

The Struggles of Remembrance: Christianity and Revenge in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Incorporation of Christian Elements in <i>Hamlet</i> and its Place among Contemporary Revenge Tragedies	9
Chapter 2: Remembrance, Revenge and Christianity in <i>Hamlet</i>	45
Chapter 3: Performance and Christian Providence in Hamlet's Revenge	78
Conclusion	112
Works Cited	118

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the religious aspects of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which, I argue, form the foundation of *Hamlet*'s plot and are critical to understanding Hamlet's character and his dilemmas. Early modern culture was particularly saturated with religious allusions. The advent of the Reformation and emergence of printing resulted in an explosive growth in the publication of new Bible translations and other religious materials. While I note that most early modern writers of general literature made frequent use of biblical texts and themes, I add that Shakespeare's use of the Bible and Christian doctrine in *Hamlet* is especially subtle and substantial. Shakespeare achieves this by establishing Hamlet as a particularly devout Christian Prince who is a student at the University of Wittenberg. I argue that it is Hamlet's theological pedantry which makes him procrastinate throughout the play. Additionally, Hamlet's Christian characteristics exhibit syncretic—Catholic and Protestant—Christianity as represented by Elizabethan religious culture. Shakespeare incorporates contemporary religious beliefs in the play not for dogmatic purposes but rather for dramatic expedience. I compare *Hamlet* to other contemporary revenge tragedies and establish how the underlying Christian themes, as revealed in Hamlet's character through his soliloquies, set *Hamlet* apart from other revenge plays. Finally I argue that Hamlet exacts his revenge through a particular performance that operates exclusively within his Christian worldview. Ultimately, as I conclude in the third chapter, through the character of Hamlet, Shakespeare also makes the best dramatic use of contemporary religious beliefs and contentions to make his audience ponder the big question that concerned them: the eventual fate of the human soul.

Introduction

The three chapters that follow deal with different aspects of *Hamlet*, yet, throughout this thesis my focus remains the play's engagement with the biblical text and early modern Christianity. I particularly focus on the Christian aspects of Shakespeare's characterisation of Hamlet. Piero Boitoni writes that although the "topic of Shakespeare and religion has been a perennial one...the recent 'turn to religion' has brought it to the foreground" (1). However, my own focus on religion is not so much concerned with this new 'turn to religion' trend in academic work, but rather my own conclusion that it is impossible to understand Hamlet's character and *Hamlet's* plot without taking into account the biblical and Christian currents embedded in the play's text. In this context, I find it useful to cite Brian Cummings's observations about early modern literature and religion. Cummings notes that most of the writings of sixteenth and seventeenth century were religious in nature (5). The advent and revolutionary success of the Reformation itself can be ascribed to the invention and proliferation of printing which facilitated mass printing of Bibles as well as other religious materials. Cummings further notes that during the early modern period the distinction between religious and non-religious writing was often blurred: "To define religious writing as non-literary is to beg the question of what 'literature' means, and to call most 'literary' works of the period non-religious completes a circular argument" (5-6). Since the most important literary production in the European countries was the Bible, then "Without reference to religion, the study of early modern writing is incomprehensible" (6). I emphasize in this thesis that Shakespeare was a professional dramatist who wished to entertain his audience. However, I agree with Cummings that, alongside the English language translations of the Bible, Shakespeare's own reading and

influences would have included a large number of literary sources suffused with religious content and themes.

Similarly, Shakespeare's audience's awareness to biblical references would be quite high. Underlining the pervasiveness of the Bible in the early modern culture, Hannibal Hamlin uses a modern analogy and compares the Bible to a top-rated TV show "that everyone in the country has been watching every week, sometimes more than once, for their entire lives, having seen some episodes dozens of times" (2). Furthermore, as Hamlin puts it, millions of people in the neighbouring countries too watched that TV show dubbed in their own languages; critics wrote about and discussed that show endlessly; it greatly determined most of the country's literature, arts, culture, political theory, laws, philosophy, "understanding of the natural world as well as human nature..." (2). It was even illegal not to watch that show, "moreover...your salvation was understood to depend on it" (2). Especially significant to this thesis is Hamlin's observation that in his plays Shakespeare appropriated popular Bible verses that enabled him "to engage his audience on elemental matters of life and death, salvation and damnation" (2). In addition, I submit that Shakespeare's focus on the religious elements and symbolism is particularly strong in *Hamlet*, so much so that the play can neither be properly understood nor enjoyed without taking into account its elaborate Christian underpinnings.

Perhaps no single sentence in a work of literature has engendered more literary debates, created more parodies and raised more questions than *Hamlet's* "To be, or not to be—that is the question" (3.1.57-89).¹ After reading the sentence one wonders what exactly is the *question* that Hamlet is grappling with. As hundreds of scholarly works on the matter prove, there is no single answer to this. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor in their notes to the Arden edition of *Hamlet* give us three likely interpretations regarding the subject of Hamlet's question: one,

¹ All quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from The Oxford Edition edited by G.R. Hibbard, unless specified otherwise.

Hamlet considers whether life is worth living; two, whether he should commit suicide; or, three, whether he should kill Claudius and complete his revenge (284). I intend to explore whether all of these three interpretations or aspects of Hamlet's question are intimately linked with and originate in Hamlet's constant adherence to Christian religion, ethics and doctrine.

Stephen Greenblatt writes that the psychological in *Hamlet* is portrayed in theological terms (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 229). In this thesis, I submit that most of Hamlet's soliloquies construct an inner life for Hamlet that show him overwhelmed by his anxieties and fears whenever his contemplated course of action—whether it be committing suicide, pursuing private revenge or committing a premeditated murder—comes in direct conflict with his Christian characteristics. The play's focus is on how Hamlet works his way out of his many dilemmas without contravening his Christian beliefs. As seen through the perspective of Hamlet's character, his dilemmas are not logical or intellectual in nature; rather, they are deeply religious. From the play's beginning till its last scene, Hamlet is preoccupied with the eventual fate of his soul as determined through Christian doctrine.

I posit that, for the purposes of my thesis, the more important question about the "To be or not to be" soliloquy should not begin with what but *why*. Why is he asking this intricate question in the first place instead of acting? The simple answer to this, as Edward Wagenknecht notes, is that Hamlet's delay or procrastination is a dramatic necessity (189). If Hamlet kills Claudius then the play would end, or rather there would be no play. Apart from this obvious dramatic necessity, however, it is important to identify what personal and individual considerations confront Hamlet to make him ponder the question; in other words, to consider what characterological as well as what dramatic use Shakespeare makes of Hamlet's delay. The answer is given in the soliloquy itself: we are told that it is Hamlet's "conscience" that makes him a "coward" who is unable to act. If that is the case then it raises a further question: what exactly is the audience supposed to recognize as the thing that troubles Hamlet's

conscience? I intend to explore whether it is the case that Hamlet's characterization, and thereby the portrayal of his conscience, are predominantly shaped and affected by Christian religion, theology and the biblical text.

In the first chapter, I compare and contrast *Hamlet* with other contemporary plays in which the theme of revenge performs an important part and that are relevant to *Hamlet*'s plot: Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. First, I discuss the evolving ideas of revenge in Western culture from pre-Christian times. Then I track how Western literature has treated the theme of revenge. Finally, I bring the focus to the English revenge tragedies of the early modern period. I argue that most of the revenge tragedies of Shakespeare's time follow the basic Senecan structure. They all contain graphic descriptions of violence, murder and suicide. The protagonists show a strong inclination towards a bloodthirsty revenge and seek to destroy and kill the murderer of their loved ones. The mad and violent pursuit and completion of their revenge mission seems to be the main feature as well as attraction of these plays. *Hamlet* too is considered a revenge tragedy. However, a close look at the comparisons reveals that *Hamlet* radically departs from the structure and content of other revenge tragedies. The play's focus never seems to be on blood, gore and violence. Most of the violence and murders in *Hamlet* occur off stage and are narrated by other characters. *Hamlet*, on the other hand, mostly tracks its protagonist's tormented conscience over the issues of revenge as seen from his Christian beliefs. Accordingly, in this first chapter, I draw these comparisons between *Hamlet* and other revenge plays in order to elaborate on their differences and demonstrate the uniqueness of *Hamlet* as a "revenge play". Is it possible, I ask, whether *Hamlet*, due to its unique preoccupations, ends up subverting the structure of a typical revenge tragedy and creates a genre of its own?

In the second chapter I explore how—if *Hamlet* can indeed be considered unique among contemporary revenge plays—Shakespeare uses the play’s engagement with contemporary Christian religion and biblical text in order to create dramatic tension. I make the point that two major antecedents and sources of Hamlet’s story—by Danish writer Saxo Grammaticus and the sixteenth century French writer Belleforest—do not ascribe to Hamlet a Christianized conscience.² Both of these writers also do not mention Hamlet’s father’s ghost (Greenblatt *Hamlet in Purgatory* 205). I also discuss the ways in which Old Hamlet’s ghost is clearly distinguished as possessing Christian (Catholic) associations, as opposed to the ghosts from the classical and pagan hell in revenge tragedies based on Senecan models, for example, *The Spanish Tragedy*. I then consider the impact of these elements on the character of Hamlet and the play’s plot. Walter N. King opines that the play is about Hamlet’s search for meaning in an essentially Christian context. King states that towards the end of the play Hamlet’s words amount to “seemingly dogmatic assertions about the role of providence in human life...and a sorry decline into religious resignation” (ix). King states that Shakespeare had a firm idea about Hamlet’s journey that ends with him attaining a sense of “religious certainty”. By contrast, disputing *Hamlet’s* religious underpinning, D. Douglas Waters writes that “*Hamlet*, as I shall contend, is a secular tragedy, not a religious one” (208). He qualifies his assertion by citing Roland Mushat Frye’s “distinction between the use of theological doctrine to build the structure of tragic drama and a theological structure itself...” (208).

While I agree that *Hamlet* is not a religious (or didactic) tragedy in the contemporary tradition of mystery plays—which dealt directly with biblical stories and the Passion of Christ—I will argue that categorizing *Hamlet* as a secular tragedy is reductive. The word *secular* has modern connotations that do not hold true for a play written for the Elizabethan

² Although Hibbard does note Belleforest’s Christian objections and qualms about Amleth’s powers of divination; furthermore, “As a good Christian, he disapproves of private revenge...” (11).

culture, which was permeated by Christian religion, the reading and study of biblical and other devotional texts that were also regularly expounded on in churches for the benefit of the masses.³ Furthermore, I argue that Christian themes, theology and biblical allusions suffuse *Hamlet*'s text and plot, and more importantly, that they play an essential role in Hamlet's characterization.

As recent scholarship reveals, both the religious themes and remembrance of the dead play central roles in *Hamlet*, and are often ignored or downplayed by earlier scholars. For example, while acknowledging the merits of Michael Neill's *Issues of Death*, Thomas Rist mentions Ralph Houlbrooke's contention that Neill's work—while it illustrates the pervasiveness of mournful funeral in Renaissance drama—“says next to nothing of the substantial religious dimensions of mourning in the period...” (18). In my own thesis, I propose to bring the religious issues to the fore while discussing Hamlet's Christianized conscience and its significance in the play's plot and design. Beatrice Groves writes that “Shakespeare enriched his play through appropriating both the linguistic wealth of the English Bible and the theatrical splendour of liturgy, images and mystery plays from England's recent Catholic past” (vii). While acknowledging Shakespeare's Christian—especially Catholic—influences, Groves cautions against making assumptions about Shakespeare's own religious beliefs (4). Similarly, for the purposes of this thesis, any examination of what Shakespeare's personal religious beliefs or opinions were is unnecessary. However, it is important to underline how his contemporary society's preoccupation with religion shaped Shakespeare's mind, imagination

³ The *OED* defines secular as “not connected with religious or spiritual matters”. Additionally, in the word's etymology the dictionary notes that the word is derived from the Latin *saecularis* which meant “the world (as opposed to the Church).” Therefore, the word secular can potentially denote not just being “non-religious” but being opposed to religion. In this sense, I take this word to be reductive and problematic when used to categorize *Hamlet* as a secular tragedy.

and art. More specifically, in the second chapter, I intend to explore how those theological ideas and Christian doctrines also inform Shakespeare's representation of Hamlet's mind.

In the third and final chapter, I try to answer this question: if procrastination is Hamlet's way of choosing inaction over an action that might damn his soul, how then is he able to consummate his revenge mission? I propose that Hamlet does so by assuming the performance of a revenger. I also submit that this performance serves two purposes: first, it gives an impression that Hamlet is pursuing revenge as per his father's ghost's command. In this sense his performance is aimed at self-deception. However, Hamlet's self-deception only works to a certain degree. Time and again, he is tortured by the realization that through his performance he is only causing unnecessary delay and thereby lengthening his father's torment in purgatorial hell. The second facet of Hamlet's performance is that it allows him to procrastinate and think his way out of his dilemma. This strategy bears fruit eventually in the fifth and final act when Hamlet successfully incorporates the idea of Christian providence to his revenger's performance. In other words, Hamlet develops and accepts the idea that he is heaven's scourge and minister, that is, eventually he is merely a tool for carrying out divine justice by killing a monstrous sinner such as Claudius. In fact, as per Hamlet's incorporation of the concept of divine justice to his revenge mission, he can do no other but kill Claudius or else he will stand responsible before God for enabling Claudius to perpetuate his sins and crimes.

However, despite this new resolution to kill Claudius in the final act, Hamlet still does not believe in committing a premeditated murder that will certainly damn his soul. In order to get around this problem, Hamlet adds an element of improvisation to his revenger's performance which means that he will operate within God's will by waiting for divine cues and instructions before taking action. The final result is that Hamlet manages to kill Claudius with a clear conscience. Also, as I detail in the second chapter, Shakespeare appropriates a whole range of popular Christian beliefs for dramatic expedience. The character of Hamlet holds on

to syncretic Christian beliefs and doctrines prevalent at the time. The focus of this thesis is not what theological points—if any at all—Shakespeare is trying to make through *Hamlet*, but how he uses the contemporary religious culture and prevalent beliefs to engage his audience's interest.

Finally, in line with the play's thematic preoccupations, Shakespeare also makes it amply clear to his audience at the end that Hamlet's soul will not go to perdition. In fact, as I will discuss, throughout the play the question of Hamlet's soul's eventual fate looms large. Hamlet's very first soliloquy in which he rejects suicide is ultimately related to the eventual fate of his soul as he interprets exclusively through the Christian canon that forbids self-slaughter. As noted in the third chapter, the play cannot end without settling the issue of Hamlet's soul after his death. Hence, this thesis investigates and foregrounds the pervasive Christian schemata that play an integral role in the plotting of *Hamlet* as well as in the characterization of its titular character.

Chapter 1: Incorporation of Christian Elements in *Hamlet* and its Place among Contemporary Revenge Tragedies

The Bible, Christian Doctrine and Shakespeare's 'Revenge' Play *Hamlet*

In this chapter I aim to track the evolving notions of revenge in European and English societies from the pre-Christian era to the Christian times during which *Hamlet* was composed and performed. Additionally, I will discuss how the theme of revenge has been treated in the Western literature—classical as well as early modern. In the latter part of this chapter, I will compare and contrast *Hamlet* with other contemporary revenge tragedies in order to explore *Hamlet*'s unique engagement with the theme of revenge. I will attempt to establish in this chapter whether Shakespeare's inclusion of Christian elements in *Hamlet* and its titular character's religious dilemmas set it apart from other contemporary revenge tragedies. The succeeding chapters of this thesis will further explore *Hamlet*'s engagement with the Bible and Christian doctrine and how they make *Hamlet* unique among other revenge plays.

Steven Marx underlines the unparalleled influence of two books in the English language, the King James version of the Bible and the collected works of Shakespeare (Folio), first published in 1623 (1-2). Marx also sees significantly close connections between these two hugely influential books. The King James Bible did not appear until 1611. So, it is unlikely that Shakespeare read or used this Bible's text while he composed his plays. Yet, the King James Version owed a great deal to many earlier English language versions of the Bible. Thomas Rist notes that Shakespeare made extensive use of English language Bible versions available during the time he was writing, especially The Geneva Bible (22-23). Marx too notes the Geneva Bible's influence on Shakespeare's works (4). Hamlin writes how scholarly

research has focused on certain words and phrases used by Shakespeare in his biblical allusions that only match the Geneva Bible (10). In the second scene of the fourth act when Othello berates Desdemona because of her supposed adultery, Shakespeare has him allude to Proverbs 5:15 with the phrase “a cistern for foul toads” (10). Hamlin observes that the Geneva Bible’s marginal note makes it clear that this particular Proverb is about an adulterous wife; therefore, jealous and suspicious Othello’s allusion to it becomes apt. Furthermore, “it is to the Geneva translation that Shakespeare alludes, since it is the only translation to include the fountain and cistern; the Bishop’s Bible has ‘well’ in both places” (10). Therefore, Hamlin states that the biblical allusions in Shakespeare’s plays “are frequent, deliberate, and significant” (1).

While acknowledging the biblical influences on Shakespeare’s works, Roland Mushat Frye writes that Shakespeare’s works were neither didactic nor overtly religious like the works of Milton or John Bunyan, for example (13). Russ McDonald, while emphasizing that the Bible was the most important book Shakespeare knew, adds that “it did not serve as major source for any of his plays” (101). Still, many Shakespearean characters recall Old and New Testament stories and “Christian doctrine is sometimes invoked as a context for interpreting dramatic action...” (109). I will argue that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare makes significant use of the Bible and Christian doctrine for dramatic purposes. I will attempt to show how Hamlet has been given a particularly Christian disposition and how his constant dependence on the biblical text and Christian doctrine is an indispensable part of the play’s plot and action.

