant Church of England, was punished with “imprisonment until conformity...and deportation [from England] on a second offence.”<sup>23</sup>

Twelve London clergymen, appointed in 1588, took on the work of ensuring that the content of pamphlets and books were aligned with the goals of the Church of England.<sup>24</sup> After the Reformation, John Pendergast writes, the line between secular and religious control became blurred, with “the result that the State sought to control not only individual belief, but all aspects of education and literacy.”<sup>25</sup> Despite intense Catholic censorship, sixteenth century Protestant writers felt an intense need to justify Protestantism as a legitimate and historical religious view. The religious historian George Abbot writes:

Now, of all truth this day in controversy, there is none more sought after by some, than the visibility of the truth Church, which retained the purity of the Apostles’ doctrine, unmixed with dregs of error and superstition, especially in the gloomy and dark Ages before Luther.<sup>26</sup>

Despite control over official religious writings of the country, the Protestant Church of England still feared Catholic recusants. Andrew Milton writes that sixteenth century “[p]arliamentary

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22. Stephen Longstaffe, “Puritan Tribulation and the Protestant History Play.” *Literature and Censorship in Renaissance England* (edited by Andrew Hadfield, Palgrave Publishers, 2001), 33.

23. *Ibid.*, 34.

24. *Ibid.*, 128-129.

25. John S. Pendergast, *Religion, Allegory, and Literacy in Early Modern England, 1560-1640*. (Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2006), 153.

26. George Abbot, *A treatise of the perpetuall visibilitie, and succession of the true church in all ages*. (London: Humfrey Louunes, 1624), 3.

debates were often punctuated by clarion calls for more vigorous persecution of Roman Catholics,” revealing the political power of the Protestant Church of England.<sup>27</sup> The government-controlled Church of England promoted violent anti-Catholic rhetoric which dominated the official workings of the English government. This “starkly polarizing anti-Catholic ideology,” while creating a general sense of Protestant national identity, did not directly impact the everyday lives of English people.<sup>28</sup> Local English “office-holders, while opposed to ‘popery’ in a general sense, were less prepared to prosecute men who were neighbors or friends.”<sup>29</sup> While the government as a general body was overwhelmingly anti-Catholic, the English people lived alongside each other, overlooking the saw beyond the distinctions drawn between the religions by necessity. Andrew Milton observes that despite the “language of binary opposition between the forces of Protestantism and Catholicism... life in Protestant England was in fact littered with Roman Catholic ideas, books, images, and people.”<sup>30</sup> Local churches and communities could not eradicate all of the centuries of Catholic art and philosophy which existed long before the Protestant Reformation began in England. Andrew Milton observes “all early modern Englishmen in a sense had Roman Catholic neighbors and kinsmen, in the form of their own ancestors.”<sup>31</sup> English Protestants could not escape the religious difference of their Catholic ancestors, often “anxious to be reassured that their ancestors who died before the Reformation

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27. Marotti, *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism*, 85.

28. *Ibid.*, 86.

29. *Ibid.*, 100.

30. *Ibid.*, 86.

31. *Ibid.*, 103.

had been saved, despite having held Roman Catholic beliefs.”<sup>32</sup> Jean d’Albin de Valsergues asks his readers if they believe that all Catholic “martyrs, which have suffered for our religion...I would have you answer me unto this: Do you think that they be in heaven or in hell?”<sup>33</sup> A critique of Protestant salvation rested on this: could Protestant believers be comfortable with rejection of the faith of their forefathers? The acceptance of a new view of salvation created an intense fear of the eternal resting place of their ancestors. Despite the government’s attempt to cast Catholicism as a national enemy to foster English unity of thought, England’s own Catholic history remained.

Into this polarizing yet uniquely connected conflict between Catholic and Protestants, grace and sovereignty pitted against works and free-will, comes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The titular character finds himself caught between an academic background associated with Protestantism and a Catholic ghost. In Elsinore, Hamlet comes face to face with a Ghost suffering in Purgatory, the Catholic doctrine of an intermediary state for souls to pay for their sins. Hamlet is confronted with the truth of his father’s murder by the Ghost of his father. Horatio, Hamlet’s friend from Wittenberg, informs Hamlet that he has seen the Ghost of King Hamlet in Elsinore. Hamlet’s mourning is interrupted by his fellow student Horatio. In surprise, Hamlet asks his friend “what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?”(1.2.168). Horatio replies that he came to witness the funeral of Hamlet’s father. Hamlet replies to his “fellow-student” that he saw instead Hamlet’s mother’s wedding (1.2.177-178). Horatio joins Hamlet for a moment in grieving his father, saying “I saw him once. ‘A was a goodly king” (1.2.186). Horatio then

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32. Ibid.