The Renaissance saw a close interaction between Biblical and classical narratives. The Bible “became an object of humanistic scholarship” (Marx 5). Renaissance scholars such as Lorenzo Valla and Desiderius Erasmus “unearthed, compared, edited, and published ancient biblical as well as classical manuscripts” (5). Della Mirandola and Marcello Ficino tried to trace a common source in the narratives of Homer, Plato and Moses “that would provide a key to universal symbolism” (5-6). Renaissance artists and painters such as Michelangelo,

Caravaggio and Rubens “pictured Old and New Testament subjects no differently from those in Greek mythology...” (6). Similarly, Marx notes the Bible’s influence on Shakespeare’s works: “Any imagination being formed in the sixteenth—and seventeenth—century England would have been saturated with what was the most powerful cultural influence of its time” (3). Marx suggests that Shakespeare’s characters like Prospero in *The Tempest*, King Henry V and Duke Vincentio of *Measure for Measure* have God-like attributes (10-11). Harold Fisch notes that it is fairly common in modern criticism to liken Lear—whose story is set in pre-Christian Britain—to a Job-figure (123). Despite his similarities with the biblical Job, Lear “dies in fulfillment of the laws of tragedy and there is a hint also, as many critics have noted, of a sacrificial death, a kind of crucifixion...” (125). R.A. Foakes states that Shakespeare was preoccupied with some of the biblical themes from the beginning of his career till the end. For example, the Genesis account of Abel and Cain crops up in various Shakespeare plays: “Shakespeare’s early history plays begin and end with allusions to their story” (52).

Similarly, in *Hamlet*, in a rare confession to God, Claudius at one stage compares himself to Cain, the murderer who was cursed by God for killing his brother Abel: “O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven./ It has the primal eldest curse upon’t—/ A brother’s murder” (3.3.37-8). These lines also affirm *Hamlet*’s Christian setting and thorough engagement with biblical narratives. Even the villainous character of Claudius can suffer the pangs of guilt when he reflects on a biblical account. In fact, Claudius playfully manages to insert a reference to the Abel and Cain story even at the beginning of the play when he dissuades Hamlet from prolonged mourning and mentions “the first corpse” (1.2.105). As Hibbard observes, at this stage we do not know yet that Claudius “himself has committed Cain’s crime...” (44). Furthermore, as this chapter will focus, there is a lot to be said about *Hamlet*’s status as a revenge play as well as its engagement with the Christian and biblical ideas of revenge during Shakespeare’s times.

Having acknowledged Shakespeare's thorough engagement with Christian theology and doctrines, Ronald Mushat Frye adds a caveat: "Always, however, the theology he knew and used is contributory to the drama, and not vice-versa" (13). Marx takes an opposite stance and opines that Shakespeare's commentaries on the biblical text can be called midrashes. As per Marx's definition, "Generally, midrash refers to a technique of interpretation that expands and elaborates the biblical narrative" (15). Marx suggests that Shakespeare's *King Lear* can be read as a midrashic elaboration of the book of Job (15). Thus, Frye and Marx represent two extreme poles as to Shakespeare's engagement with Christian doctrine. While I find some justification in both claims, I do not agree that the picture is that simplistic. First, although I agree with Frye that Shakespeare was not adding to the existing theology, yet, it is safe to conclude that Shakespeare's often provocative inclusion of Christian doctrine—for example, commentaries of various characters in *Hamlet* on the eventual fate of Ophelia's soul—proactively engaged with and thereby expanded on contemporary doctrinal debates on a contentious issue. Second, I do not agree with Marx's statement that Shakespeare deliberately engaged in acts of biblical exegesis through his plays.

For the purposes of this thesis, I submit that while it is not Shakespeare's intention to turn his plays into vehicles of moral, ethical or theological instruction, he often incorporates contemporary popular religious beliefs for his dramatic purposes. But since the Bible and Christian doctrine were so intricately woven within the social, cultural and legal fabric of the Elizabethan society, Shakespeare's inclusion of Christian elements for dramatic expedience cannot help becoming thought-provoking commentaries on contemporary society and religious doctrine. For example, *Measure for Measure* deeply engages with the biblical text and Christian doctrine over issues of premarital sex, sexual promiscuity, marriage, ideas of "sin", drunkenness, prostitution, capital punishment, legalism, forgiveness and so on. Yet, as a work of art *Measure for Measure* does not put forward a dogmatic didacticism that takes certain

doctrinal or moral positions to the exclusion of others as many characters in the play—who are contrasted with the character of Duke—do. Instead, the play sheds light on and is sympathetic to the human condition: sexual promiscuity is a human possibility and the “crime” of prostitution is not necessarily caused by promiscuous character but rather by serious deprivation and poverty engendered by socioeconomic marginalization. Yet, eventually, *Measure for Measure* takes a positive view of monogamy and marriage; after all, the play ends with the joyous announcement of three marriages by Duke who serves as the conscience of the play. The play manages to be both thought-provoking and entertaining by using serious drama as well as bawdy, dark humour while it engages with the Bible and Christian doctrine. The focus of this thesis is how Shakespeare utilizes the Bible and the contemporary Christian doctrine for dramatic expedience in *Hamlet*. In this particular chapter I will focus on the theme of revenge.

Of course, in many of his works Shakespeare depicts non-Christian or pagan societies, characters and their beliefs. As Frye points out, *King Lear* is set in a pre-Christian society and therefore the characters do not make direct references to Christianity (168). Still, as noted earlier, many other critics read strong biblical themes and narratives into *King Lear*. In *Julius Caesar* the Christian God or Trinity is replaced by references to pagan gods (Frye168). Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus* “when Tamora pleads with Titus to imitate the gods by being merciful, she is not exceeding the limit of pagan wisdom...” (169). In these plays, non-Christians or pagans too display good sense, sound ethics, kindness and other virtues (169-70). In *Hamlet*, by contrast, as this thesis will argue, Shakespeare has chosen to make use of specifically Christian themes, and to present a hero with uniquely Christian dilemmas and characteristics. As Frye writes: “In the development of Hamlet’s character, suffering seems to have eventuated in a steady assurance of God’s Providence” (231). Furthermore, Frye notes, Hamlet’s is “an unmistakably Christian providence” (231).

The contrast between Hamlet and other characters in the play only underscores Hamlet's consistent fidelity to Christian doctrine—at least in the letter if not always in the spirit. Many other characters in *Hamlet* make references to God or heaven and suffer feelings of guilt, yet their thoughts and actions are not overridden by Christian doctrines, unlike Hamlet. Gertrude carries guilt about her “o'erhasty marriage”—made most stark during the closet scene after Hamlet's merciless condemnation—but at the same time she continues in her role as Claudius's wife; Claudius suffers the “heavy burden” of guilt after murdering his brother but he is too hardened a sinner to repent with a true heart. Similarly, Laertes, in a vengeful state after learning about his father's murder begins to rage against God, heaven, church and their virtuous teachings. In contrast to Laertes, Hamlet too loves his father dearly and honours him; however, due to his belief in Christian edicts against private revenge, Hamlet seems incapable of Laertes's vengeful bloodlust. Hamlet seeks his revenge in line with his Christian worldview, not by rebelling against it. As Frye writes, of all the characters in the play, it is Hamlet who “seems most aware of the full range of Christian doctrine” (234). However, it is not just Hamlet's awareness but his consistent fidelity to Christian doctrine—especially regarding the issues of suicide, violence, murder and revenge—that sets him apart.

Yet, despite Hamlet's thoroughly Christian worldview, *Hamlet* is not a didactic play. Shakespeare uses Christianity in Hamlet's characterization “in the same general way that he used Stoicism in his characterization of Brutus [in *Julius Caesar*]”, that is, without any intention of indoctrinating his audience (Frye 234). Still, I would argue that in *Hamlet* the titular character's religious beliefs play a significant role in the plot. I explore in this chapter, whether it is possible that under the guise of a revenge play, Shakespeare manages to shift the entire focus away from revenge-theme to Hamlet's tormented conscience. In order to answer this question it is important to discuss the theme of revenge in Western literature and then compare

Shakespeare's use of revenge genre with a protagonist who has rather dogmatic beliefs in the Christian doctrine.

In the next section, I will briefly discuss the ideas of revenge in pre-Christian and Christian societies of Europe and England as the complicated status of revenge in contemporary England illuminates the conflict taking place within Hamlet's character's mind as well as contemporary audience's.

Pre-Christian and Christian Ideas of Revenge

Teresa Godwin Phelps gives a succinct account of the evolving ideas of revenge in human societies. In early societies taking revenge was “a sacred duty, a right, and a responsibility” that bound both an individual as well as family (12). This gave rise to the idea of blood feuds (13). But in most societies there was an eventual shift from “private dutiful and honorable revenge to dispassionate state revenge...” (13). Phelps notes an evolving pattern in the idea of revenge moving from private and feudal revenge to the universal idea of “pollution doctrine” that puts the onus or duty of taking revenge on the larger society. From this notion developed the idea of revenge as justice meted out by the state. Much before the Middle Eastern Judaic laws emerged and became popularized through the Bible, “The ancient Babylonian laws (the code of Hammurabi)...demonstrate that blood feuds become more and more limited as central government grew stronger” (14). Thus, private revenge's bloody and inordinate chaos started to give way to organized public justice. In essence, the Christian rejection of private revenge—as recorded in the New Testament—echoes the spirit of pollution doctrine (14).⁴ As per the

⁴ Jesus's own words in Matthew 5:39 seem to go beyond the pollution doctrine since they seem to negate and reject all forms of revengeful behaviour, public or private: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Similarly,

New Testament ethical system, God is considered as the final judge over all the injustices and crimes.

Both the Old and New Testament are replete with injunctions about revenge and murder that often seem to contradict each other. Therefore, it can be problematic to conclude with certainty, a single biblical pronouncement on the issue of revenge. Romans 12:19 is often cited as an injunction against private revenge: “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord”.⁵ Paul is referring to Deuteronomy 32:35 that begins thus: “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense...” Even though Paul quotes Deuteronomy to dissuade Christians from seeking private revenge, it also becomes clear from those verses that God’s own nature is not necessarily of forgiveness as the person of Jesus Christ in the Christian Trinity personifies. Rather, as Kerrigan writes, there is a strong indication that “God’s own mode of punishment is vengeful” (23). The Old Testament stresses God’s retributive justice in other places: almost all of Psalm 94 makes the similar point: “O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth; render a reward to the proud” (94:1-2). A few verses later this Psalm repeats the same theme, “And he shall bring upon them their own iniquity, and shall cut them off in their own wickedness: yea, the Lord our God shall cut them off” (94:23).

It could be concluded that these Old Testament sections support God’s retributive justice and at the same time forbid private revenge. However, equally convincing are the Old

Jesus, as depicted in the New Testament, does not seem to endorse societal or state sponsored retributory justice. In this context, Hamlet’s inability to use violence against Claudius or Gertrude could be attributed to his following the Christian example and injunction, until he emphasizes other form of religious rationalization towards the end of the play.

⁵ In this thesis, all quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James Version unless noted otherwise.

Testament verses that strongly suggest justification for private revenge or *lex talionis*. For example, Numbers 35:19 records this injunction: “The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him.” Thus, as per these biblical verses, a person who has wronged, hurt or murdered in cold-blood certainly deserves revenge or death at the hands of the wronged party or person. Additionally, Numbers 35:22-25 clearly makes a distinction between a cold-blooded murder and an inadvertent killing or manslaughter, and urges the civilized society to afford protection from an angry revenger.⁶ Deuteronomy chapter 19 echoes similar commands that urge protection for an inadvertent killer from a bloodthirsty revenge.

Even though these contradictory Old Testament verses—regarding God’s vengeance in Deuteronomy and support of *lex talionis* in Numbers—offer rather confusing views about private revenge, still, both of these injunctions recognize that revenge can be just, and are concerned to distinguish between justified and unjustified revenge. As I will discuss in later chapters, this idea of justified versus unjustified revenge plays a significant role in Hamlet’s endless rationalizations. First, he wants to be certain that the Ghost’s testimony can be corroborated so that his revenge is just. However, once it is corroborated, Hamlet is torn apart between the biblical injunctions against private revenge and, prompted by the principle of *lex talionis*, the cold-blooded murder that he now must commit. In effect, Hamlet’s confusions correspond with the intricate—or rather muddled—web of biblical text on these issues.

Hamlet’s engagement with the biblical injunctions about revenge has other important strands. Notably, according to some parts of the biblical text, revenge can also be justified in order to retaliate for wrongs other than murder, violence or bodily harm. For example, in the

⁶ In this context, almost all of violence and murders committed by Hamlet—against Polonius, Laertes, and even Claudius—come across as spur of the moment manslaughters that occur in self-defence. Thereby, they do not carry the punishment of eternal damnation as a premeditated and unjust murder would.

context of revenge, Proverbs 6:32-35 makes a special mention of the transgression of adultery. A cuckolded husband is considered within his rights to take revenge on the adulterer. Moreover, these sections of Proverbs stress that the cuckolded man absolutely cannot forgive or compromise with the other man who dishonors him by having sexual relations with his wife: “For jealousy is the rage of a man: therefore he will not spare in the day of the vengeance. He will not regard any ransom: neither will he rest content, though thou givest many gifts” (Proverbs 6:34-35). In the light of these biblical verses, Hamlet and the Ghost’s continued emphasis on Gertrude and Claudius’s “adultery” only underlines one more potent biblical reason—or rather an unavoidable duty or obligation as far as Hamlet is concerned—for taking revenge.

Given the significance of this relationship between ideas of revenge and justice in the Bible, it is not surprising that revenge has featured so prominently in drama and other literature. Additionally, of course, the treatment of the theme of revenge in Western thought and literature, including Shakespeare, has been heavily influenced also by sources outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition, including the revenge plays of classical dramatists Aeschylus and Seneca. In what follows, I will track and establish the evolution of the revenge theme in Western literature, how it influenced early modern English literature and what contrast can be found between *Hamlet* and other contemporary revenge plays.

Precursors and Models of Early Modern Revenge Tragedies and *Hamlet*

“The term ‘revenge tragedy’ was given currency by A.H. Thornkdike in about 1900” when he categorized plays written by Shakespeare and his contemporaries (John Kerrigan viii). The motif of revenge offers writers rich and compelling narratives that delve into issues of violence, volatile emotions and situations and ethical debates. Beginning with ancient Greek literature,

the theme of revenge has preoccupied European literature for nearly three thousand years. Kerrigan notes that “writers as ideologically various as they are historically disparate...have explored the same subject with similar passion, complexity, and concern” (3). “The revenge plays of the English Renaissance mark neither the beginning nor the end of a tradition. Their forbears are Greek and Latin tragedies, which derive their plots from still more ancient legends” (Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* ix). Linda Woodbridge calls revenge theme “a primitive, sub-literary motif” (3). Revenge plays enjoyed a wild popularity during the English Renaissance and were often printed many more times than other plays (4).

In 1931, Lily B. Campbell in her influential essay about revenge motif in Elizabethan drama asserted that “there was a persistent condemnation of revenge in the ethical teaching of Shakespeare’s England” that was based on the New Testament (Campbell qtd. in Akiko Sano 3). Conversely, Maus states that despite the Christian and classical moral codes prevalent in the Renaissance that prescribed patience and non-aggression, “a man’s ‘honour’ in early modern England required him to retaliate swiftly for slights to himself, and to refuse to tolerate the abuse of his kin or dependents” (*Four Revenge Tragedies* x). Woodbridge suggests that the popularity of revenge plays can be explained by the contemporary people’s interest in fairness and justice in a society ruled by corrupt and dysfunctional authorities. “Unfairness was like the weather: everyone talked about it. But revenge plays did something about it” (6). In the corrupt English society the guilt of the rich went unpunished while the poor paid harsh penalties, which meant that the masses held deep resentment towards the high authorities and the justice system (12). Many contemporary revenge tragedies such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* mirror this contemporary reality. Both Hieronimo and Titus fail to get justice from the prejudiced and corrupt authorities. Consequently, they both decide to take law into their own hands and punish the guilty.

Hamlet, however, cannot be easily put into such a category. It focuses more on Hamlet's personal religious and ethical quandaries than issues of justice and fairness under Danish monarchy. Hamlet himself is a prince who often exalts monarchy under his father's reign. This is how Hamlet in his soliloquy compares his just and virtuous father to Claudius: "So excellent a king, that was to this/ Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother..." (1.2.139-40). In summation, Hamlet's need for revenge is mostly generated by the honour code of revenge or *lex talionis*. But, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapters, towards the end of the play, Hamlet moves away from the idea of private revenge or honour code and replaces it with the idea of divine justice as seen from his biblical and Christian worldview.

Kerrigan writes that "While the retributive violence can be inflicted under many names, the principle itself has proved remarkably stable and persistent" (21). *Lex talionis* "has been foundational in Western thought and social practice" (22). The Latin phrase can be translated as "law of repayment in kind". It was held in classical Athens that the evil doer should suffer harm. "Reflecting these assumptions, Aristotle says that 'To take vengeance on one's enemies is nobler than to come to terms with them; for to retaliate is just (*dikaion*), and that which is just is noble'" (22). Furthermore, it was widely believed that anger and revenge have a close association. Aristotle defined anger as an intense longing for revenge for an underserved slight (113). However, as Kerrigan points out, in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the origins of Orestes's revenge are complex in that his revenge is not entirely willed by him. It originates in and is designed by external forces beyond Orestes's control. Furthermore, Orestes's revenge does not equate to the style of revenge that entails the unleashing of inordinate violence and bloodshed by a revenger. Kerrigan cites *The Spanish Tragedy* as one of the first examples in English literature depicting a revenge story based on inordinate payback and much bloodshed (21).

Kerrigan points out that the Old Testament often supports *lex talionis*, for example: "'The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him'

(Numbers 35:19)” (22). In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament teachings, however, are markedly opposed to revenge and stress the need for Christian patience, stoicism and even suffering, since justice will eventually be restored by God. Nevertheless, the Old Testament’s pro-revenge rhetoric was often used to justify private or feudal revenge and consequently, “Theories of full retribution and the practice of private revenge went together in Christian Europe...until the eighteenth century” (23).

Even so, the strong anti-revenge motif of the New Testament could hardly be lost on a sincere, highly idealistic Christian believer and Bible reader like the character of Prince Hamlet. As I will discuss in more detail in the second chapter, Shakespeare is careful about mentioning at the beginning of the play that Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg University. Suzanne H. Stein makes some curious observations about Shakespeare’s mention of Wittenberg and finds it odd that Shakespeare chooses to make Hamlet—a thirty year old man—still a student at Wittenberg (55). Indeed, Shakespeare “associates the totality of Hamlet’s earlier life experience with the University of Wittenberg” (55). In this way Shakespeare clearly establishes for his audience that Hamlet is well-versed in the study of the Bible as well as in Christian doctrine and theology. Like most European universities in their early years, Wittenberg was a place of theological debates and ideas, and included a curriculum based heavily on contemporary Christian theology and doctrine. Once Hamlet’s theological and doctrinal training and disposition is established, it follows that Hamlet painstakingly assesses the issues of suicide, murder and revenge through the lens of Christian theology and doctrine.

Despite *Hamlet*’s significant Christian setting and revenger-protagonist, it borrows some key plot devices from classical revenge plays. Further, I will note some of those similarities. Kerrigan discusses the theme of revenge in Aeschylus’s *The Libation Bearers*—composed at least four hundred years before the advent of Christianity and before the New Testament was written. Orestes kills Clytemnestra to avenge his father Agamemnon’s death. However, the

play is far more nuanced than just telling us about a son carrying out retributive justice to avenge his father's death. "It was not through his own virtuosity, Orestes says, but with the help of 'right', *dike*, that he punished his mother" (20). Helene P. Foley writes that Orestes avenges his father's death "at the behest of the god Apollo" (vii). In other words, Orestes becomes an agent of *dike* and Apollo. Thus, Orestes's "choice brings out consequences which were not part of his intention" (Kerrigan 20). Ultimately, Orestes, as well as the audience, acquire knowledge "which is something like recognition" (20). In this chapter, I attempt to show that Hamlet's own revenge eventuates on similar principles—albeit, within a predominantly Christian context—when towards the end of the play indecisive Hamlet begins to consider himself as an agent of God. Hamlet's complete reliance on God's providence is foreshadowed when soon after killing Polonius he calls himself heaven's "scourge and minister" (3.4.164). As Fredson Bowers writes: "From the Elizabethan point of view, divine providence works out the catastrophe with justice" (749). Consequently, Hamlet believes that the path of retributive justice he is on is ordained by heaven. As I discuss in the third chapter, it is the theological position that Hamlet singularly comes to accept by the fifth act. It is crucial for Hamlet to arrive at this theological rationalization—or Christian resignation—in order to counter, if not completely overcome, the New Testament injunctions against private revenge and murder. Yet, unlike other contemporary revenge tragedies, Hamlet remains averse to the idea of inordinate violence and bloodshed and rather waits for his cues to act out the just revenge on God's behalf.

Due to its focus on the protagonist's predicament, *Hamlet* stands unique among other contemporary revenge tragedies. Most early modern revenge plays were heavily influenced by Seneca. Peter Mercer suggests that Seneca's *Thyestes* provided the classical structure for many early modern revenge plays. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, faithfully adopts this structure (Mercer 27). This Senecan structure of revenge tragedy has three parts.

The first part records the appearance of the ghost and a call for revenge. The second part deals with the making of the revenger. The third part comprises the acting of revenge and often contains high degree of violence, bloodshed and murders. In *Thyestes* the second part of this structure records the transformation of “Atrous from frustrated rage to horrible intention” (Mercer 27). On the surface, *Hamlet* appears to follow this structure, especially as it was heavily influenced by *The Spanish Tragedy*. However, what *Hamlet* actually ends up doing is to first adopt and then subvert this structure. *Hamlet* faithfully follows the first part, where the appearance of the Ghost reveals the crime and Hamlet is called upon to take revenge on Claudius. In the second part, however, *Hamlet* radically departs from the generic structure, as it is precisely the making of the furious, cruel, cunning and bloodthirsty revenger that is never achieved in the character of Hamlet. As for the last part, *Hamlet’s* revenge plot again subverts the structure when after confirming Claudius’s guilt even as Hamlet gets a chance to kill him, he invents an excuse for inaction. Eventually, Claudius is killed by Hamlet but almost without his intending to do so. Indeed, the final killing of Claudius “occurs as one of the ‘casual slaughters’ Horatio reports at the end, not as a deliberate act of revenge” (Foakes 107).

I will attempt to show that this subversion of Senecan revenge structure occurs in *Hamlet* because of Shakespeare’s introduction of a hero whose mode of thinking operates primarily within a Christian ethical, theological and doctrinal context. Even the outraged Ghost fails to show the bloodthirsty yearning for revenge. “In the Ghost’s long narrative the idea of revenge becomes diluted, and almost lost” when it urges Hamlet to leave his mother to her conscience and heaven (121). Foakes calls this “the Ghost’s Christian qualification of his Senecan call for revenge” (120). Additionally, the Ghost’s departing words, in effect, are not a call for revenge but remembrance: “Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me” (1.5.91). Similarly, Kerrigan underlines that after the Ghost has vanished, “Hamlet never promises to revenge, only to remember” (126). It appears that the Ghost too is conflicted as to what an act of revenge must

entail. Even though the Ghost calls his own murder as “most foul, strange, and unnatural” he seems incapable of spelling out the need for murdering Claudius in his call for revenge. Again, this distinction sets *Hamlet* apart from contemporary revenge tragedies. Thus, after a lot of indignant talk about Claudius and Gertrude, both the Ghost and Hamlet move away from spelling out revenge and a premeditated murder even in the first act of the play.

Furthermore, Foakes thinks that Hamlet’s use of the word “commandment” to refer to his father’s call for revenge has potential for confusion in Hamlet’s own mind. After the Ghost has departed, Hamlet speaks: “And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain...” (1.5.102-3). Hamlet promises the Ghost that he will wipe all other value systems and thoughts from the “table of my memory” to give a singular attention to the Ghost’s command. But, as Foakes notes, the word “commandment” corresponded to a specific biblical meaning in the minds of the Elizabethan audience (121). It reminded them of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God, inscribed on a stone tablet. In the biblical book of *Exodus*, the sixth of the Ten Commandments specifically forbids killing. Moreover, the Ten Commandments “were by law inscribed or hung on the walls of parish churches in England” (121). Thus, the word commandment, with its conflicted meaning, will continue to torment Hamlet’s mind. For example, when the Ghost appears before Hamlet for the last time, Hamlet is full of guilt and fear for letting down the Ghost with his inability to follow the “dread command” (3.4.101). In the expository scene (1.5), the Ghost and Hamlet not only express their outrage over the foul murder, but they also zealously condemn Claudius and Gertrude’s lust, adultery (also forbidden by one of the Ten Commandments) and incest (condemned, forbidden and criminalized by many laws in the book of *Leviticus*) from a position that clearly reflects Christian moralizing. But although the Christian morality allows Hamlet and the Ghost to verbally condemn and curse Claudius, it does not permit them to kill him. Nowhere in the expository scene does Hamlet or the Ghost actually talk about killing Claudius. Ironically, the

very worldview that provokes furious indignation in the Ghost and Hamlet also denies them the satisfaction of a bloody and violent Senecan revenge. In this crucial expository scene the Christian codification in the language of the Ghost as well as Hamlet begins to counter the making of bloodthirsty revenger, thereby, subverting the structure of a generic revenge tragedy.

John Casey writes that Western society has been heavily influenced by two dominant worldviews: the classical and the Christian. Generally, though not always, these worldviews contradict each other. For example, the ethics of Aristotle and those of the New Testament can often clash (ix). Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* “made an heroic effort to reconcile” these conflicting set of ethics (ix). Also, Shakespeare in his comedies often blended the pagan and Christian values so seamlessly as to remove any appearance of conflict (ix). In *Hamlet*, however, the clash between these disparate sources of ethics—especially concerning the issues of suicide, private revenge and murder—forms an important feature of the plot. Hamlet is a student at the Wittenberg University: apart from his thorough understanding of the Christian theology and doctrine, Hamlet’s sound “training in the classics is reflected in his language” (Foakes 122). Casey writes that Western society “admires qualities derived from the ancient Greeks and Romans”, they are the “irascible” virtues of “pride and shame, a sense of the noble, certain valuing of pride, courage and ambition” (Casey qtd. in Foakes 121). On the other hand, Western society adheres to certain Christian values—humility, contentment, piety, meekness, compassion—that often run counter to the “irascible” pagan values. As opposed to Casey’s opinion—that while writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was himself confused about these two dominant Western worldviews—Foakes writes that Shakespeare only used the contradictions “to establish the character and dilemma of his protagonist” (122). As I maintain throughout this thesis, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare quite strategically introduces, embeds and highlights the Christian themes—as well as Christian characteristics of Hamlet—that would run counter to the vengeful Senecan and pagan revenge theme. By such Christian codification at the beginning

of the play Shakespeare not only highlights the conflicted intentions of the Ghost and Hamlet, but also forces his audience to identify with the conflict, that will loom large in the rest of the play.

Unlike any other revenge tragedy, *Hamlet's* plot largely consists of not how the protagonist pursues revenge, but rather how he *delays* and shirks from the duty to revenge on one pretext or another. Additionally, those pretexts are almost always based on Hamlet's Christian beliefs. Kerrigan gives a succinct gist of *Hamlet's* plot: "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*... revolves around the question, what might action be? Everybody in the play seems to have a different answer, whether it is the prince, the first gravedigger...or those men who make acting their profession..." (4). However, what Kerrigan omits to mention is that prince Hamlet does not have an answer as to what action might be. Indeed, it is Hamlet's tortuous confusion and indecision that dominates the play's plotline till the end. As I will argue in more detail in the second chapter, Hamlet's indecision is deeply rooted in the Christian beliefs and compunctions, and in the Christian form of conscience that Shakespeare's characterization ascribes to him.

In order to highlight *Hamlet's* uniqueness among contemporary revenge plays, the next section will compare Hamlet's character and behavior with that of the main protagonists from William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy*. All of these are self-evidently revenge plays, with the exception of *Julius Caesar*, which nonetheless contains an important subplot and rhetoric of pagan revenge and thus provides an interesting contrast to Hamlet's revenge that operates within a Christian worldview. Marc Antony, as exhibited in his famous soliloquy, due to his professed love and loyalty towards Caesar, is obligated to avenge his murder in accordance with the principle of *lex talionis*. Also, Marc Antony's public rhetoric expertly invokes the principle of *lex talionis* in order to incite the masses against Caesar's murderers. Apart from the revenge theme, *Julius Caesar* offers notable comparisons between Hamlet's

Christian character and that of Brutus the pagan Stoic. By contrasting these plays with *Hamlet*, I aim to explore how *Hamlet* engages with or departs from the theme of revenge. Additionally, I will try to demonstrate whether the play's subject of revenge and the titular character operate predominantly—from the play's beginning to its end—within Christian contexts that repeatedly draw on the Bible, and on the contemporary Church doctrines and religious beliefs.

Hamlet and Other Revenge Tragedy Characters Concerning Issues of Private Revenge and Suicide

In this section I will compare the character of Hamlet with other characters from *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* as well as *Hamlet*. Unlike Hamlet, these characters are mostly unaffected by Christian considerations as they seek revenge or when they consider suicide. While analyzing these characters I will also discuss the theme of suicide because it too illuminates *Hamlet's* uniquely Christian engagement with the issue when compared to other revenge tragedies. As Harold Fisch writes, “It sometimes seems in fact that the fundamental issue in *Hamlet* is suicide, not revenge. It is in relation to suicide that the real *agon* is played out” (97).

The indecision or Christian compunction that plagues Hamlet rarely or never bothers the characters of other revenge tragedies—Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar*, Titus in *Titus Andronicus*, Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* or Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*—once they have decided to take revenge. More remarkably, in *Hamlet* itself, two other sons—young Fortinbras and Laertes—who seek revenge for their father's murder are hardly bothered by any Christian or biblical considerations. In fact, Laertes, in a fit of rage, utters vengeful blasphemous rhetoric that transgresses and defies Christian beliefs. Indeed, it is precisely these

transgressions against the Christian precepts that Hamlet is incapable of committing in order to turn into a bloodthirsty revenger.

A comparison between Hamlet and Vindice from *The Revenger's Tragedy* brings out the striking contrast between Hamlet's Christian compunctions and Vindice's revengeful blood-lust. Mercer suggests that the constant moralizing by Hamlet and the Ghost about the sexual sins and Vindice's moralizing on the lust and corruption in his society are part of the longstanding literary tradition of satire on the vices and follies of the world (3).⁷ In this respect, both plays start out on similar grounds. *Hamlet*, according to Mercer, combines two different modes—"the dramatic mode of revenge tragedy and the rhetorical satire and complaint" (3). In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, however, these two modes "do not so much converge as collide..." (3). Vindice's roles of revenger and moral satirist mingle with such "ferocity" that he is only driven to bloodthirsty revenge (3). On the other hand, in the character of Hamlet, the role of the satirist and moralist takes over and makes it impossible for him to act out his revenge. Along with the Ghost he rails against real or supposed sexual sins of Claudius, Gertrude and Ophelia, but at the same time he cannot, unlike Vindice, use violence. Because of Shakespeare's careful Christian codification of Hamlet's character, it is apparent that he shuns violence due to his adherence to Christian doctrine and canon. As opposed to Hamlet's fidelity to the Christian injunctions, Vindice the moralist opts for "Amoral self-assertion" that "replaces allegiance to a divine power: the only sanction Vindice respects is his own" (Maus *Four Revenge Tragedies* xiii). But Hamlet can only pursue his revenge within a strictly Christian framework that in effect forces him to shun—or at least put off—the pursuit of private revenge, and the premeditated murder it requires.

⁷ In this context, Ophelia's comical description of hypocritical pastors—who preach "steep and thorny way to heaven" to others while they themselves live like "puffed and reckless" libertines and tread "the primrose path of dalliance"—is significant (1.3.174).

Eileen Jorge Allman observes that despite the angry rants against Ophelia and Gertrude, Hamlet “stops short of the Jacobean revenger’s gratuitous violence against women...” (62). Before going to Gertrude’s bedchamber to moralize, Hamlet’s cautionary words give us an important insight into his Christian mode of thought as well as action: “Let me be cruel, not unnatural./ I will speak daggers to her, but use none” (3.2.378-9). Hamlet draws a line at being cruel, but he will not be a killer. Frye sees Hamlet’s “cruelty” in accordance with “the Christian practice of confession and reform...” (154). Hamlet believes that he has a duty to censure and correct Gertrude. “I must be cruel only to be kind,” Hamlet says to Gertrude (3.4.166). His censure of Gertrude very much sounds like a righteous Christian minister correcting a stray and hell-bound believer: “Confess yourself to heaven;/ repent what’s past; avoid what is to come...” (3.4.145-6). A little further Hamlet urges Gertrude: “O, throw away the worser part of it,/ And live the purer with the other half” (3.4.153-4). These words of Hamlet strongly echo Jesus’s words in Matthew 5:29-30:

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Clearly then, Hamlet the revenger who frequently quotes from the Bible, particularly the New Testament, can hardly ignore Jesus’s words against private revenge and violence. It is due to his Christian characteristics that Hamlet cannot physically hurt Gertrude; instead, Hamlet vents his anger into his moralistic sermons. Fittingly then, after Hamlet’s bitter judgments and condemnation of her supposed sexual sins, Gertrude’s own response is that of a repentant

convert: “O Hamlet, speak no more./ Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul,/ And there I see such black and grained spots...” (3.4.80-2).

In order to explore why Vindice’s approach to revenge and violence—or that of other contemporary revengers—differs so radically from Hamlet’s, it is important to note how Shakespeare introduces and establishes Hamlet’s character as a person with a strong Christian mode of thinking that determines most of his actions. Hamlet is introduced in the second scene of the first act. In this scene, first, there is a brief but important exchange of words between Hamlet and newly married Claudius and Gertrude both of whom try to dissuade him from prolonged mourning after his father’s death. While Gertrude asks Hamlet to cast his “nightly colour off”, Claudius’s words are much more forceful: “But to persever/ In obstinate condolment is a course/ Of impious stubbornness, ‘tis unmanly grief,/ It shows a will most incorrect to heaven...” (1.2.92-5). By the end of this speech Claudius strongly urges Hamlet not to go back to Wittenberg University and Gertrude concurs. The mention of Hamlet’s university is significant. As noted earlier, Wittenberg University, at the time Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*, was a place of comprehensive biblical and Christian doctrinal education. We can read Hamlet’s character’s motivations and dilemma once we understand the Christian characteristics of his inner life. Unlike other plays of Shakespeare that highlight the tormented inner life of characters, *Hamlet* stands apart and is unique because “the psychological in Shakespeare’s tragedy is constructed almost entirely out of the theological...” (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 229).