33. Jean d’Albin de Valsergues, *A notable discourse*, 89.

declares that he “thinks [he] saw him yesternight” (1.2.188). Shocked, Hamlet demands to hear how Horatio could possibly have seen the dead king. Horatio tells his friend that “a figure like your father” has been seen walking at midnight (1.2.199). Determined to meet with this “figure,” Hamlet joins Horatio and the guards as they hold their evening watch (1.2.199). When the Ghost appears, Hamlet must determine whether or not this figure is truly the Ghost of his father, or if the figure is merely taking on the likeness of the King (1.2.188).

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!  
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned  
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape  
 That I will speak to thee.(1.5.39-45).

Hamlet does not know if this “spirit” can be trusted, but declares he will speak to it for the single reason that it is “a figure like” his father (1.2.199). Horatio warns Hamlet not to follow the Ghost, revealing the possibility that the Ghost is an evil spirit who “might deprive your sovereignty of reason” (1.4.73). Horatio’s use of the word “might” reveals the continuing uncertainty of the Ghost’s true nature; the Ghost may be tempting Hamlet to evil, or it may not. Hamlet does not care whether the Ghost brings “airs from heaven or blasts from hell,” as he is determined to speak to despite the possibility of its’ evil purposes (1.5.41). Hamlet breaks free of his friends’ attempt to hold him back with the cry “I’ll follow thee” (1.4.86). The Ghost tells Hamlet that he is the spirit of King Hamlet:

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 (1.5.39-45).

The Ghost, with crimes “burnt and purged away,” states that he is Hamlet’s father, whose soul is trapped in Purgatory (1.5.13). Like English Protestants afraid for the fates of their Catholic ancestors, Hamlet, “a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost.”<sup>34</sup> Hamlet’s last remaining link to Wittenberg is his friendship with Horatio, and yet it is Horatio who informs Hamlet that the Ghost of his father has been seen. Shakespeare has removed his main character from the safe academic environment of Protestant Wittenberg, and thrown him into the confused and inconsistent religious world of Elsinore.

The Ghost commands Hamlet to “revenge his most foul and most unnatural murder,” revealing that he was murdered by his brother Claudius (1.5.25). While King Hamlet slept, Claudius poisoned him. “If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not,” orders the Ghost, and Hamlet vows to revenge his father (1.5.81). As the Ghost exits the stage, presumably returned to Purgatory, he calls to Hamlet “[r]emember me” (1.5.91). “Remember thee?” Hamlet asks himself, after the Ghost has exited.

Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I’ll wipe away all trivial, fond records  
 All sawes of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there

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34. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 240.

And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter (1.5.96-103).

Hamlet first swears to forget all things which he learned through both his “youth and observation (1.5.99). In saying “youth,” Hamlet refers to the morality of his childhood (1.5.99). All foundational truths learned in his childhood now become “trivial, fond records” (1.5.99). When Hamlet speaks of things learned through “observation,” he could be referring to the theology he learned and observed as a student. If “observation” is the theology linked to Wittenberg, well-known for its link to the Protestant Reformation, here Hamlet leaves behind not only the moral truths he learned in childhood but the intellectual comfort of Protestant theology. To revenge his father’s “[m]urder most foul,” Hamlet replaces every Protestant thought with the call to revenge heard from a Catholic Ghost (1.5.27). By cutting himself off from his own moral beliefs, he distances himself from the Protestant background of Wittenberg. When Hamlet wipes away all formerly foundational beliefs, he loses his ability to take action.

The religious conflict of a Protestant figure accepting a Catholic ghost leads Hamlet to confusion and inaction. Before his conversation with the Ghost, Hamlet pursues action fearlessly. He tells Horatio and the guards that if the Ghost appears to be “my noble father’s person, / I’ll speak to it, though hell itself should gape” (1.3.243-244). Robert Abbot’s defense of the Protestant church argues that since salvation was from Christ alone, Christ “must over-matter the gates of hell.”<sup>35</sup> Because Hamlet is secure in his Protestant theology, he does not fear “hell

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35. Robert Abbot, *A triall of our church-forsakers. Or A meditation tending to still the passions of unquiet Brownists, upon Heb. 10.25 Wherein is justified, against them, that the blessed Church of England 1 Is a true Church. 2 Hath a true ministry. 3 Hath a true worship.* (London: Thomas Payne, 1639), 32.

itself” (1.3.244). Hamlet’s courage stems from the Protestant belief that, as Luther writes, God’s grace through Christ kept souls safe “from sin, death, the devil, and [makes them] partners of eternal life.”<sup>36</sup> Hamlet is secure in his knowledge that the Ghost cannot harm his “soul... / Being a thing immortal as itself” (1.5.66-67). Hamlet’s immortal soul has already been justified by his Protestant faith; he finds intellectual security in the belief that his soul is safe before God. Luther also writes that all things in life, things good and things evil, are ordained “by the mere predestination and free mercy of God before [we were] yet borne.”<sup>37</sup> Faith in the overarching control of God’s predestined will is a uniquely Protestant theological belief. Hamlet’s Protestant conception of fate gives him courage to resist his friends’ attempt to keep him from following the Ghost, saying that “[m]y fate cries out / And makes each petty artery in this body / As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve” (1.4.82-83). Luther writes that “it is, then, fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christian to know that God...foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will.”<sup>38</sup> When Hamlet is still surrounded by the influence of Wittenberg, through his own moral beliefs and the presence of his friend Horatio, he finds courage to chase down impossible things in a certain knowledge of destiny. This courage, however, makes him more than willing to fight even his friends, as Hamlet threatens to “make a ghost of him” who dares prevent his pursuit (1.4.85). His faith in the security of his soul and the destiny controlled by God’s will give him strength to pursue an unknown spirit into darkness.