Soon after Hamlet accedes to Claudius and Gertrude’s demand of not going back to Wittenberg, everyone leaves the stage, and Hamlet is left alone to deliver his first soliloquy that will give us important insights into his mind and character. Here is how Hamlet begins his first soliloquy in the play:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
 Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! O God! (1.2.129-32).

Hence, in order to establish Hamlet's character's dependence on Christian doctrine, before the issues of murder and revenge are broached in the play, Shakespeare is careful to give us an insight into Hamlet's mode of thinking. As is clear from the soliloquy, Hamlet seriously considers and then rejects an act of suicide because of his fidelity to Christian doctrine—as expressed in the Christian canon—which forbids suicide. Furthermore, Hamlet's rejection of suicide on the basis of Christian doctrine at the beginning of the play foreshadows his later rejection of private revenge and premeditated murder on similar grounds. No other contemporary revenge tragedy features such Christian codification of the leading character or revenger. Moreover, as Fisch states, the rejection of suicide in compliance of some ethical code is quite alien to classical literature and thought (95). The issue of suicide is not discussed elaborately in biblical text although Christian doctrine strongly forbids it. Still, Fisch considers the rejection of suicide as a particularly biblical idea. Job's wife "urges him to 'curse God and die', to end...his torments, with a bare bodkin" (95). "Irrationally," Job chooses to live and endure in the absence of hope, good health and dignity (95). "The limit of logical understanding is here marked by a tautology that would have been incomprehensible to the Greeks and Romans" (95).

Frye also focuses on the contemporary Christian stance on the issue of suicide:

On no theological issue was there such universal agreement in Shakespeare's age as we find in the case of suicide. The Church of Rome has always

regarded suicide as a damning sin, while the Protestant view was no less clear...Suicide was a far worse sin than murder, it lowered man below the level of brute beasts, it was an act of cowardice...(24-25).

In marked contrast to this position, the characters—both Christian and non-Christian—in other contemporary revenge plays seem to embrace suicide when it is convenient. In most revenge tragedies suicide is seen as liberating or even honourable in certain situations. Cassius in *Julius Caesar* sees suicide as a gift from the gods to liberate human soul from earthly bondage. When Casca informs Cassius that Caesar may be proclaimed the king, the latter, drawing his dagger, declares, “I know where I will wear this dagger then:/ Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius./ Therein, ye gods, you make the weak most strong” (1.3.88-90). Cassius and his coconspirators sing praises of suicide’s liberating virtues. At the end of *Julius Caesar* noble Brutus considers it honourable to kill himself, and *The Spanish Tragedy* ends with Hieronimo “tearing out with his own teeth his mangled, bloody tongue before stabbing himself to death with a penknife” (Gregory M. Colon Semenza 51).

Hamlet contrasts with this glorification of suicide not only from the outset, when Hamlet rules out suicide for himself, but also towards the later stages of the play when Ophelia’s death and the gravediggers’ discourse about the fate of her soul again focus on suicide from a Christian viewpoint. And at the end of *Hamlet* the issue of suicide reemerges once again, when Horatio considers it honourable to die along with Hamlet. These words of Horatio—as he ponders suicide by drinking poison—show the contrast between Christian and pagan worldview about suicide: “I am more an antique Roman than a Dane./ Here’s yet some liquor left” (5.2.294-95). Notably, however, at this point Hamlet prevents Horatio from committing suicide, and thus, Hamlet saves not only Horatio’s life but “perhaps, his soul as well, since it saves Horatio from committing the deadly sin of suicide” (Hibbard 63).

Hamlet's rejection of suicide due to his Christian beliefs is a unique perspective among most contemporary revenge tragedies. From the play's beginning Hamlet views issues of life and death from a strictly Christian perspective. In the contemporary Christian doctrine, that Hamlet is keenly aware of, suicide almost certainly led one's soul to eternal damnation. Having pondered suicide in his first soliloquy, Hamlet rules it out for the second and final time in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. In this famed soliloquy Hamlet compares death to sleep. It may be easy for modern readers to read this as Hamlet's agnostic understanding of death. However, as Frye points out, "The image of death as sleep is Biblical" and in the sixteenth century it implied a state of rest that exists till the raising of the dead (54). Fische notes that the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer "speaks of the death of the elect as 'our perfect consummation and bliss'..." (96). The sixteenth century's most influential Protestant theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin also likened death to sleep in their writings (Frye 55). During Shakespeare's time "Theology was everywhere discussed, and the level of theological literacy among educated people was considerably higher than" modern times (63). Therefore, it is quite plausible that Hamlet's reference to death as sleep is commensurate with contemporary Christian theology and beliefs. In effect, through his soliloquy Hamlet speaks to the contemporary audience about the issues of life, death, the fate of the human soul in the afterlife primarily within a Christian theological and doctrinal context.

During his exchanges with Claudius and Gertrude Hamlet also comes across as highly sensitive and idealistic. He takes great offense when Gertrude suggests that his mourning "seems" too pronounced. While objecting to this classification Hamlet also utters a rather cryptic line: "But I have that within which passeth show..." (1.2.85). In fact, Hamlet is in the grips of suicidal melancholy. His rhetoric against flesh—"too too solid flesh"—echoes the New Testament Christian teachings about the sinfulness of flesh. Hamlet's personal response to world's corruption is a deep longing for death. But the only thing that comes between him and

his death wish is the “canon” of the “Everlasting” (1.2.31-2). It is firmly established that Hamlet’s thoughts and actions are determined by his Christian theological education and beliefs. Indeed, it is the character of Hamlet and his highly idealistic and Christianized conscience and inner-life that set the play apart from other contemporary revenge tragedies, including Shakespeare’s.

Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* provides particularly sharp contrast, especially as *Hamlet* is widely believed to have been inspired by *The Spanish Tragedy*. Both Hieronimo and Hamlet can be seen as good and noble human beings. But when they are called upon to revenge, the contrast between their responses is very marked. After first meeting with the Ghost, Hamlet’s initial angry resolve about revenge soon atrophies into confusion. Due to his Christian beliefs, Hamlet cannot accept private revenge, nor can he murder Claudius. On the other hand, Hieronimo rejects the Christian command against revenge and moves towards a Senecan revenge based on *lex talionis*. Hieronimo’s “Vindicta Mihi” speech is often compared to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech since both speeches mention suicide. Both Hieronimo and Hamlet are so pained that they want to kill themselves. Hamlet cannot kill himself because, even in philosophical mode, he cannot forget the Christian injunctions against suicide. As Greenblatt mentions, Hamlet may not be afraid of dying or Purgatory but “he does worry that his soul might go to Hell” (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 4). Even though in the “To be or not to be” speech he does not directly mention the Bible, we know that on a previous occasion he has explicitly given his belief in the Christian “canon” as the only reason preventing him from committing suicide.

In contrast, Hieronimo’s reason for not killing himself is that he still has an unfinished task of revenging his son:

For if I hang or kill myself, let’s know

Who will revenge Horatio's murder then?

No, no! fie no! pardon me, I'll none of that" (3.12. 83)

In fact, *The Spanish Tragedy*, unlike *Hamlet*, fully embraces Senecan bloodthirsty revenge based on *lex talionis*. When Hieronimo seems to hesitate in his revengeful quest, Bell Imperia chides him with these words: "Hieronimo, for shame, Hieronimo,/ Be not a history to after-times/ Of such ingratitude unto thy son" (4.1.104). The demands of *lex talionis* to avenge the murder of a loved one are very strong indeed, and in Hamlet's case they bring much suffering insofar as they clash with his firmly held Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, until the very end, unlike Hieronimo, Hamlet stays faithful to his Christian beliefs that forbid private revenge and murder.

Another contrast is provided by Shakespeare's characters in *Titus Andronicus*, who, free from the Christian compunctions that Shakespeare gives Hamlet, go on to plot most gruesome, cruel and bloody forms of revenge on each other. Even Lucius's son referred to as "Boy" seems to burn with the passion for revenge when he tells Titus: "I say, my lord, that if I were a man/ Their mother's bedchamber should not be safe" (4.1.7-8). Marcus praises this vengeful streak in him with these words: "Ay, that's my boy! Thy father hath full oft/ For his ungrateful country done the like" (4.1.10-11). Another important factor in contrast to *Hamlet* is that the revengeful characters of *Titus Andronicus* consider it highly necessary to maim and kill the blood relatives and friends of the person on whom they seek vengeance. Lavinia's gruesome rape and murder is thus encouraged by Tamora who impresses on her sons:

Remember, boys, I poured forth my tears in vain
 To save your brother from the sacrifice,
 But fierce Andronicus would not relent.

Therefore away with her and use her as you will:

The worse to her, the better loved of me (2.2.63-7).

Apparently, the characters have an obsessive need for revenge that must be met with a bloody satisfaction that includes grievous bodily harm, sadistic rape, mutilation, torture, beheadings and even cannibalism. Hamlet almost never talks about any acts of cruelty and physical violence, nor does he have any interest in killing any associates of Claudius.⁸ As I note in this thesis, Hamlet goes to a great extent to warn Polonius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that he knows about their designs on his liberty and life. He kills them only inadvertently and in self-defence. Furthermore, in *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora, disguised as Revenge, makes it amply clear that deep desire for as well as satisfaction from revenge springs from classical hell when she speaks to Titus:

I am Revenge, sent from th' infernal kingdom
 To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind
 By working wreakful vengeance on thy foes.
 Come down and welcome me to this world's light,
 Confer with me of murder and of death (5.2.31-4).

To Titus's relief, Tamora promises to aid his revenge with "bloody murder or detested rape" (5.2.37). Such violent and sadistic intent is completely missing from Hamlet's revenge. In *Hamlet*, even furious Laertes is not capable of such cruelty. Laertes's fury is provoked more because of the honour code of revenge than hellish inordinate vengeance described in *Titus*

⁸ When Hamlet does talk about violence it is indirectly and only to lament the fact that his own revenge mission is devoid of violent acts and bloodshed.

Andronicus. For example, Laertes—once Claudius convinces him that Hamlet has treacherously killed his father, Polonius—does not seek to torture, rape or kill Gertrude in order to satisfy his vengeful fury. Laertes only wants to pay Hamlet back in death as per *lex talionis*. Furthermore, despite the fact that Laertes, like most characters in *Hamlet*, is a Christian, does not allow religious considerations to dull his thoughts of revenge, bloodshed and murder as far as punishing Hamlet is concerned. And herein lies the difference between Hamlet and other Christian characters of revenge tragedies: they can overcome conscientious pangs caused by Christian teachings against revenge and violence, but Hamlet's adherence is too strict to allow him such compromises. Shakespeare makes it clear to his audience that it is not merely Hamlet's Christianity but his strict adherence to Christian beliefs and doctrine that makes it impossible for him to follow the Ghost's implied command for a revengeful murder.

Julius Caesar, though usually considered as one of Shakespeare's Roman plays, has revenge at the centre of its plot. As Shakespeare's depiction indicates, Marc Antony must revenge Caesar's death because he is bound by the bond of love. Even shrewd Cassius knows this fact and protests Brutus's decision to spare Antony's life: "Yet I fear him;/ For in the engrafted love he bears to Caesar" (2.1.183-4). We know that Cassius's fears are justified when Antony is left alone with Caesar's bloody corpse and he gives an angry speech full of the promises of revenge. He mentions that Caesar's spirit is "ranging for revenge" (3.1.273). Antony, bound by love, takes it upon himself to bring satisfaction to Caesar's raging spirit. Similarly, in his speech to the citizens of Rome, Antony appeals to the citizens' sense of *lex talionis*. First, in mock-defence of assassins he says to the crowd, "I will not do them wrong. I rather choose/ To wrong the dead, to wrong myself and you..." (3.2.22-4). In effect, Antony is saying that he himself and the citizens are bound by love to revenge Caesar's death. Not avenging the murder is tantamount to violation of love and a gross dishonour of dead Caesar who loved them all dearly. Again, Antony repeats strong allusions to *lex talionis*:

It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you.

You are not wood, you are not stones, but men;

And, being men, hearing the will of Caesar,

It will inflame you, it will make you mad (3.2.138-41).

Antony repeatedly portrays the citizens as beloved children of a doting father, Caesar. At the end of his speech Antony yields a desired response from the crowd: “Most noble Caesar! We’ll revenge his death,” says one citizen (3.2.234). At another point all of them shout: “Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!” (3.2.196). However, Hamlet can neither match the resolve for private revenge nor the bloodlust that most other characters in contemporary revenge plays, including *Hamlet*, exhibit.

Hamlet’s hesitation does not come from cowardice, lack of proof or lack of opportunity. Nor can it be explained by the derangement of Hamlet’s mind by suicidal depression, because, in fact Shakespeare shows Hamlet to be in expert control of his mental faculties: indeed it is made clear that Hamlet purposefully puts on his “antic disposition” in order to complete his revenge mission. Hamlet frequently addresses the audience—through his soliloquies and asides—without his “antic disposition” and then puts it on again when other characters approach him. Therefore, he successfully feigns madness and makes a fool of almost everyone. At the same time he is extremely attuned to the spying, schemes and plots of Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Moreover, through this perilous time, Hamlet displays intelligence, wit, and humor. Hamlet’s calm mind and intelligence ensure that he remembers the Christian doctrine he has memorized and imbibed through years of Christian studies at Wittenberg. No revengeful fury, like that of Shakespeare’s other revengers, can erase from his mind the Christian commands against private revenge. At times, Hamlet is prone to

strong bouts of melancholia. He admits that he has lost “all his mirth”, and that the majesty and grandeur of a starry night-sky seem to him no more than “foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.294-300). In effect, as these lines occur after the encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet is increasingly torn apart over his inaction and dereliction of duty towards his dead father. Many of his soliloquies express his extreme anguish over not being able to revenge his father’s death and bring comfort to his soul as it suffers in purgatorial hell. Unable to murder Claudius due to his firm Christian beliefs, Hamlet is crippled and overpowered by shame and guilt of not being able to honour his dead father and bring succor to his tormented soul. This is an intense dilemma caused by religious convictions, which afflict no other protagonist from contemporary revenge plays.

In the next section, I will attempt to explore how Hamlet’s character’s Christian disposition plays an indispensable role in the play’s unique treatment of the themes of revenge and murder. Also, I will discuss how the traditional revenge tragedy genre is subverted by *Hamlet*’s unique and consistent Christian underpinning.

The Acting of Revenge and Murder in *Hamlet* and the Other Plays

Compared to *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* contains almost no onstage violence or bloodshed till towards the end of the play. The first killing in the play, Polonius’s, occurs as an inadvertent manslaughter. Since *The Spanish Tragedy* influenced *Hamlet* significantly, a close contrast between these two is especially fruitful. Andrew Gurr writes that *The Spanish Tragedy* is “Perhaps the best revenge play in English [and] it became a classic in its own time...” (vii). The play’s storyline is “colourfully gruesome” and features “a set of revenge killings” (vii). Semenza writes about the significance of violence in *The Spanish Tragedy*: “the grotesque and spectacular nature of

Hieronimo's revenge plot is not so much the problem as it is the central part of *The Spanish Tragedy*" (51).

Hamlet, by contrast, never focuses on the violence. The murder of Hamlet's father takes place off stage and is mentioned only in the Ghost's account. Moreover, Hamlet's father is not murdered by direct assaults on his body but through stealthy and treacherous poisoning. The killing of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz also takes place offstage and is only reported at the very end in a prologue of sorts. Similarly, the stabbing of Polonius occurs behind a screen. And uniquely for a revenge tragedy, even at the end of *Hamlet*, during the duel scene, the deaths are not gruesome. Both Hamlet and Laertes die not from severe wounds but because of the poisoned tip of the sword. Gertrude dies of poisoning. Claudius too dies from a single stab by the envenomed sword and the poison Hamlet forces him to drink. Claudius almost seems to be paying for his own evil schemes to kill Hamlet instead of becoming a victim of premeditated murder. Moreover, Laertes, wounded by the envenomed sword, laments: "The foul practice/ Hath turned itself on me" (5.2.271-2). In contrast, all the contemporary revenge plays mentioned in the earlier section—*The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*—contain gruesome violence, dismemberment, mutilations, beheadings, onstage suicides and murders. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare deliberately eschews violence in order to focus on Hamlet's character and his ethical and moral dilemma rooted in his religious belief.

Additionally, a comparison between the play-within-a-play in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* with that of *Hamlet* highlights *Hamlet's* uniqueness. *The Spanish Tragedy's* final act "uses a play within the play staged by Spain's chief justice, Hieronimo, to let him commit all his revenge murders" (Gurr vii). Notably, Vindice too, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, organizes a playlet to bring about the violent murders. Hallet and Hallet note, "In other revenge plays, the protagonist kills his enemies within the mock play... Hamlet commits

no murder in the Gonzago play” (212). Moreover, whereas Hieronimo and Vindice plan to unleash bloody violence during their playlet, Hamlet only wants to corroborate the Ghost’s word regarding Claudius’s crime. Hallet and Hallet also consider it significant that whereas Hieronimo and Vindice make themselves the main actors of their plays and carry out the killings, “Hamlet remains outside of his play, as in fact, does his victim” (2002). Among all the contemporary revenge plays *Hamlet* stands unique in that “the delay lingers on as a theme after the curtain has fallen on the play-within-a-play” (212). In fact, it is safe to conclude that after the Ghost’s first encounter with Hamlet in the fifth scene of the first act, Hamlet’s tormented inner life and his various pretexts to delay the consummation of revenge become the play’s main plot.

Maus calls *Hamlet* a “revenge-tragedy-as-character-study” because of “its overwhelming concentration upon the hero’s tormented complexity” (*Four Revenge Tragedies* xxiii). Michele Witte too notes that Hamlet’s unique thematic preoccupations set it apart from contemporary generic revenge plays: “Unlike the traditional Roman revenge tragedy, Shakespeare highlights predicament rather than acts of violence within the play” (2). As for Hamlet’s inner life, in her introduction to *Julius Caesar*, Maus makes an illuminating observation: “In the conflicted, highly self-conscious Brutus, Shakespeare invents a kind of hero that resembles those of the tragedies he will begin to write” (1002). Additionally, it is Brutus’s many introspective soliloquies that “provide abundant insight into his turbulent inner life” (1003-4). *Hamlet* contains many lengthy soliloquies by Hamlet, considerably more than Brutus’s soliloquies in *Julius Caesar*. It is through Hamlet’s soliloquies that we know about Hamlet’s thoroughly Christian belief system that dominates his emotions, explains his belief in the supernatural, his motivations, and finally his tormented dilemma when his beliefs come in direct conflict with *lex talionis*.

Witte suggests that Hamlet struggles with internal conflicts of religious uncertainties. He procrastinates in killing Claudius while searching for religious truths (2). It is not the focus of my thesis as to what religious truths—if any—Hamlet searches for or arrives at. The departing point of this thesis is that Hamlet is characterized as a highly idealistic young man with deep Christian beliefs that are further strengthened through his theological university training. Through Hamlet's character and his dilemma, which pits his conscience between *lex talionis* and his Christian beliefs, Shakespeare probes—or rather plays on—the contemporary morality of revenge and murder from a Christian worldview. The play focuses on how Hamlet must find a way to take revenge while working *within* rather than *outside* of the boundaries set by his Christian beliefs. Therefore, while other revenge plays focus on action, revenge and violence, *Hamlet* focuses on its protagonist's inaction, delay, procrastination, conscience and predicament.

Hamlet's Uniqueness among Contemporary Revenge Tragedies and Other Plays

Unlike the protagonists of other revenge tragedies, it is impossible for Hamlet to act against the Christian doctrine regarding crucial issues of suicide, revenge and premeditated murder. Such focus on its protagonist's inner life subverts the formal structure of a revenge tragedy, making *Hamlet* a revenge tragedy like no other. Although on the surface *Hamlet* seems to follow the structure of revenge tragedy, as it progresses it increasingly becomes an elaborate character study with an intense focus on Hamlet's dilemma rooted in his religious beliefs. Even so, as René Girard notes, Shakespeare had no intention of overtly rejecting *Hamlet's* status as a typical revenge tragedy: “Outwardly, at least, Shakespeare had to respect the literary conventions of the time” (283). Furthermore, the play tracks how Hamlet works his way out of

his dilemma while staying within the bounds of Christian doctrine and worldview. In none of the other revenge plays, such constant reliance on the biblical text or Christian doctrine is exhibited by any of the characters.

It may be concluded—as some scholars like Hallet and Hallet have suggested—after a general reading of the play that Hamlet’s character begins as a thoroughly Christian young man who moves away from Christian precepts in order to fulfill his duty to revenge. But, as I maintain in this thesis, this simply is not the case, which is exactly what sets it apart from other revenge plays. Hamlet’s revenge is not wild or furious but is shaped methodically as per his understanding of Christian doctrine and theology. Hamlet continues to rely on the biblical text and Christian doctrine till his dying moment towards the end of the play. His stoicism is nothing more than Christian resignation. In fact, towards the end of the play he is more aligned with a form of Christian fatalism or predestination than he is at the beginning of the play.

The graveyard scene towards the end of the play affirms the play’s Christian focus. In this remarkable scene even the comical characters of gravediggers debate Christian notions of heaven, hell and damnation of soul in the event of suicide. If suicide results in the damnation of the soul, the gravediggers ask, then it raises the possibility whether Ophelia’s tragic end has led to yet a bigger tragedy of eternal damnation of her soul. The gravediggers’ comical exchanges highlight a rather grim possibility that Hamlet himself has pondered over in at least two significant soliloquies. In the play the contentious issues of suicide, revenge, murder and violence are conflated. Furthermore, these issues are assessed and refracted through Hamlet’s character’s predominantly Christian outlook.

James Wood writes about philosopher Bernard Williams’s work in which the latter discusses “tragic dilemmas”. In the tragic dilemmas “someone is faced with two conflicting moral requirements, each equally pressing” (177). Williams often found examples of tragic dilemmas in Greek tragedy and epics “in which we see the self struggling with what he called

‘one-person conflicts’” (177). As discussed previously, despite Christian precepts against revenge and murder, the contemporary moral code of *lex talionis*—which could also be backed up with selective verses of the Old Testament text—required Hamlet to avenge his father’s wrongful murder.

Hence, *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy that, unlike contemporary generic revenge tragedies, focuses on a tragic dilemma and one-person conflict. Furthermore, Hamlet’s tragic dilemma and conflict are rooted deeply in his Christian modes of thinking. Therefore, although *Hamlet* is often categorized as a revenge tragedy, it also transcends this particular genre. *Hamlet* can be read rather as a revenge-tragedy-as-character-study, a play about tragic dilemmas and one-person conflict. More specifically, Shakespeare achieves remarkable dramatic tension and depicts Hamlet’s inner life by appropriating contemporary Christian beliefs and doctrine. The character of Hamlet is enmeshed within pernicious and inescapable webs of conflicting moral and ethical systems. Such a dramatic design and the particular dilemmas of the lead character were unprecedented at the time of *Hamlet*’s composition and performance.

Chapter 2: Remembrance, Revenge and Christianity in *Hamlet*

This chapter concerns the question of Hamlet's possible courses of action after his encounter with the Ghost. My emphasis is on the role of biblical and Christian doctrinal influences on Hamlet's character as he pursues his revenge mission, and how they influence the play's plot. The biggest question Hamlet faces relates to his future course of action. As Hamlet procrastinates, his question gets more complex and consequently becomes more unanswerable. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy ponders Hamlet's question and casts it in general terms. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor in their notes to the Arden edition of *Hamlet* give us the most tenable choices as to the subject of Hamlet's question in the soliloquy: "(a) whether life in general is worth living, (b) whether he should take his own life, (c) whether he should act against the king" (284).

In this chapter I intend to demonstrate that, ultimately, Hamlet's question and the related dilemma that he struggles with throughout the play are intimately linked with his beliefs in the Christian doctrine. I will explore how through such characterisation of the revenger-protagonist Shakespeare is able to create dramatic tension. I will discuss in detail how and to what effect *Hamlet* engages with contemporary Christian beliefs, doctrine and theology in Reformation England, which still retained strong Catholic influences. The play's engagement with religious doctrine increases the dramatic tension—for example, the speculative and dreaded discussion about the purgatorial ghost in the opening scene and the Ghost's eventual appearance creates an unsettling and thrilling experience for the audience. "More than anyone of his age, Shakespeare grasped that there were powerful links between his art and the haunting of spirits" (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 157). Shakespeare strongly establishes Hamlet's belief in

Christian doctrine in order to foreshadow the oncoming conflict within Hamlet's mind as to the course of his action when faced with an inescapable duty to take revenge. As I will discuss in this chapter, various scholars suggest that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare explores the contemporary rift between Catholicism and Protestantism. While I find some of these discussions of Catholicism vis-à-vis Protestantism illuminating, I reject the assumption that Shakespeare portrays Hamlet as subscribing to either predominantly Catholic or predominantly Protestant beliefs. Rather, my own research shows that Shakespeare has Hamlet invoking both Catholic and Protestant beliefs depending on what best serves his dramatic purposes and enables him to capture his audience's interest. Therefore, I use Hamlet's "Christian" beliefs to mean his character's mixed Catholic as well as Protestant beliefs, although where relevant I will be distinguishing between these two strains of Christianity. It is also necessary to remember that, as far as *Hamlet's* major subjects of revenge, murder and suicide are concerned, both Catholic and Protestant doctrines unanimously forbid and condemn them.

Extensive Biblical Allusions by Hamlet

Hamlet's character is introspective and Shakespeare uses his various soliloquies to give his audience insights into his character's inner thoughts and motivations. In the second scene of the first act, we are introduced to Hamlet as a young man who would commit suicide if it were not forbidden by the Christian doctrine. Indeed, Hamlet habitually resorts to Christian doctrine while making decision on matters of life and death. Shakespeare's extensive use of Christian doctrine and theology in the play would have resonated with his contemporary audience, for whom the "Christian presuppositions and Christian language pervaded oral, written and printed discourse..." (Alison Shell 4). Recent estimates show that religious titles accounted for almost half of all printed matter between 1475 and 1640 (6). And even though the majority of people

in Shakespeare's audience were non-literate, most of them would have complied with the legal requirement to attend church services on Sundays and holy days (10). Accordingly, the early seventeenth-century London audience's alertness to biblical and religious allusions "can hardly have been surpassed in the history of the theatre" (9). It is also very likely that during his education at grammar school Shakespeare took part in contemporary provocative debates "where the felicitous deployment of moralistic commonplaces would have been crucial to rhetorical success" (123).

Hamlet relies on the Bible towards the end of the play in order to appropriate the idea of providence to consummate his revenge. Indeed, it is in his first soliloquy that we begin to see his deep immersion in the biblical text and Christian doctrine. In this soliloquy Hamlet likens Denmark to an "unweeded garden" that has fallen from its Eden-like pure state (Hibbard 50). Thus, as soon as Shakespeare introduces the character of Hamlet, it becomes apparent that the Christian canon and the Bible are his ultimate reference points. Also, the audience can see the beginning of Hamlet's theological pedantry that will dominate the rest of the play. Hamlet wants to commit suicide because he cannot bear to live in a fallen world. But on the other hand he cannot commit suicide because according to the Christian doctrine it will condemn him to eternal damnation.

Hamlet also alludes to biblical verses for humorous purposes in a rather intriguing manner. For example, Hamlet's referring to Polonius as Jephthah is humorous but it also foreshadows Ophelia's death, something the audience cannot guess beforehand. Hamlet, in his "antic disposition", mentions to Polonius: "O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!" (2.2.397). Strangely, the allusion to the biblical story of Jephthah, which the Elizabethan audience would be quite familiar with, is completely lost on Polonius who wonders: "What a treasure had he, my lord?" (2.2.398). Most likely, this query by Polonius is another one of those instances in which Hamlet's biblical knowledge is shown to be far more elaborate than that of

all other characters in the play. The story of Jephthah occurs in the eleventh chapter of the book of Judges. To begin with, something that Hamlet would find humorous, Jephthah the mighty and courageous man is described as “the son of an harlot...” (11:1). Jephthah’s half-brothers who have the same father, Gilead, mistreat him on account of his illegitimate birth. Next, according to the biblical account, the Gileadites come under attack from foreign invaders and they seek help from Jephthah who obliges. Jephthah makes a vow before God that if he is victorious in the battle and returns home then “whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me...shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering” (11:31). As it happens, it is Jephthah’s daughter who comes out to meet him first. Eventually, Jephthah keeps his word and kills his daughter. In this context, Hamlet’s comparison between Jephthah and Polonius is loaded with deep meanings and warning. Possibly, as Hamlet is aware of Polonius’s spying, he foresees that Ophelia will be used by Polonius for his purposes. Further, the implication is that Polonius will thereby put his innocent daughter at risk of death—which is exactly what happens in the play. Thus, Hamlet’s mocking biblical allusion at this point foreshadows Ophelia’s tragedy. In this and many other ways, Hamlet’s allusions to biblical themes and anecdotes become an essential part of the play’s plot. It also shows Hamlet’s constant reliance on the Bible for matters that at times are humorous but at other times they can carry profound implications, especially when Hamlet ponders the issues of suicide, sin, revenge and a premeditated murder. Therefore, it is Hamlet’s particular religious and doctrinal obsessions that eventually make *Hamlet* a unique play.

I’ve explored how Hamlet’s allusions to the Bible can often carry deep layers of meaning. They also give us deeper insights into the plot and design of the play. Next, I will attempt to explore how the Bible and Christian doctrine are intimately linked with Hamlet’s revenge mission, unlike the protagonists of other contemporary revenge tragedies.

The Prominent Role of the Bible and Christian Doctrine in Hamlet's Revenge

Christianity and paganism often intersected during the Renaissance. Renaissance scholars, writers and thinkers in Europe not only cherished and revived the classical works but also appraised and admired them from the dominant Christian worldview. Indeed, one aspect that distinguished Renaissance writers—for example, the writers of early modern England—from the classical writers was that they were born and raised in a world thoroughly imbued with Christian beliefs and worldview (Shell 47). At the same time, many pagan virtues like “Stoicism and emphasis on virtues of endurance” informed Christian morality and were co-opted into it (48). On the other hand, many Christians also claimed that any lessons learned from pagans would only taint one’s Christian religion (48). In other words, while classical and Christian value systems were often amalgamated and harmonized, certain points of disagreement were always there. The issue of revenge was a particularly contentious one. This conflict of positions was augmented because the Bible itself, especially the Old Testament, presents a muddled picture on the issue of revenge.

Shakespeare plays on the same conflict in contemporary society to arrest his audience’s attention. Remarkably, at the very outset of Hamlet’s revenge mission, the Ghost makes almost an impossible and confounding demand while asking Hamlet to take revenge: “But howsoever thou pursuest this act,/ Taint not thy mind...” (1.5.84-5). Hibbard, in his notes to the Oxford edition, highlights that this cryptic demand asks Hamlet not to stoop to Claudius’s immoral ways while taking revenge on him. “He thus presents the hero with the dilemma that is at the heart of revenge tragedy: how is the nobility of the successful avenger to be preserved?” (190). The Ghost’s rather paradoxical command for revenge only elevates the tortuous conflict in

Hamlet's mind. A close reading of these lines shows that the Ghost cautions Hamlet about two things: one, he should not physically harm Gertrude, and second, in the pursuit of the act of revenge—or while bringing Claudius to justice—he shouldn't "taint" his mind. Thus, for Hamlet, the Christian form of revenge becomes a form of justice that ought to be consummated without any foul play. This distinction clearly sets the Ghost—and by extension, Hamlet—apart from many other revengers of contemporary revenge plays who are either pagan or do not let the Christian injunction against revenge and murder hinder them. As noted in the preceding chapter, in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* both Tamora and Titus resort to deceitful and treacherous means to satisfy their lust for a bloody revenge. In *Hamlet* itself Laertes, goaded by Claudius, resorts to deceitful means in order to kill Hamlet. Hamlet on the other hand never considers killing Claudius by deceitful means, for example, by stealthy poisoning. But how exactly, then, should Hamlet pursue the act of revenge is never elaborated on by the Ghost. Hamlet is left alone to resolve the conundrum—as he struggles to do throughout the play—and bring about a just resolution.

Despite the Ghost and Hamlet's Christianized view of revenge, justice and fair play, Shakespeare himself does not inject a didactic tone in the play that portrays *lex talionis* as a less honourable code than the Christian commands that explicitly forbid private revenge. Rather, the two worldviews are contrasted for dramatic effect. Just because Laertes zealously follows the pagan code of *lex talionis* in direct defiance of Christian virtues and mores, does not make him a villain in the play. Indeed, Laertes is not portrayed as an evil or malicious person but as a dutiful son who seeks to protect the honour of his father and his family as per *lex talionis*. When Laertes comes to Elsinore to enquire about his father's whereabouts he has completely transformed into a dutiful and bloodthirsty revenger: "O thou vile king,/ Give me my father," cries Laertes (4.5.113). When Gertrude urges him to stay calm Laertes roars, "That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,/ Cries cuckold to my father..." (4.5.116). Thus,

Laertes invokes *lex talionis* as justification of his vengeful anger. He also adds that because he is his father's dutiful son, and not a bastard, he will zealously pursue revenge.

In contrast to Laertes's transformed state as a furious revenger in the fourth act, at the beginning of the play we see Laertes as a gentle and loving young man. Shakespeare is also careful to highlight a loving bond between Polonius and Laertes. Moreover, Shakespeare introduces Laertes as a loyal and dutiful citizen. In his introductory scene, Laertes politely asks for Claudius's leave to return to France after having done his "duty" by attending Claudius's coronation. Claudius understands that Laertes is a loving and obedient son and asks him accordingly, "Have you your father's leave? What says Polonius?" (1.2.57). Furthermore, Shakespeare sets up most of the third scene of the first act to focus on the domestic life of Polonius the father and his children, Laertes and Ophelia. In this scene, Laertes's character is established as that of an affectionate, caring brother as well as a loving, obedient son. Although Laertes's advice to Ophelia about staying away from Hamlet is patronizing, it is also filled with brotherly concern and affection for his younger sister. Unlike Polonius's rather commanding advice to Ophelia on the same subject, Laertes's words have a ring of brotherly concern: "Fear it, Ophelia, fear it my dear sister..." (1.3.33). Ophelia herself treats him with love and affection—whereas she cowers and becomes quite anxious when Polonius broaches the subject—and is not afraid of answering him back, tongue-in-cheek. Laertes shouldn't sermonize like a hypocritical religious minister, Ophelia quips. When Polonius appears in the scene, the audience observe the loving relationship Polonius and Laertes share. Against this background, it seems consistent that Laertes becomes a furious revenger when he finds that his beloved father has been murdered and later his dear sister too has died of grief. Laertes is heartbroken when he notices Ophelia's insanity. Before exiting in the fifth scene of the fourth act, Ophelia makes a reference to "Christian souls" and "God" (4.5.200). However, Laertes is evidently disillusioned with the Christian God and remarks: "Do you see this, O God?"