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36. Luther, *Galathians*, Fol 1.

37. *Ibid.*, Fol 39.

38. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 80.



One would think that knowledge of his father's murder would spur Hamlet, a character willing to kill a friend to pursue an unknown cause, on to vengeful action. However, his father's Ghost returning from Purgatory shakes Hamlet's religious identity. At first sight of the Ghost, Hamlet expresses his uncertainty through repeated questions, demanding why the Ghost makes him feel "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?" (1.5.56-57). Here, Hamlet echoes Luther's description of men unsure of what they believe: "as they do not know the limits of their ability, they will not know what they should do."<sup>39</sup> Hamlet's initial wonder at the Ghost foreshadow his coming lack of action. Instead of taking swift vengeance, Hamlet finds himself transformed into a man of uncertainty. After the commission of revenge, and Hamlet's subsequent abandonment of all foundational moral thought, Hamlet can no longer be counted among the intellectual scholars like Horatio. Before he sees the Ghost, Hamlet believes that "[f]oul deeds will rise, / Though all the earth o'erwhelm them" (1.3.256-257). Instead of taking action at a Catholic Ghost's command to "remember me," Hamlet discards all moral foundations of Protestant belief (1.5.95). The man who once dared to speak to and chase down ghosts finds himself trapped between conflicting ideas about the afterlife. This conflict is internalized in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, characterized by his fear of an uncertain afterlife (3.1.57).

The opening line of Hamlet's famous soliloquy shows a character caught between life and death: "To be or not to be—that is the question" (3.1.57). While both life and death contain elements of uncertainty, Hamlet believes he must make a choice between the two. To make this choice, Hamlet looks at the extremes of life and death, wondering if he should live and endure

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39. Ibid., 78.

“the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (3.1.59). At this moment, Hamlet feels that life is composed of nothing but “heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” (3.1.64). For a moment, to Hamlet’s conflicted mind death appears as a “consummation devoutly to be wished” (3.1.64). With the word “devoutly,” Hamlet attempts to rewrite his desire for death in religious terms, abandoning himself in momentary devotion to the idea of peaceful death. “To die, to sleep, / To sleep, perchance to dream—”, but suddenly he pauses (3.1 65-66). The dash in line 66 creates a caesura, or momentary break in rhythmic pattern, which signifies the moment that Hamlet loses hope of peace after death. This caesura foreshadows the “pause” in which Hamlet stops to consider “what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (3.1 67-68). These dreams, he says, “[m]ust give us pause” (3.1.69). Hamlet has just been confronted with a Ghost who claims to have come from Purgatory, claiming that “the secrets of my prison house” would “harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood” (1.5.76). This is not the picture of an idyllic Protestant heaven, where souls are eternally justified by God’s grace and mercy. Faced with terrifying uncertainty, it is no wonder Hamlet must pause to consider what “dreams” may come after death. When Hamlet speaks of “dreams,” it brings to mind the sixteenth century rejection of Purgatory as an intermediary state for eternal souls. In 1563, the Church of England denounced Purgatory as “a fond thing, vainly invented.”<sup>40</sup> William Tyndale, a sixteenth century Protestant translator of Scriptures, stated that Purgatory was ““a poet’s fable.””<sup>41</sup> Hamlet’s reaction to a Catholic afterlife is informed by the Protestant Reformation’s attempt “to undo the Purgatorial imagination.”<sup>42</sup> Greenblatt writes that the Reformers believed

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40. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 235.

41. *Ibid.*, 35.

42. *Ibid.*, 61.

that they could only liberate people from the concept of Purgatory “by taking the great fable apart, piece by piece.”<sup>43</sup> Hamlet’s visitation by the Ghost makes him unable to reject the “fable”, but his loss of the Protestant academic foundation leave him caught in uncertainty.<sup>44</sup> This is the language of a character who once met danger head on, daring to follow a Ghost to hell and back, now paralyzed by a newfound fear of what comes after death.

While death seems to be freedom from life’s inevitable heartache and despised treachery, Hamlet states that no man would “bear the whips and scorns of time” if they did not fear the afterlife (3.1.71). Life’s hardships would be unbearable, and worth ending:

But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of (3.1.79-84).