(4.5.201). Apparently, Laertes thinks that God must be blind not to see and do something to assuage the great injustice and suffering his family is going through. At Ophelia's funeral when the priest refuses to give proper Christian burial to Ophelia, Laertes's grief is intensified. He roars against the Church rituals and doctrine:

Lay her i'th earth,
 And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
 May violets spring. I tell the, churlish priest,
 A minist'ring angel shall my sister be
 When thou liest howling (5.1.228-32).

As Hibbard comments in his notes in the Oxford edition, in the last line Laertes claims that it is in fact the priest who would be howling (in hell) for denying his dead sister due respect and a proper Christian burial (332). It is clear that Laertes's disgust and rage against Christian religion, rituals, doctrine and worldview has reached a high point. In fact, we get a glimpse of Laertes's open defiance of Christian precepts against revenge and murder when Claudius asks him how would he punish his father's murderer. In response, Laertes promises to "cut his throat I'th' church" (4.7.103). But the audience can hardly see Laertes's blasphemous defiance of Christian edicts against revenge as villainous. Laertes has just grievances against a religious system and its god who, as Laertes sees it, is apathetic and unsympathetic to the injustice and suffering of his family. In this context, the audience is likely to admire Laertes's resolve to revenge. Moreover, the fact that Claudius is using Laertes to get Hamlet killed for his own purposes only increases Laertes's victimization and tragedy in the audience's eyes, and thus Laertes, despite his total rejection of the Christian worldview, becomes a tragic figure who

inspires the audience's sympathy. "The ability to evoke sympathy and understanding for a diverse range of characters" is generally considered Shakespeare's greatest strength (Shell 128). Additionally, Shakespeare uses Laertes's quest for revenge, which remains unhindered by Christian compunctions to highlight Hamlet's inability to do the same due to his fidelity to Christian doctrine. Therefore, the contrast between Laertes and Hamlet's pursuit of revenge emphasizes the way in which Hamlet's incapacitation as a revenger is rooted in his Christian—both Catholic and Protestant—beliefs.

Shakespeare introduces the prevailing Christian worldview in Elsinore much before Hamlet appears in the play. In fact, in the very first scene of the play Marcellus contrasts the opposing Christian and pagan (or non-Christian) worldviews and their respective supernatural influences. Marcellus notes that the Ghost retreated at the crowing of the cock. He further cites the popular belief, which holds that during the time when "our Saviour's birth is celebrated", the cocks crow all night auspiciously (1.1.141-2). During this sacred time:

they say, no spirit can walk abroad,

The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,

So hallowed and so gracious is the time (1.1.143-5).

Furthermore, as opposed to the general Christian population of the play's Denmark, we come to see that Hamlet is rather strict in his adherence to Christian beliefs and doctrine. David Bevington notes the importance of Hamlet's university as an important focal point of Christendom: "Wittenberg is where Martin Luther had posted his celebrated 95 theses to the church door in 1517 and where he had met William Tyndale in 1524..." (63). Stein notes that only a very small number of men from nobility attended university and "For Shakespeare to

prolong Hamlet's studies into manhood renders what was already unusual even more so..." (55). Furthermore, it was rare for a Dane to attend German universities (55). Additionally, apart from being famous for its links to Martin Luther, Wittenberg was also famous for its humanistic leanings. For example, Christopher Marlowe in his 1592 play portrays Faust "as an advanced Wittenberg humanist with new views of the world, and his humanism and new views have long been thought essential to understanding his many-sided angst" (Stein 56). However, as I will discuss further, unlike Faust, Hamlet's angst—especially concerning the eventual fate of his soul—is firmly rooted in his Christian beliefs.

Jennifer Rust asks whether *Hamlet's* mention of Wittenberg infuses the play with any ideas of Reformation theology, but also warns that "it is notoriously difficult to identify any consistent theological position in either the play itself or its title character, despite his prominent education at Wittenberg" (260). A particular reference to the Reformation—when Hamlet punningly compares the Diet of Worms with Polonius's decaying body—in the play only muddles the picture (260).⁹ A "Diet" refers to a formal assembly, often held for political purposes during the Roman Empire. "Worms" is a city in modern Germany where, in 1521, Martin Luther was summoned to an assembly to discuss his doctrinal objections to the Catholic Church. In *Hamlet*, after Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius asks him questions regarding Polonius's whereabouts. Hamlet answers that Polonius is at supper. When Claudius demands an elaboration, Hamlet apparently puns on the words "diet" and worms" to mean food for insects: "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain/ convocation of politic worms are e'en at him" (4.3.20-1). Thus, Hamlet's rhetoric resembles that of Luther's when he condemned

⁹ The Diet (or assembly) of Worms was held in 1521 and was presided over by Emperor Charles V. Martin Luther was summoned and asked to recant his statements considered heretical by the Catholic Church. Luther refused, and consequently the Edict of Worms, issued on 25 May 1521, declared Luther an outlaw. Thus, the Diet of Worms was a momentous event in the early Reformation.

the sacramental authority of the Roman Catholic Church at the Diet of Worms (260). It appears that Hamlet conflates Claudius with the tyrannical Catholic Church (260-1). Additionally, the main sacrament of the Church debated at the Diet of Worms would be the Eucharist (261). However, Hamlet's crude and morbid rhetoric goes beyond Luther's "nuanced doctrine" to argue against the Catholic Church's belief in transubstantiation (that is, the literal transformation of wine and bread into Christ's blood and body) during the Eucharist (261). Even so, scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt note that crude rhetoric to condemn the doctrine of transubstantiation was not unusual in some Reformation propaganda (Rust 261; Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 241).

As I argue throughout this thesis, Shakespeare's use of religion and his creation of a character with such a strong Christian disposition are primarily in the service of his dramatic purposes. It is both unfeasible and irrelevant to conclude Hamlet's—let alone Shakespeare's—particular Christian biases. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the theological content of the play is that in the exposition scene (1.5.) the Ghost professes overtly Catholic beliefs, to which the supposedly Protestant Hamlet raises no objections. For example (as I will discuss in more detail later), not once does Hamlet question the doctrine of Purgatory, even though in other ways he doubts the Ghost's credentials. In addition, as Greenblatt has observed, Hamlet's repeated questions to confirm the Ghost's authenticity are commensurate with the practice of *discretio spirituum* that was believed to force a ghost "to submit to a rigorous cross-examination..." (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 103). In the opening scene of the play other characters also try to submit the Ghost to such cross-examination in order to verify its identity and credibility.

As for the humanist leanings of Wittenberg University, it is hardly surprising for humanism to coexist with Christian beliefs in Renaissance Europe. Many prominent scholars—including a Bible translator like Erasmus—enthusiastically subscribed to humanism. Still, I

will submit that Hamlet's character is no humanist like Marlowe's Faustus, the Christian-Humanist scholar who provides a sharp contrast to rather dogmatically Christian Hamlet who has spent much of his life studying theology and doctrine. When Mephistophilis warns Faustus about the horrors of hell, he replies, "Come, I think hell's a fable" (1.5.126). When Mephistophilis repeats his warning that Faustus is hell-bound, Faustus merely mocks the idea of hell: "Think'st thou that Faustus is so fond to imagine/ That, after this life, there is any pain?/ Tush; these are trifles, and mere old wives' tales" (1.5.132-34). Conversely, Hamlet shows much deeper and constant reliance on the Bible and Christian doctrine. Hamlet is not the one who would trade his soul to the devil in return for any secret knowledge and risk being damned to hell. As Shakespeare shows us in the very first soliloquy of Hamlet, he genuinely fears the possibility of getting damned. After his discourse with Claudius and Gertrude, when Hamlet is left alone, his first soliloquy in which he rejects suicide establishes that his character is not only knowledgeable about Christian doctrine but that it provides the ultimate reference point for him as he makes significant decisions.

Thus, Shakespeare thoroughly establishes Hamlet as a character who exhibits a particular adherence to Christian beliefs and doctrine. In the course of the play as Hamlet undergoes many sorrows, calamities and tragedies he does not give up his reliance on the Christian God or the Christian canon. Indeed, Hamlet's objection to Gertrude and Claudius's marriage as incest also derives from his Christian beliefs. The Old Testament's Mosaic Law treated incest as gross violation. The book of Leviticus, in chapters 18 and 20, comprehensively lists sexual relations with various close relatives as forbidden. Oddly, Levitical injunctions against incest fail to mention marriage or sexual relationship among cousins; neither do they make a specific mention of sexual relations between father and daughter. Yet, in chapters 18 and 20 Leviticus makes special mention of a form of incest that corresponds to the Ghost and Hamlet's constant outrage about incest. Leviticus 18:16 mentions: "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy

brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness". A little further, Leviticus 20:21 commands: "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness: they shall be childless". In order to incriminate Gertrude on the basis of these verses from Leviticus Hamlet taunts her in the closet scene: "You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife..." (3.4.117). Hamlet's—along with the Ghost's—morality closely aligns with the biblical text, contemporary Christian beliefs and doctrine. Furthermore, the Elizabethan audience would be keenly aware of the aforementioned Levitical verses that were cited by Henry VIII to annul his marriage—in contravention of the Catholic Church's injunctions—with Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother.¹⁰ More importantly, in 1534, The Act of Supremacy formally severed links with the Roman Catholic Church and ushered in the English Reformation. Thus, the biblical text could carry immense weight in the social, cultural, political and personal realm of sixteenth-century England. Against this background, Hamlet and the Ghost's severe condemnation of Claudius and Gertrude's marriage gives them scriptural justification—in Hamlet's case, also obligation—to take revenge on Claudius.

By giving detailed clues about Hamlet's reliance on Christian scriptures and doctrine, Shakespeare establishes how and why the encounter with the Ghost creates an intense conflict in his mind. First, the pagan code of honour based on *lex talionis*—which, as discussed in the first chapter, certainly existed even in most Christian societies—obligates Hamlet to take revenge. Additionally, *lex talionis* could also be supported by selectively citing the Bible, especially the Old Testament. But, on the other hand, the Bible—especially the New Testament—strongly forbids private revenge and committing murder. At first, during his emotionally charged encounter with the Ghost, as soon as Hamlet learns that his father was

¹⁰ "Henry VIII (1509-1547)": Retrieved from Tufts University link: <http://www.tufts.edu/programs/mma/fah188/kpetersen/Henryviiihistory.html>

treacherously murdered he readily prepares himself to take revenge on his father's behalf: "Haste, haste me to know it, that I, with wings as swift/ As meditation or thoughts of love,/ May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.29-31). However, after the Ghost departs and Hamlet has sworn his friends to secrecy, he realizes that not only is the act of private revenge expressly forbidden by Christian doctrine, but it would also entail committing a premeditated murder that could damn his soul. With this realization Hamlet's painful conundrum has begun and he moans: "O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.196-7). Hamlet has no way out of his dilemma, although he finds temporary relief in procrastination. In effect, I propose, that Hamlet's problem is that he has to use his free will to make a free choice that may not only define his morality but also decide the eternal fate of his soul after death. John Casey writes that "Shakespeare in his comedies...blended 'pagan' and Christian values as to make it seem that there is no conflict" (ix). I would argue that in *Hamlet*, by contrast, Shakespeare highlights the conflict and contrast between pagan and Christian worldviews concerning suicide, murder and revenge. For example, Christian Hamlet's rejection of suicide stands in stark contrast to the pagan characters of *Julius Caesar* who see suicide as noble and honourable in certain situations.

The long scene (1.5) that portrays Hamlet's first close encounter with the Ghost is crucial in setting up Hamlet's conflicted conscience over the duty to take revenge. In the scene the Ghost exposes Claudius's crime and his own murder. Additionally, as I will discuss further, the scene is saturated with Christian (especially Catholic) symbolism, doctrine and theology. Significantly, as opposed to the ghosts of other contemporary revenge tragedies that have their origins in a pagan or classical hell, *Hamlet's* Ghost is framed in an exclusively Christian context. After listening to the Ghost's opening speeches it becomes quite clear that it is suffering in a way that corresponds to Catholic beliefs and doctrine of Purgatory:

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 (1.5.9-13).

Without mentioning the word Purgatory, the above description by the Ghost of a tormenting place where his crimes are “purged away” makes it clear to the audience that it is indeed a reference to Purgatory. Much can be written about the raging debates on Purgatory between Catholics and Protestants. In short, at the beginning of the Reformation, the Protestant leaders vehemently objected to the Catholic Church’s profiteering by selling intercessory prayers for the dead whose souls supposedly lingered in a tormenting place called Purgatory before reaching heaven. As for the existence of some sort of purgatorial stage after death, many Protestant leaders were ambivalent. English reformer John Wycliffe believed in the existence of Purgatory (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 26). Martin Luther too, at least in his earlier writings, admitted the existence of some Purgatory-like place after death (33). However, Shakespeare uses the Ghost’s apparent purgatorial origins for dramatic purposes. The play does not dwell on the bitter doctrinal disputes between Catholicism and Protestantism. In fact, Protestant Hamlet never questions the idea of Purgatory. At first encounter with the Ghost Hamlet’s only concern is to establish whether it is demonic or angelic, and if its “intents [are] wicked or charitable...” (1.4.21). Two lines later Hamlet has decided to believe, even before getting the Ghost’s confirmation, that it is indeed his father’s tormented spirit: “I’ll call thee Hamlet,/ King, father, royal Dane. O answer me!” (1.4.23-4). After the Ghost has departed Hamlet tells Horatio emphatically that “It is an honest ghost...” (1.5.193). Greenblatt also finds

it remarkable that Hamlet mentions Saint Patrick “the patron saint of purgatory” (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 233-34).

To further underscore its Catholic and Christian nature the Ghost specifically gives reasons for its torments: he was murdered “in the blossoms of my sins” (1.5.75). Also, he was denied access to heaven because his life ended suddenly while he could not get the salvific benefits of Catholic sacraments. In the Ghost’s words, he died “unhouseled, di-sappointed, unaneled” (1.5.76). These three terms refer to three of the seven Catholic sacraments: “the Eucharist, Penance and the Anointing of the Sick”.¹¹ In effect, the Ghost states he is suffering in purgatorial hell because he died suddenly, without the benefits of receiving the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, without performing the sacrament of Penance, which requires repentance for sins and confession before a priest who could grant Absolution, and thirdly, he died without receiving the rite of Extreme Unction or Anointing of the Sick in accordance with the Catholic belief to facilitate a dying person’s soul’s passage to heaven. Thus, the Ghost’s origins and his strongly held beliefs are deeply Catholic. In this regard, it may seem surprising that Hamlet—who is a student at Protestant university of Wittenberg—has no objections to the Ghost’s deeply Catholic beliefs and origins. But to expect him to react in opposition to Catholic doctrine and beliefs is to misunderstand how Shakespeare is using syncretic Christian beliefs for dramatic expedience.

Also, in the second scene of the fifth act Hamlet himself echoes Catholic beliefs. As he tells Horatio, his forged documents instruct the English authorities that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should at once be put to death, without any “shriving-time allowed” (5.2.47). Shriving denotes confession of sins before a priest in order to receive Absolution. Hamlet’s comment also implies that the English understand and possibly practice the Catholic beliefs.

¹¹ “The Seven Sacraments of the Church”: retrieved from the Vatican website:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2.htm

Greenblatt notes how Shakespeare fills his plays with colourful descriptions of contemporary commodities, consumer goods, apparel, dresses, fashions, popular drinks and alcoholic beverages to captivate his audience's attention (*Norton Shakespeare* 4-5). I propose that, similarly, Shakespeare uses Hamlet's character's syncretic Christian beliefs and origins, which would have resonated with his contemporary audience by stirring their emotions and appealing to their sense of religious awe and wonder. Indeed, Christian theology and doctrine are not relegated to a supplementary part in *Hamlet*; rather, they play an active and significant role in Hamlet's characterization and the play's plot. The contemporary audience would be very alert to Hamlet's biblical references, Christian beliefs and mode of thinking. Therefore, it would be possible for the audience to gauge Hamlet's conflicted thoughts and dilemma—rooted in religious belief—as portrayed in his various soliloquies.

Moreover, apart from the character of Hamlet (and the Ghost) other major and minor characters in the play often engage with the Christian beliefs. Elsinore is a thoroughly Christian setting with “Christian” characters, that is, they have clearly grown up in a world rife with Christian institutions, doctrine, popular beliefs and practices. However, Hamlet is unique in his highly idealistic and at times literal and fanatical fidelity to Christian doctrine. It is especially this kind of Christian fidelity that makes it impossible for Hamlet to choose premeditated violence and murder in order to complete his duty to take revenge. In the fourth scene of the fourth act Hamlet specifically spells out the need for “bloody” thoughts and actions in order to realize his revenge. In this scene, when Hamlet learns about Fortinbras's military attack on Poland, his curiosity is piqued and he directs many questions to an army Captain about the nature of this attack. The Captain informs Hamlet that the armies of both sides are fighting over an insignificant piece of land. When all other characters leave the stage, Hamlet delivers a lengthy soliloquy that begins thus: “How all occasions do inform against me,/ And spur my

dull revenge!” (4.4.32-3 Signet Classics edition).¹² In the soliloquy Hamlet considers it a matter of great shame for himself that all these soldiers are risking their life “for an egg-shell” because their “honour’s at the stake”. Compared to these soldiers, Hamlet describes his own situation thus:

How stand I then,
 That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
 Excitements of my reason and my blood,
 And let all sleep? (4.4.56-9).