Fear of what comes after death keeps Hamlet firmly on the side of life. Mankind bears the troubles of this life because the reality of eternity, whether Purgatory or eternal damnation, could very well be worse. Hamlet’s religious experience before the Ghost has been completely shattered by the possibility of Purgatory. The statement “[n]o traveler returns” from death seems contradictory in light of his recent face-to-face conversation with the Ghost (3.1.80-81). Perhaps, then, this line reveals Hamlet’s own mistrust of the Ghost; perhaps he does not trust the Ghost’s tale of being his father’s spirit forced to wander until his sins are “burnt and purged away”

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43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

(1.5.13). Hamlet does have Horatio help him verify his uncle's "occulted guilt" later in the play (3.2.73). This contradiction "puzzles the will," but enhances the overall sense of uncertainty and fear in the soliloquy (3.1.81). Hamlet's uncertainty runs so deep that he is unsure if he can even trust an eye-witness account of Purgatory. Much like the Church of England, nominally Protestant but struggling to purge the concept of Purgatory out of a national identity, Hamlet is conflicted by the existence of two opposing theological ideologies.

Confronted with his own doubt about the after-life, Hamlet concludes: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (3.1.84). Conscience, defined as "the application of moral law to an individual action in a unique and bewildering set of circumstances," leads Hamlet to abandon his courageous nature and dwell in cowardice.<sup>45</sup> When Hamlet wipes away all "fond records," he loses the ability to apply a consistent moral law to action (1.5.99). Hamlet's distrust of the Ghost's account and his abandonment of his own theological views mean he has no idea of what comes after death, which "puzzles the will" (3.1.81). Here even Hamlet's belief in predestination over free-will becomes questioned. Martin Luther writes that without confidence in the sovereignty of God, His will is puzzled, unclear, and nowhere is the sense of action which was once emboldened by his former Protestant belief in God's sovereign control over his destiny.

Hamlet's uncertainty about the after-life results in conscience-induced cowardice, which manifests itself in fear and inaction. The word "thus" signals the concluding thought of the soliloquy: the following lines are the practical consequences of Hamlet's reaction to an uncertain moral law in the bewildering circumstances in the play's religious reality:

And thus the native hue of resolution

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45. Camille Wells Slight, *The Caustical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 39.

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment,  
 With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action (3.1.85-89).

This “pale cast of thought” overcomes an active nature (3.3.87). Much like sixteenth century England, attempting to create a new Protestant identity amidst a deeply Catholic history, Hamlet’s confusion leads to conflict. Martin Luther believed that without a confidence in Protestant theology, “[his] conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God.”<sup>46</sup> While Hamlet’s inclination is to believe the Ghost’s story and to revenge his father’s murder, he is trapped by the loss of a courageous conscience. Robert Frye writes that “the conscience which forestalls the particular action of suicide broadens out to forestall unspecified ‘enterprises of great pitch and moment’ and so all ‘lose the name of action.’”<sup>47</sup> Without a religious foundation, Hamlet’s cowardly conscience leaves him inactive. Unable to differentiate between the different theological concepts, Hamlet does nothing. This inaction mirrors an interesting point of the Protestant Reformation; true salvation could not be earned by works. The Reformation rested on the question whether “Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for salvation and all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort.”<sup>48</sup> Catholics, in response to the Reformation’s grace-based salvation, turned to verses like

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46. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 313.

47. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 189.

48. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 59.

James 2:18: “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead in itself.”<sup>49</sup> Hamlet’s inaction echoes the attitude of Catholics towards a grace-based salvation; without the need to earn salvation through good works, a person would have no motivation to change their sinful ways. Faith without good works left no reason for future moral actions of holiness. Like English Protestants grappling with the reality of their Catholic ancestors, Hamlet is firmly trapped in between his Protestant upbringing and the Catholic works-based salvation.<sup>50</sup>

When a band of travelling actors arrives in Elsinore, Hamlet seizes on an idea. He ensures the actors perform a show with a plot resembling “the murder of [his] father / Before [his] uncle” (3.1.516-517). He asks Horatio to help him watch Claudius’ reaction to the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which will portray a murderer marrying the widow of his victim. “The play’s the thing,” he muses to himself, “[w]herein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (3.1.525-526). Claudius’ guilty reaction to the play confirms to Hamlet that the Ghost has indeed spoken true: “O good Horatio, I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (3.2.168-69). Claudius, disturbed by Hamlet’s play, becomes suspicious that Hamlet has caught onto his crime. Claudius arranges for Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, two of Hamlet’s old schoolmates, to accompany Hamlet to England carrying letters which ask the English to kill Hamlet. After sending Guildenstern and Rosencrantz away, Claudius confirms the Ghost’s story by admitting to the murder of Hamlet’s father in the form of a soliloquy.

Claudius begins his soliloquy by reflecting on the reality of his sin, saying “my offense...hath the primal eldest curse upon’t” (3.3.36-37). Like Cain, the son of Adam and Even

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49. *The Geneva Bible*, Christopher Barker, printer to the Queenes most excellent Maiestie, (London, 1583), James 2:18.

50. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 59.

who killed his brother in Genesis 4:1-16, Claudius admits to murdering his brother.<sup>51</sup> Claudius is unable to focus on his prayer initially, describing himself as “a man to double business bound / I stand in pause where I shall first begin / and both neglect” (3.3.41-41). His conscience forces him into period of brutal introspection, his guilt trapping him in inaction. Claudius asks himself the rhetorical question: “What if this cursed hand / Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood?” (3.3.43-44). The use of the phrases “cursed hand” and “double business” bring to mind James 4:8, which reads “[c]leanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded.”<sup>52</sup> (3.3.43-44). Claudius, upon admitting his guilt to himself, must now find a way to cleanse his hands and purify his soul. He ponders the full extent of forgiveness: “Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash [my hand] white as snow?” (3.3.45-46). Here Claudius references Isaiah 1:18, which reads “though your sins were as crimson, they shall be made white as snow.”<sup>53</sup> Wondering if there is a way for heaven to cleanse his hands of his brother’s blood, Claudius appeals to the biblical precept that all can be forgiven through Christ’s blood. Ephesians 1:7 says that in Christ “by whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins, according to his rich grace.”<sup>54</sup> The book of Hebrews adds that for forgiveness, a man must allow “the blood of Christ...[to] purge your conscience from dead works.”<sup>55</sup> Claudius wishes to appeal Christ’s blood for justification. Claudius’ conscience is

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51. *The Geneva Bible*, Christopher Barker, Genesis 4:1-16.

52. *Ibid.*, James 4:8.

53. *Ibid.*, Isaiah 1:18.

54. *Ibid.*, Ephesians 1:7.

55. *Ibid.*, Hebrews 9:14.

convicted of his sin, and he would pray for forgiveness if it is possible. From a desire for forgiveness, Claudius' thoughts turn to the purpose of mercy and prayer.

Whereto serves mercy

But to confront the visage of offense?

And what's in prayer but this twofold force,

To be forestalled ere we come to fall,

Or pardoned being down? (3.3.46-50).

God's mercy reveals the need for repentance, while prayer for mercy serves two purposes: to keep sinners from sinning, and to pardon them when they do sin. Prayer for mercy serves little purpose without sin. If there was no offense, there would be no reason to ask for mercy. Claudius attempts to use these precepts to justify his desire to be pardoned: "Then I'll look up, / My fault is past" (3.3.51). However, Claudius' desire to repent is defeated by his inability to pray for forgiveness. Claudius realizes that although an honest prayer would gain forgiveness, "Pray can I not, / Though inclination be as sharp as will; / My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent" (3.3.3-40). Claudius' desire to be forgiven does not outweigh his guilt. He is brutally honest with himself, aware of the actions his guilt necessitates. Claudius links his guilty conscience with his desire for the throne. He wonders:

[W]hat 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 my queen (3.3.51-56).



Claudius believes that forgiveness, or justification, cannot take place unless he gives up “those effects for which” he killed his brother (3.3.55). Despite Claudius’ desire for his sins to be washed “white as snow,” forgiveness is impossible for him to achieve (3.3.46). Claudius understands his “need for repentance and the availability of mercy” but refuses to undertake the action necessary to be forgiven.<sup>56</sup> His guilty conscience forces himself to honestly address one crucial question: “May one be pardoned and retain th’offense?” (3.3.56). The answer is no. Amidst the “agonizing of his conscience,” Claudius realizes that he cannot be forgiven his dreadful sins unless he gives up his crown.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, Claudius’ conscience tells him that he cannot gain forgiveness. Camille Slights writes that Claudius “Hamlet’s most dangerous adversaries...consciously decide to act against the direction of their consciences.”<sup>58</sup> Claudius’ conscience convicts him of the evils of murder, but he consciously rejects the option of giving up “the effects for which [he] committed the murder” (3.3.55). Claudius’ conscience reveals the need for forgiveness, yet this conviction does not precede repentance. Claudius’ conscience as an application of moral law leads to rejection of true penance. What use is the mercy of God if “when one cannot repent?”(3.3.66). Claudius’ inability to repent without taking action reveals a view of justification based on works, a Catholic concept of salvation. He rejects the Protestant view of Christ’s blood as sufficient to wash away his sins, believing instead that he must earn forgiveness by giving up his crown and his wife. Claudius’ guilt informs his understanding of salvation, revealing a works-based salvation echoing the Catholic recusants of Shakespeare’s day.

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56. Ibid.

57. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 135.

58. Slights, *The Caustical Tradition*, 95.

Claudius' attempt to pray has only revealed his depravity to him further, keeping him farther and farther away from repentance. "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-98). Empty words of false contrition may bring a brief respite on earth, but will never wash away the stain of sin. For Claudius to pray "without thoughts" is to pray without true repentance (3.3.98). He cannot pray without giving up his crown and admitting his guilt publically. In Claudius' work-based justification, heaven will never hear his words while he repents half-heartedly. In desperation, he finds himself a "soul that, struggling to be free, / Art more engaged!" (3.3.68). While Martin Luther would applaud Claudius' "self-knowledge," or honest appraisal of his sin, Luther condemns those who "cannot repent when they err; and impenitence is the unpardonable sin."<sup>59</sup> Here on earth, Claudius says, the wicked can escape justice for a time, but "'tis not so above. There is no shuffling, there the action lies / In his true nature" (3.3.60-62). Claudius' works will stand as evidence of his evil nature, and he cannot, or will not, take steps to repent of his sin. Claudius' conscience leaves him trapped, unable to be forgiven because he is unwilling to take the necessary action of which he is convicted.

Hamlet and Claudius are trapped in inaction by their respective consciences. Their ability to apply morality to their actions is compromised by their views of salvation. Claudius' conscience, informed by a Catholic view of works-based salvation, reveals that the action he must take is the very one which he will not. Hamlet is trapped by the loss of foundational beliefs caused by the confusion between his Protestant upbringing and the call to revenge by his father's Ghost. This confusion has kept Hamlet's active nature dormant, unable to truly take revenge,

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59. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 78.

until Claudius confirms the Ghost's story at the play. For three acts, the audience is left wondering what Hamlet "will do if he is ever again free to act."<sup>60</sup> When Hamlet comes upon his uncle praying, he instinctively jumps to revenge the Ghost, whose story he now believes. Hamlet draws his sword, ready to finally take revenge. "Now might I do it," he says to himself, before realizing that Claudius "is a-praying" (3.3.73). While a fragment of Hamlet's formerly fearless self appears for a moment, seeing Claudius at prayer transports him back into confusion. This confusion is demonstrated by the conjunction "but" caught between the words of immediacy: "now...but...and now..." (3.3.73-74). The confusion between Protestantism and Catholicism keeps Hamlet from his revenge at the last moment. "And so 'a goes to heaven, / And so am I revenged" (3.3.74-75). If Hamlet kills his uncle in the midst of a righteous action, Claudius will end up going to heaven rather than to hell. Hamlet wonders if this any way to revenge a father. "A villain kills my father and for that, / I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven" (3.3.76-78). By killing Claudius "in the purging of his soul" Hamlet believes he will allow his father's murderer to avoid the Purgatory in which his father's spirit now suffers (3.3.85). When Claudius killed Hamlet's father, he was unable to repent of his crimes. Now, Hamlet says, "how his audit stands who knows save heaven?" (3.3.83). To kill Claudius mid-prayer is a gross injustice to Hamlet's father, murdered without the chance of repentance and now doomed "to walk the night...till the foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (1.5.10-13). No, Hamlet decides, putting up his sword:

When [Claudius] is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,

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60. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 199.

At game a-swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of salvation in't—  
 Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be as damned and black  
 As hell, whereto it goes (3.3.89-95).

Hamlet will wait for Claudius to return to sinful actions, the outward manifestation of an unrepentant heart, in order to ensure that Claudius ends up in hell rather than heaven. Hamlet is still reacting out of a worldview influenced by works-based salvation, Luther and the Reformation rejected the idea that one could be admitted to heaven on good works alone. Trying to make sense of the conflicting ideologies of Elsinore, Hamlet decides to wait for his revenge: “Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent” (3.3.88). Indeed, Hamlet’s sword will know “a more horrid hent” when Hamlet kills innocent Polonius rather than the king (3.3.88).

While Hamlet confronts his mother about her marriage to his uncle, Polonius, the steward of Elsinore castle and the father of Hamlet’s love-interest Ophelia, is hiding behind an arras. Thinking it is Claudius, Hamlet stabs Polonius unseen. “Oh, I am slain,” says Polonius:

Queen:           Oh me, what has thou done?  
 Hamlet:         Nay, I know not. Is it the King?  
 Queen:           Oh, what a rash and bloody deed is this!  
 Hamlet:         A bloody deed – almost as bad, good Mother,  
                     As kill a king and marry with his brother (3.4.24-29).

In the intense emotion of confronting his mother about her marriage, Hamlet is finally goaded into taking real action. However, his rashness means he has killed the wrong man; “a horrid hent,” indeed (3.3.88). The very action of confronting his mother is a direct rebellion against the

he command of the Catholic Ghost: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven" (1.5.85-86). This action and its consequences impress themselves on Hamlet. Slights writes that "While Claudius is unable to act on his desire to repent and Gertrude dissolves in ineffectual self-loathing..., Hamlet straight-forwardly repents and promises to "answer well" for Polonius's death."<sup>61</sup> Hamlet's actions reveal a newfound courage of conscience, courage which is evident in his answers to Claudius' questions regarding Polonius' body. "A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet"(4.3.19-21). Hamlet is reconnected to Wittenberg through this reference to the Diet of Worms, the hearing where Martin Luther was tried by the Catholic Church for heresy and where Luther refused to recant his dissenting views, for "his own conscience was captive to the Word of God alone."<sup>62</sup> Reconnected with his Protestant educational background, Hamlet's conscience no longer makes him a coward.