Thus Hamlet considers it necessary that Claudius’s wicked acts be punished by him. Yet, he cannot act. Hamlet cannot understand what indeed is keeping him from taking revenge on Claudius, even as he goes on to acknowledge that “Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means /To do't” (4.4.45-6). However, at the end of the soliloquy Hamlet correctly identifies the need for violence: “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (4.4.65-6). Hamlet recognizes that his own honour is at stake and that for the sake of that honour he must act against Claudius— but still, no consideration of honour or revenge can override his fidelity to the biblical and Christian precepts against revenge and murder. This becomes more evident through comparison with one of Shakespeare’s sources. Christian considerations do not worry Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Historiae Danicae*, “compiled at the end of twelfth century” (Hibbard 6). Indeed, “The tale Saxo tells conforms to the pattern of blood revenge so common in Norse Saga” (6). Witte too considers Saxo’s story of revenge as a product of contemporary “late medieval” Danish society in which Amleth’s revenge would be

¹² The Oxford edition of *Hamlet* excises one of the most important soliloquies from fourth scene of fourth act. Therefore, I quote here from the Signet Classics edition.

“doubly justified” because Amleth could kill the murderer of his father and the noble and beloved king (4).

As I have noted in the first chapter, even in Shakespeare’s own time most revenge plays based on the Senecan model depicted bloodthirsty revenge, for example, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. But in *Hamlet* the revenge mission follows a rather biblical or Christian model as determined by Hamlet’s particular Christian characteristics. In the next section I will explore significant Catholic underpinnings in Hamlet’s revenge.

Hamlet’s Remembrance and Revenge in a Catholic Context

So far I have tried to show how Shakespeare highlights the conflict between Christian and pagan worldviews on the issues of suicide, revenge and murder. I have also noted that although the New Testament teachings urge Christians to forsake revenge, selective verses from the Old Testament support *lex talionis* in certain situations. Although, for Hamlet, Christian commands against revenge outweigh multiple considerations of *lex talionis*, he is constantly reminded of his overdue revenge mission, not least by repeated appearances of his father’s purgatorial ghost who urges Hamlet to *remember* him. Even in the expository scene when the Ghost meets Hamlet for the first time, he stops mentioning the word “revenge” and makes repeated use of the word “remember”. Greenblatt notes this critical shift from vengeance to remembrance. It is with this new focus on remembrance that Shakespeare takes us inside the mind and conscience of Hamlet (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 208). In this section, I will detail how call for remembrance becomes a call for revenge when interpreted through the Catholic beliefs concerning honouring and aiding the dead through prayerful remembrance. The doctrine of Purgatory itself obligates the loved ones to practice a prayerful remembrance of their deceased

to ease the purgatorial torment. Thus, in Catholic doctrine and traditions, remembrance of the deceased relatives and friends occupies a very important place.

In the expository scene both Hamlet and the Ghost realize that great injustice has been done and that Claudius must pay for his gross sins and crimes. Yet, both are uncertain as to how should Claudius be punished. At first, the Ghost asks Hamlet to revenge his murder. But soon the Ghost begins to hesitate from making direct references to revenge. Rather, his speech is full of pathos and grief at being wronged by his own brother and wife. By the time the Ghost departs the call for revenge has been completely replaced by call for remembrance. There are many precedents in Western literature where dead characters impress upon the surviving loved ones to remember them or cherish their memory. For example, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus's mother Anticleia "wishes her story to be known and remembered in the world of the living" (Casey 85). In the Christian era, in Dante's *Purgatorio*, a dead female character begs to be remembered (Casey 85). According to Richard Kearney one possibility is that what King Hamlet's ghost says is: "Tell my tale and transmit my memory to future generations so that my role in history—abruptly cut off—can be restored" (158). I would argue, however, that this is exactly what the Ghost is *not* saying. When the Ghost asks Hamlet to remember him he is not asking that his life story should be remembered or that monuments should be erected so that he could be kept alive in public memory. The Ghost never communicates with anyone else except Hamlet, though he appears before a few other characters in the play. As opposed to the cliché of "forgive and forget", Susan Jacoby states that "Remembrance is unquestionably a form of revenge..." (1). Accordingly, the Ghost wants Hamlet never to forget that he has a duty to take revenge on behalf of his murdered father's suffering soul languishing in Purgatory. Therefore, through a call for remembrance in *Hamlet*, the pagan code of *lex talionis* also assumes a distinctly Catholic and Christian character.

Stephen Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare's own sensitivity to the status of the dead became acute after the death of his son Hamnet in 1596, and after his father John's death in 1601 (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 248). Beatrice Groves traces Catholic influences on Shakespeare's plays and writes that "*Hamlet*, for example, can be read as an extended meditation on maimed funeral rights" (3). Similarly, Thomas Rist notes that in the Catholic Church commemorating Christ's life and death and re-presentation of Christ's death in the mass has always been a central tenet. In due course, the meaning of this "remembrance" became an issue of heated debates between traditionalists and Reformers (3). More importantly, this remembrance of Christ in the Catholic traditions had become tied to certain beliefs and rituals dealing with the death of loved ones. "Christian remembrance of the dead entailed repeated performances of prayerful memory, themselves considered effective aids to the dead in Purgatory" (4). Thus, according to this belief, it was up to the surviving relatives and friends to bring comfort to the soul of a loved one suffering in Purgatory. Even after the advent of the English Reformation the Catholic beliefs about Purgatory and praying for dead souls remained common practice. In the contemporary revenge tragedies "corpses are repeatedly viewed as dishonoured and thus devalued if deprived of their funeral's ritual..." (17). Hence, the Ghost of King Hamlet makes a special mention of his violated pre-funeral rites to Hamlet who is under the impression that his father received proper Christian burial and the sacraments in accordance with Church doctrine and rituals. Hamlet is greatly distressed to learn about his father's violated pre-funeral rites that are prolonging his purgatorial torments. Additionally, to underline the lack of respect shown towards his father's death and the mourning phase, Hamlet makes a caustic remark about Claudius and Gertrude's hasty marriage: "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.180-1).

There is a constant emphasis on mourning the dead in *Hamlet*. In fact, Hamlet is introduced in the second scene of the first act in deep mourning while both Gertrude and

Claudius try to discourage Hamlet from lengthy mourning. Notably, Reformation England particularly discouraged and condemned excessive mourning as a sign of heathenism or popery. During the reign of Elizabeth elaborate funeral rites and symbolism were seen as Catholic superstitions (Rist 24). In his 1553 sermon Hugh Latimer states that “In the time of popery, before the gospel came amongst us...we went to burials, with weping and waiting, as though there were no god” (Latimer qtd. in Rist 22). The official Church of England discouraged excessive mourning and rituals at funerals as they, supposedly, encouraged belief in Purgatory. Purgatory was considered an unbiblical Catholic superstition by most Protestants. Against this background, it is remarkable that *Hamlet* opens with the death of King Hamlet and his son in deep mourning for which he gets criticized by Gertrude and Claudius. Gertrude urges Hamlet: “Do not for ever with thy veiled lids/ Seek for thy noble father in the dust” (1.2.70-1). For an Elizabethan audience, Claudius’s objections to Hamlet’s mourning are much longer and strongly polemical. Therefore, Shakespeare makes deft use of popular contemporary discourses concerning funeral and mourning.

As per the Catholic beliefs that Hamlet’s character is so attuned to, after his first encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet cannot ignore the fact that it is his utmost duty to ensure that his beloved father’s funeral rites are honoured, his purgatorial anguish is abated and his call for remembrance is obeyed by taking revenge on his behalf. Claudius, as Hamlet puts it, “hath killed my king and whored my mother...” (5.2.65). Hamlet finds it impossible to separate remembrance from revenge. Even so, despite powerful calls for revenge due to *lex talionis* as well as King Hamlet’s purgatorial suffering, Hamlet fails to contravene the New Testament injunctions against revenge and bloodshed, and therefore, he continues to refrain from killing Claudius. Consequently, Hamlet’s guilt and suffering keep increasing as the play progresses. As opposed to most other revenge tragedy protagonists, this is quintessentially Hamlet’s dilemma made ever intense because of Hamlet’s constant adherence to the biblical text and

Christian doctrine. Jacoby writes that “Blood revenge is a central theme of all Greek tragedy...” (23). In *Hamlet’s* case, however, it is the morality of blood revenge as seen from Hamlet’s Christian worldview that becomes the central theme.

As noted earlier, the issue of Purgatory and prayerful commemoration to aid the dead was very contentious in early modern England. While unofficially many people continued to believe in these age-old traditions and beliefs, the new Protestant establishment was alarmed at their existence (Rist 8-9). Many scholars—including Michael Neill—focus on instances of contemporary “theatre’s exploitation of this anxiety and performative controversy” (9). Scholars such as Peter Milward read Shakespeare’s Catholic leanings in such Catholic symbolism in his plays. Although I agree that Shakespeare uses these conflicts between Catholic and Protestant worldviews in Reformation England to enhance the dramatic tension, I reject the notion that Shakespeare sets up “Catholic” Hamlet as a victim in a rival “Protestant” world. Shakespeare does not use Catholic imagery for subversive or didactic purposes, but only so far as it serves to create dramatic tension.

I also reject the conclusion—as presented by John Curran—that Hamlet is portrayed as either exclusively Catholic or Protestant. As far as the audience can gauge, Hamlet goes to a Protestant university but at the same time he is also comfortable with his father’s Catholic beliefs and the Ghost’s purgatorial origins. This syncretism in Hamlet’s religious beliefs is not Shakespeare’s invention or poetic licence. In fact, as I will discuss in the next section, like the contemporary Church of England, Hamlet’s own beliefs are a mixture of Catholic and Protestant.

Catholicism and “Calvinistic-Protestantism” in *Hamlet*

Hamlet’s focus never seems to be the act of revenge. In the foreword to Curran’s book James Nohnberg writes that “Hamlet exhibits a vocation for perfection. The summons to exact justice

is transformed into a call to consummate something other than revenge” (xix). This “something other”, in effect, becomes a religious exercise that will trace Hamlet’s transformation from a Catholic to someone who exclusively subscribes to “Calvinistic-Protestantism”. Although I find this conclusion problematic, Curran’s research highlights important connections between *Hamlet*’s text and contemporary Christian beliefs and doctrines. When Hamlet is not busy pondering the morality of private revenge he is obsessed with sexuality and sin, which he understands through an exclusively Christian worldview; consequently, he judges Claudius and Gertrude’s marriage as incestuous as well as adulterous. He also spends a great deal of time ruminating about human mortality. His own father’s demise has made it impossible for Hamlet to avoid the question of death. The graveyard scene records in detail Hamlet’s philosophical and existential musings on human mortality. Hamlet is unlike the hero of any classical or contemporary revenge tragedy. “Purely Senecan revengers are compelled to contrive bigger and better crimes; Hamlet’s final preparations aim merely at his rendezvous with mortality...” (Nohnberg xix). Furthermore, in the Christian doctrine, private revenge was considered a mortal sin primarily because it “usurped the divine prerogative” (Jacoby 35). However, as I have discussed in the earlier section, by introducing the purgatorial theme and the Ghost’s insistence on remembrance, Shakespeare has also turned revenge into a religious duty for Hamlet.

Curran details *Hamlet*’s deep engagement with Catholic and Calvinistic-Protestant theology of Shakespeare’s time. Curran suggests that through *Hamlet* Shakespeare wanted to make a case for Catholic contingency against Calvinistic determinism (9). Contingency and free will were highly cherished concepts in Catholic doctrine. Medieval Christian scholar Thomas Aquinas stressed the place for contingency within God’s will: “it is in the nature of some things to be contingent. Divine providence does not therefore impose any necessity upon things so as to destroy their contingency” (Aquinas qtd. in Curran 9). Scholars such as Philip

Edwards have pointed out that Hamlet's condemnation of the excessive drinking of the Danes reveals a type of Protestant absolutism (55). However, Curran counters this view: "Hamlet is an absolutist only in the sense that he demands of people a very high level of virtue..." (55). Hamlet, as Curran suggests, is not an absolutist but a "particularist" (56). Curran associates "absolutism" with Protestantism that does not leave room for contingency. Therefore, Curran applies the term "particularist" to Hamlet to give him "Catholic" attributes. As I shall explore in this section, such arbitrary application of labels—absolutist-Protestant and particularist-Catholic—to describe Hamlet's Christian characteristics is problematic.

Curran claims that before he capitulates to absolutist-Protestantism, Hamlet has free will that operates within a contingent "Catholic" universe: Hamlet "believes in the individual's responsibility to work through particular moral situations..." (56). The Ghost offers Hamlet an opportunity to exact a particular revenge that is "bound to pious memory and filial love" and carries "such spiritual discipline so that the mind is not tainted" (62). But this possibility is doomed as Hamlet is bound to turn into a common revenger who, as Curran puts it, will result in Hamlet causing unnecessary destruction and killing innocent people other than Claudius. However, it has to be noted that Hamlet does not seek to punish or kill anybody else but Claudius. He takes great care to avoid "collateral damage". He gives enough warnings to Polonius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to stay away from him, and later repeatedly emphasizes that he is not guilty of their death. After Hamlet inadvertently kills Polonius—thinking it is Claudius—he is angry with Polonius for being foolish and intrusive. In other words, Hamlet considers Polonius responsible for his own death. Hamlet himself mentions while looking at dead Polonius: "I took thee for thy better" (3.4.34). Therefore, Hamlet strongly believed that he was actually killing Claudius hiding behind the arras. Similarly, Hamlet has a long playful exchange with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz in the second scene of the second act. Through lively dialogue Hamlet warns them that he knows that they are acting at

Claudius's behest: "You were sent/ for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which/ your modesties have not craft enough to colour" (2.2.276-8). Soon Hamlet even ends up extracting a confession from Guildenstern: "My lord, we were sent for" (2.2.290). Still, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern conspire with Claudius to have Hamlet killed in England. As such, Hamlet's plan to get the conspirators killed is only an act of self-defence. The only two innocent characters who get killed during the play are Laertes and Ophelia. Laertes wants to kill Hamlet because he has been led to believe by Claudius that Hamlet has murdered his father in cold blood. When Laertes realizes Claudius's wickedness he is full of repentance. Hamlet has nothing but brotherly love for Laertes. Similarly, Hamlet deeply grieves when he learns about Ophelia's death. Hamlet never actively goes on a murder spree unlike most other revengers of contemporary revenge tragedies. Hence, as Curran claims, Hamlet does not turn into a common revenger. Rather, he continues to operate within the Christian doctrinal framework towards the consummation of his revenge. Additionally, to follow the Ghost's Christian qualification of the call for revenge, Hamlet tries his best not to taint his mind. Hamlet does not physically hurt Gertrude and until the end of the play he does not resort to foul play, unlike Laertes.

Further, Curran writes about deep Catholic symbolism intertwined with Hamlet's duty to revenge. As per "the logic of purgatory...punishment is diminished or protracted depending on the level of zeal in the activity of the living" (82). Consequently, the Ghost emphasizes his purgatorial suffering and asks Hamlet to take revenge because of the love that he owes to his dead father. Therefore, the expository scene between Hamlet and the Ghost establishes "the powerful idea of revenge as prayer for the dead..." (137). I too have acknowledged this connection earlier in this chapter and agree with Curran's illuminating examples. Curran points out that in the fifteenth-century theological treatise, *Dives and Pauper*, children are urged to honour their dead parents through respectful memory and pious living, but "forgetful

negligence of dead relatives...is painted as an especially heinous sin..." (84).¹³ Against this background, Hamlet's insistence on mourning his father in the face of Claudius and Gertrude's disapproval, sets him up as a character of strong Catholic beliefs and disposition. "In the 'Hecuba' speech...he scourges himself not for forgetting but for ineffectual remembering" (88). Curran suggests that the purgatorial theme accounts for Hamlet's delay because he wants to "dignify time" by spending it in prayerful commemoration (103). However, as I note in the next chapter, the Ghost definitely does not view Hamlet's delay in such terms. Additionally, Curran states that Hamlet's delay can be further explained by Catholic doctrine of merit: "a performance of being and seeming to which God responds in proportion to its excellence" (104). In this context, the pursuit of revenge becomes Hamlet's religious performance and he wants to deliver it carefully and impressively: "It must be a mighty display which communicates the great feeling lying behind it to an attentive audience" (104). While to a degree Curran's observations are significant and valid, he omits in his research the real reason for Hamlet's delay: unlike Laertes, Hamlet cannot act because such an action will comprise commission of violence and a premeditated murder. Hamlet delays not because he wants to give a meritorious religious performance but rather the continuance of his revenger's performance (or pretence) prevents him from consummating private revenge that will certainly damn his soul. In his soliloquy in the fourth scene of the fourth act Hamlet specifically underlines the need for violence and bloodshed if he is to accomplish his revenge mission. Indeed, Hamlet's tortuous attempts to work his way out of his Christian inhibitions and

¹³ Although there is no reason to believe why Hamlet's character's Protestant leanings should not compel him to honour his father by taking revenge on his behalf. As Shuger notes, in the first authoritative document of English Puritanism, *De regno Christi*, Martin Bucer writes that "After God, certainly the greatest honor and reverence is due from children to their parents" (Bucer qtd. in Shuger 26).

proscriptions account for his delay. I will discuss in detail how Hamlet manages to do that in the third and final chapter of this thesis.