After Hamlet's banishment, he leaves his religious confusion behind him. As he travels to England, he comes across the army of the Polish prince Fortinbras preparing for battle. Impressed and awed by their dedication to so slight a cause, Hamlet's heart is convicted of his lack of action. "I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'" he says (4.4.44-45). Hamlet believes he has more cause for action than these soldiers, and wonders how he could have delayed his revenge for so long. "Oh, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody of be nothing worth!" he responds, dedicating himself to action (4.4.66-67). By leaving his religious confusion behind him, Hamlet is able to return to his own active nature. Hamlet's conscience

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61. Slights, *The Caustical Tradition*, 103.

62. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 34.

now informs his actions, not through paralyzing confusion, but as “thoughtful analysis of a particular situation.”<sup>63</sup> Having left the confusion of Elsinore, Hamlet now “thinks precisely on each event of moral choice, even more determined to act according to his own conscience.”<sup>64</sup> Hamlet has moved from irrational religious confusion to intense intellectual thought processes, replacing his confusion with a return to his Protestant ideology. Lost is the “vexing uncertainty which had so disturbed [Hamlet] during his soliloquies”—in its place comes a calm, deliberate Hamlet, with a renewed confidence in predestined fate.<sup>65</sup> Describing his escape from Claudius’ plot to kill him, Hamlet tells Horatio that there “is a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). Hamlet was able to use his father’s ring to forge letters to escape death at the hands of the English. He recounts that “even in that was heaven ordinant,” in that he simply happened to have his father’s ring with him during his banishment (5.2.48). God’s sovereignty informs all parts of Hamlet’s return to Elsinore. Having survived Claudius’ plot, tricked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and escaped pirates, Hamlet’s conscience no longer makes him a coward. Luther writes that a rejection of Catholic doctrine means an acceptance of “the only righteousness of Christ, and to them that embrace the same, it bringeth peace of conscience.”<sup>66</sup> An acceptance of Protestant theology means salvation through Christ alone, which leads to “peace of conscience.”<sup>67</sup> Hamlet has internalized this Protestant peace of conscience. Responsible for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths, Hamlet says that they “are

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63. Slights, *The Caustical Tradition*, 93.

64. *Ibid.*, 103.

65. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 259.

66. Luther, *Galathians*, Fol 10.

67. *Ibid.*

not near my conscience,” as their involvement with Claudius’ treachery was their own doing (5.2.53). Now, indeed, Hamlet feel prepared for revenge against his uncle:

He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,  
Popped between th’election and my hopes,  
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
And with such coz’nage – is’t not perfect conscience? (5.2.63-66).

No longer is Hamlet weighing the possibilities and consequences of revenge, of when to take revenge and how to take revenge. Upon regaining his moral foundation, the “cases of conscience which had preoccupied, troubled, and perplexed him are now resolved.”<sup>68</sup> He has compiled the evidence of Claudius’ guilt—the murder of his father, the marriage to his mother, the assassination attempt—and has declared revenge to be completely justified, in “perfect conscience” (5.2.66).

Hamlet returns to Elsinore not only secure in his conscience, but in the Protestant belief of predestination. Like Martin Luther, Hamlet is confident in the divine providence of God, and sees himself as a participant of God’s willing plan, completely under his control. When Claudius proposes a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Horatio attempts to convince Hamlet to avoid the fight. “If your mind dislike anything, obey it,” Horatio says (5.2.187). Hamlet responds:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be (5.2.189-193).

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68. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 259.

Hamlet refuses to back away from the duel, having no fear of death at this moment. He believes that if it is meant to happen, it will happen. In Act V, Hamlet accepts not only “God’s governance of the world but also...the unshakeable truth that nothing can be otherwise than it is.”<sup>69</sup> Hamlet contrasts augury, the interpretation of signs and omens through birds, with a quote from Christ himself: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father...Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.”<sup>70</sup> Hamlet’s trust in the divine providence of God leads him to say, simply, “Let be.” (5.2.193) Earlier in the play, Hamlet’s defining question was “To be or not to be—that is the question” (3.1.57). Trapped in the confusing world of Elsinore, isolated from his Protestant background and given orders by a Ghost from Purgatory, Hamlet’s conscience did indeed make him a coward (3.1.84). Hamlet regains his ability to act after accepting the “Protestant logic that in life it is all the same, unified in its fixedness and uniform in its utter subjection to God’s will.”<sup>71</sup> The character of Hamlet emulates the theology of Martin Luther in this respect. Luther wrote that without his confidence in God’s sovereignty, he would be unable to endure “many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devil.”<sup>72</sup> Luther’s confidence in God’s sovereignty allows him to believe with “comfortable certainty...that [God] is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.”<sup>73</sup> In the statement “[I]et be,”

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69. John E. Curran, *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency*, (Burlington, VT: Marquette University, 2006), 205.

70. *The Geneva Bible*, Christopher Barker, Matthew 10:29.

71. Curran, *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency*, 206.

72. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 314.

73. *Ibid.*



Hamlet finds courage to face an unknown future (5.2.193). Hamlet's acceptance brings back the question of conscience as the application of morality to action. Hamlet's conscience, now settled, makes him "ready for action."<sup>74</sup> Hamlet has surrendered his fear of an uncertain afterlife to an acceptance of divine control.

While Hamlet seems to have accepted the control of a sovereign God over all things down to the smallest sparrow, Elsinore remains a place of intrigue and treachery. Act V is overcome with a deeply felt "sense of fatalism and despair."<sup>75</sup> Claudius has manipulated Laertes into taking revenge on Hamlet for Polonius' death through the proposed duel. Laertes and Claudius ensure Hamlet will die, either by a poisoned rapier in the duel or by a poisoned cup of wine. Instead, it is Gertrude who drinks the poisoned wine, and Laertes who is wounded by the poisoned rapier. As Laertes dies, he reveals the plot and begs forgiveness before he dies (5.2.301-305). Hamlet, in his rage, attacks Claudius with the poisoned sword before forcing him to drink of the poisoned cup. "Here, thou incestuous, damned Dane / Drink off this potion! Is thy union here? / Follow my mother," he says, before Hamlet falls victim to the poison himself (5.2.299-301). As Hamlet dies, he turns to Horatio for comfort:

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu.  
 You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
 That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
 Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,  
 Is strict in his arrest – oh, I could tell you –

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74. Curran, *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency*, 202.

75. *Ibid.*

But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;  
 Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright  
 To the unsatisfied (5.2.307-314).

Hamlet has overcome his fear of death as the “undiscovered country” (3.1.80). His belief in the sovereignty of divinity has given him courage to change the confusion of “To be or not to be” once more into the certainty of the fatalistic phrase, “let it be” (5.2.11). Hamlet’s final command to Horatio is to report the truth of his story. However, Horatio’s telling of Hamlet’s story is not couched in terms of trust in a sovereign plan. Instead, Horatio reports of “carnal, blood, and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause” (5.2.355-357). Horatio wishes Hamlet’s story be told as quickly as possible, “lest more mischance / On plots and errors happen” (5.2.368-369). While Hamlet faced his death with courage founded on divine providence, Horatio tells a story of accidents, chance, and “casual slaughters...deaths...for no cause” (5.2.356-357). For Hamlet, a Protestant conscience informed by a belief in God’s sovereignty leads him to death. John E. Curran Jr. writes that although it is impossible to accurately determine Shakespeare’s religious beliefs from the play, “aspects of Catholic doctrine were sufficiently attractive to Shakespeare that he felt their loss, and that he was unsympathetic toward the conclusions about God and humanity to which predestination Protestantism necessarily leads us.”<sup>76</sup> For Shakespeare, Protestant doctrine of the afterlife, grace-based salvation, and a predestined view of the universe offered less freedom. Hamlet’s long and complicated journey to resolve his conflicted conscience leads to death, both of his free will and of his body. Shakespeare viewed the Protestant Reformation’s fatalistic predestination as “darker

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76. *Ibid.*, 5.

side of the religion they have established.”<sup>77</sup> Hamlet’s courageous conscience, informed by the Protestant Reformation, is the cause of his death in this play.

In *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare’s characters are informed by the historical conflict between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation in Europe. In the sixteenth-century Protestant Church of England, the government-run church controlled the literary thoughts of the nation, wiping away Catholic concepts such as Purgatory, indulgences, and justification by works. However, a deep historical connection to the Catholic Church remained evident in the daily lives of sixteenth-century Englishmen. Hamlet represents the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, and is thus linked to the theology of the Reformation regarding the afterlife, predestination, and justification by faith alone. The character also represents the conflict of the English people, caught between their Catholic ancestors and history and the new government-controlled Protestant religion. The presence of Hamlet’s father as a Catholic ghost creates this conflict for Hamlet, whose confusion about the afterlife, justification, and destiny leave him unable to take any form of action. Hamlet’s cowardly conscience, trapped in confusion, left him unable to revenge his father’s death. This confusion builds into anger, which results in Polonius’ death and Hamlet’s banishment. Once Hamlet leaves Elsinore, he reaccepts a Protestant worldview and regains his ability to act. Here his conscience, having accepted a moral law, is able to act as a foundation for his actions rather than a deterrent. Hamlet’s acceptance of predestination, however, leads him straight into the trap laid by Claudius. His actions, informed by a Protestant conscience mean the death of individual, or of free will. Shakespeare represents

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77. *Ibid.*, 204.

the death of free will with Hamlet's own physical death. For William Shakespeare, acceptance of predestination lead to the destruction of the individual.

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