Furthermore, as Nohrnberg puts it, Hamlet is definitely obsessed with human mortality. Hamlet's deep meditations on mortality engage deeply with Christian doctrine and worldview even when they are portrayed in general and seemingly non-religious terms. For example, as Curran notes, in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy "the apparent source for the 'undiscovered country' passage is the popular and Protestant-slanted *French Academie...*" (92). Curran's extensive research establishes *Hamlet's* deep engagement with Catholic and Protestant-Calvinistic doctrines. There is ample historical evidence that during Shakespeare's lifetime Calvinistic doctrine and theology exerted a powerful influence on Protestant European and English societies. English translations of Calvin's works were very popular and influential, and "William Perkins's Calvinistic sermons in Cambridge between 1592 and 1602 were immensely popular..." (David Daniell 28). Shell writes that "for much of Shakespeare's working life, the Church of England was, in effect, a Calvinist Church" (10). However, the acceptance of "High" Calvinism—in particular, the rigid belief that individual souls were predestined by God to go to heaven or hell—was not universal (10). The picture of contemporary religious life—Catholic and Protestant—was both complex and in a flux. Shakespeare makes expert use of these ambiguities to appeal to his audience's attention.

Curran proposes that *Hamlet* captures society's transformation from a Catholic identity to a Protestant one—Hamlet struggles to hold on to a Catholic worldview but eventually concedes to Calvinistic-Protestantism (2). The play portrays Calvinism's theology "that in truth we are totally helpless and totally constrained to move in one and only one path in life" (2). Hamlet returns from the sea voyage as a changed man: "he embraces the dictates of Protestantism and all the philosophical ramifications they entail" (3). While many of Curran's observations about *Hamlet's* engagement with Catholic and Protestant sources are insightful, I

reject his conclusion as to how and why Shakespeare uses the religious content in *Hamlet*. For example, Curran's idea of Catholic Hamlet versus Protestant Hamlet is too simplistic. It is problematic to state that at one given time Hamlet is exclusively Catholic while at other time he is Protestant, and has ceased to be Catholic. As far as Catholicism and Protestantism are concerned, Hamlet's religious characteristics, if not ecumenical, are certainly syncretic. I would argue that Shakespeare's portrayal of religious matter in *Hamlet*—and in many other plays for that matter—reflects contemporary proto-Anglican belief system.¹⁴ The Elizabethan Church of England was an English experiment to reach a compromise between extant Catholicism and newly emerged Protestantism. Besides, as Christopher Marsh reminds us, the distinctions of Protestant and Catholic were not as well defined in the sixteenth-century England as they are in modern times: “people were able to hold onto aspects of Catholic belief and practice, while simultaneously learning to think of themselves as Protestants...” (11). Therefore, it is not odd that Shakespeare portrays Hamlet as being comfortable with Catholic beliefs and sacraments. In effect, Shakespeare makes use of both prevalent Catholic and Protestant beliefs and doctrines for dramatic purposes.

Regardless of the Catholic Hamlet and Protestant Hamlet debate, as far as the central issues of revenge, murder and suicide in *Hamlet* are concerned, the Catholic and Protestant worldviews rarely differed from each other. Writing in 2009, Michael Davies mentions that in the last “15 years” there has been a “near-seismic shift in literary, biographical and historical interest in Shakespeare and religion” (1). However, the overwhelming focus of this new trend—which in fact only echoes similar debates in the distant past of Shakespeare studies—is that it seeks to establish Shakespeare either as a Catholic writer or at least a writer with notable Catholic sympathies (1). On the other hand, “studies seeking to explore Shakespeare

¹⁴ The word “Anglican” was not in use at the time Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*. The accepted name of English Protestant church was Church of England.

and Protestantism seem undeniably harder to come by” (2). Accordingly, Davies sees the need for more scholarship that explores the relationship between Shakespearean texts and contemporary Protestantism. But why has there been such an overwhelming interest in Shakespeare’s plays’ Catholicism? Davies argues that this “Catholic” Shakespeare phenomenon could be explained by popular and academic culture’s predisposition towards focusing on and championing the marginalized and subordinate cultures (3). On the other hand, a staid, conformist, Anglican or Protestant Shakespeare offers no such opportunities (4).

Yet, as other critics stress, any attempt to identify Shakespeare’s own religious biases through his plays’ content is problematic. For example, Claire Griffiths-Osborne notes that just because *Measure for Measure* puts the performance of confession onstage it does not make it largely a play that casts a nostalgic look at Catholicism (36). Rather, she argues, *Measure for Measure* “dramatizes a multiplicity of ways in which both individuals and communities deal with the problem of sin in a post-Reformation context of doctrinal plurality” (36). Similarly, a close reading of *Hamlet* reveals that there is no exclusive Catholic or Protestant thematic bias in the play. Instead, Catholic and Protestant beliefs feature in the play simultaneously in order to increase the dramatic tension. The expository scene (1.5) between the Ghost and Hamlet is a typical example of such religious syncretism. In this scene, the Ghost’s predominantly Catholic beliefs in the sacraments and Purgatory coexist with Hamlet’s status as the student of Wittenberg. R. Chris Hassel underlines strong Puritan or Protestant characteristics of Hamlet. Hamlet, like a typical contemporary Puritan, is seen constantly preaching morality and decorum to most other characters in the play, even Polonius, after Hamlet has killed him (287). Furthermore, it is also significant that Hamlet is portrayed as dressed in a Puritan-like garb, “the customary suits of solemn black”, and that “the Puritans, also like Hamlet, carried ‘tables’ or diaries to remind themselves of the dictates of conscience” (287). In recent years, historians have demonstrated that Elizabethan Puritanism was far closer to mainstream Protestantism than

previously thought (288). Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet as a Protestant (and Puritan) Prince at the beginning of the play contradicts John Curran's thesis that Hamlet's characterization is predominantly Catholic before his return from the sea in the fifth act. In the expository scene it becomes clear that Hamlet is comfortable with Protestant as well as Catholic beliefs. In fact, both father and son find much common ground—despite their differing denominational affiliations—as both of them obsessively focus on the “sins” of adultery and incest that Gertrude and Claudius are guilty of. This sort of Christian syncretism, especially in the character of Hamlet, allows Shakespeare to have a broader appeal among his audience.

Furthermore, even a brief study of the history of early Church of England reveals that many Catholic beliefs and practices were part of its official doctrine. *The Ten Articles* issued in 1536 was Church of England's first official statute as a reformed church and which rejected the authority of Pope. Yet, these articles of faith retained many Roman Catholic beliefs, for example, the third article recognizes the sacrament of Penance. Moreover, the tenth article states: “That prayers for the dead are good and useful, but the efficacy of papal pardon, and of soul-masses offered at certain localities, is negatived.”¹⁵ A year later, in 1537, *Bishop's Book* consisted of “a series of sermons or homilies designed to lead national beliefs in a new direction” (Mark Nicholls 55). Although *Bishop's Book* takes some firm steps towards evangelical Christianity—such as measuring the validity and authority of doctrine against the biblical text—it still retained many Catholic beliefs, for example, the Catholic sacraments (55). Clearly, then, the Ghost's seemingly Catholic beliefs are but the beliefs held by the early Church of England.

¹⁵ “The Ten Articles, 1536” (<http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/tenarticles.htm>)

Conclusion

In the first chapter I focused on the theme of revenge in order to contrast *Hamlet* with other contemporary revenge tragedies. I concluded that *Hamlet* only superficially adopts the genre of revenge tragedy. Due to its protagonist's essentially Christian characteristics, *Hamlet* ends up subverting the revenge tragedy genre. In this second chapter, I tried to focus in more detail upon the uses made by Shakespeare of contemporary Christian beliefs and doctrine in order to enhance the dramatic effect of his play. I especially focused on the purgatorial theme in the play. I also concluded that, when measured against contemporary religious life and doctrine, despite the Ghost and Hamlet's seemingly "Catholic" characteristics, it would be misleading to consider them as "Catholic characters". It would be even more erroneous to state, as John Curran does, that Shakespeare wrote the play in order to subvert the contemporary Protestant establishment with his Catholic characters. Even a cursory reading of contemporary English religious life proves that the Church of England was neither Catholic nor Protestant but only a syncretic mix of both, and it remained in a state of flux. Therefore, people held on to both Catholic and Protestant beliefs, often failing to distinguish any significant contradictions. In that *Hamlet* and its Hamlet only represent the contemporary syncretic Christianity.

It is fallacious to conclude that Shakespeare offers religious polemics through his plays. Alison Shell points out that often Shakespeare makes his characters utter the religious polemics of his age to enhance the dramatic experience. For example in *Titus Andronicus*, a play set in ancient Rome, "Aaron the Moor characterizes Lucius, Titus's son, as observing 'twenty popish tricks and ceremonies'..." (11). Additionally, Shakespeare "also absorbed material hostile to Catholicism in *King Lear*..." (11). And yet, Shakespeare uses Catholic settings and likable characters "who are nuns and friars in plays such as *Measure for Measure*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*" (12). Similarly, I conclude that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare was not

creating a character with particular kind of Christian characteristics to negate rival Christian factions. Instead, Shakespeare only represents the contemporary religious beliefs in order to arrest his audience's interest. Because of *Hamlet's* consistent engagement with Christianity, the audience are forced to think about the conflicting ideas about revenge in the Bible—from the Old Testament's endorsement of *lex talionis* to the New Testament's total rejection of private revenge. Also, the biblical verses regarding a cuckolded husband's right to take revenge merit a close attention, as do verses that define incest and adultery—especially when they apply to Claudius and Gertrude's marriage—as gross violations of God's laws.

Hamlet's engagement with the doctrine of Purgatory further adds complexity to the plot, especially when it equates remembrance with revenge. Consequently, as the title of this thesis suggests, Hamlet struggles with the issues of remembrance. He cannot forget one set of biblical and doctrinal injunctions and favour others. Hamlet promises the Ghost: “And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain...” (1.5.102-3). However, the Ghost's Christian qualification of his commandment itself forces Hamlet to recall and consider the complex and conflicting ideas concerning revenge in the Bible. How, then, is Hamlet able to resolve these issues of remembrance through his revenger's performance with the help of Christian doctrine is the subject of my next and final chapter. I will explore how incorporation of the idea of Christian providence to his revenger's performance allows Hamlet to complete his revenge.

Chapter 3: Performance and Christian Providence in Hamlet's Revenge

It is my aim in this final chapter to explore how Shakespeare is able to bring his unique revenge play to completion, if not to a resolution. As I've discussed in the previous two chapters, Hamlet the revenger stands apart from the revengers of most other contemporary revenge tragedies. Instead of the pursuit of a violent revenge, it is Hamlet's interiority or inner life that dominates the play. As John Lee writes, "In Shakespeare criticism up to the early nineteenth century, answers to questions of identity and identification became very quickly bound up with *Hamlet*" (150). Analyzing Prince Hamlet's character became one of the main preoccupations of Shakespeare studies (150). Additionally, Judd D. Hubert states that Hamlet's character's "performative presence" shapes the play in unexpected ways: "He appears as a student prince compelled to avenge his father, but also as the actor entrusted with the star part" (96).

I submit that if Hamlet's character plays such a central role in *Hamlet*, then it is essential to understand what sort of characteristics Shakespeare gives him that in turn will affect the design and plot of the play. As I have argued so far, in focusing on Hamlet's inner life Shakespeare highlights the deeply rooted Christian beliefs that largely determine his character's thoughts and actions. I have also emphasized that Hamlet's Christian characterization is not driven by didactic purposes but by the aim of enhancing dramatic tension, especially for the contemporary audience with its exceptional biblical literacy. In this chapter I will explore whether Hamlet as an independent performer delivers his improvised revenger's performance within the Christian doctrinal and theological framework.

The play's final outcome—especially concerning the revenge mission—is shaped by the unique characteristics of its protagonist. Walter N. King writes that Hamlet has "an absolute ethic rooted in Christian belief" (102). As I concluded earlier, it is because of Hamlet's

character's strong adherence to Christian beliefs and doctrine that he fails to be a bloodthirsty revenger unlike those of most other contemporary revenge plays. Consequently, unlike other contemporary revenge tragedies, the play cannot simply end as soon as Hamlet gets an opportunity to murder Claudius. In fact, for much of the play's length we read about Hamlet's various invented pretexts to miss opportunities to murder Claudius. Hamlet the reluctant and unwilling revenger's procrastination—and inner mental and spiritual turmoil resulting from such procrastination—forms the crux of the play's plot. How, then, is Hamlet able to overcome his predominantly Christian compunctions in order to carry out the Ghost's "dread command"? In this chapter I will also attempt to answer this question.

Many Shakespeare scholars—for example John Curran, as discussed in the second chapter—suggest that the play tracks its protagonist's religious journey. Witte writes that Hamlet "searches for religious truths" (2). My own research shows that these conclusions are problematic if not altogether speculative. As I will attempt to show, Hamlet does not undergo any major religious transformation; rather he appropriates and modulates his knowledge of the biblical text and Christian doctrine to facilitate his revenger's performance in a way that eventually enables him to consummate his revenge.

In the next section I will discuss how Shakespeare's particular focus on Hamlet's inner life brings his Christian disposition—and the resulting dilemma—into sharper relief that will eventually require solutions within Christian doctrinal and theological framework.

Hamlet's Peculiar Dilemma: The Christian Doctrine and Murder

Hallett and Hallett write that after the Ghost enjoins Hamlet to take revenge on his behalf—and thereby implicitly asks him to commit murder—it becomes "the basis of Hamlet's dilemma and the conflict from which plot, character, and theme will develop" (188). By the end of the

encounter Hamlet considers the Ghost's command akin to a curse, and later in the play he calls it a "dread command" (3.4.101). Harry Levin calls it Hamlet's "cruel mandate" (67). But why is this mandate cruel and why is it so dreaded by Hamlet? More specifically, what dilemma has been created in Hamlet's conscience after his first encounter with the Ghost? In my discussion so far I have maintained that this so called dilemma hinges on Hamlet's deep seated beliefs in Christian doctrine, which come in direct conflict with the Ghost's command and his own duty to take revenge. To further complicate Hamlet's dilemma, some contemporary Christian beliefs, especially those pertaining to the Catholic tradition, strongly bind Hamlet with an obligation to commemorate the memory of his dead father—by taking revenge on his behalf—whose soul is languishing in purgatorial hell.

According to Curran, Hamlet "remembers his cause but remains 'unpregnant' of it" (88). In other words, the only thing that is missing from Hamlet's revenge mission is the acting of it, which entails a premeditated murder. Significantly, Hamlet does not lament that he lacks either reasons or opportunities to kill Claudius, but rather that he lacks the will and intention to kill him. It is apparent in the fifth scene of the fourth act that Claudius is barely surrounded by a pack of bodyguards. He almost gets killed by enraged Laertes. Only Gertrude's intercession and Claudius's own clever words protect his life. On the other hand, Hamlet, even after corroborating the Ghost's testimony during his playlet, still fails to kill Claudius. The question is, then: despite having accepted the duty to revenge his father's murder, what is it exactly that Hamlet is unable to bring himself to do? This is the question Hamlet himself grapples with in various speeches; sometimes he pins it down, but at other times he skirts around it. In the fourth scene of the fourth act, Hamlet is still struggling with his dilemma:

I do not know

Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"

Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means

To do't (Signet Classics edition 4.4.43-6)¹⁶

In this crucial soliloquy Hamlet himself is confused as to why he cannot murder one guilty and evil man when armies at war kill hundreds over trivial matters. At the end of this soliloquy Hamlet clearly spells out what is missing from his plans—the need for violence and bloodshed: “O, from this time forth,/ My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (4.4.65-6). Indeed, throughout the play, Hamlet’s speeches are saturated with this need for violence and bloodshed that he is simply not ready to act out. Often Hamlet makes elaborate indirect references to the much needed acts of violence in his revenge mission. For example, while conversing with the players, this is how Hamlet remembers lines from a play that record Pyrrhus’s bloodthirsty quest for revenge for his father’s murder:

Roasted in wrath and fire,
 And thus o’r-sized with coagulate gore,
 With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
 Old grandsire Priam seeks (2.2.452-5).

Hamlet realizes that this is exactly the kind of blood-stained and blood-soaked revenger he needs to be. In this context, the soliloquy in the fourth scene of the fourth act raises a further crucial question: why, then, can Hamlet not shed blood to avenge his father’s murder? It is something he does not know, or at least does not pinpoint, perhaps because the reason is so apparent as to need no elucidation. As a critical reference point, as I have discussed in detail in

¹⁶ The Oxford Edition of *Hamlet* that I use in this thesis omits this important soliloquy by Hamlet in its entirety.

my previous chapters, the audience are given a significant insight into Hamlet's character at the beginning of the play, that is, he strongly abides by Christian doctrine and beliefs. It is only his Christian beliefs that stop him from committing suicide at the beginning of the play. Later in the play, despite the obligation to repay Claudius for his crime, due to the Christian injunctions, Hamlet can neither consummate private revenge nor can he commit an act of premeditated murder. His religious beliefs do not allow him moral justification for revenge or murder. As I will discuss later, it is this justification he seeks throughout the play. This justification can only come to him through personal theologizing and rationalization that must take place within his Christian and biblical worldview.

Against this background, in this final chapter I will also attempt to explain how—if as I have argued, *Hamlet* and its revenger protagonist are different from traditional revenge plays and their revenger protagonists—Shakespeare is able to bring about the play's end by having the reluctant and unwilling Hamlet kill Claudius. I propose that Shakespeare does so by having Hamlet kill Claudius without actually willing to do so. In other words, the act of revenge occurs rapidly and inadvertently as an act of manslaughter, as opposed to a coldblooded murder. While waiting for the fortuitous moment Hamlet merely keeps up the *performance* of a revenger, without ever possessing the will and intention of a revenger. Furthermore, I submit that Hamlet's performance as a revenger is intimately bound with his Christian beliefs. In the play's final act as Hamlet's revenger's performance evolves, so does his view of the revenge mission as seen from a particular theological and biblical perspective. Throughout his revenger's performance, Hamlet does not withdraw from his Christian beliefs but rather he incorporates the idea of divine justice to his revenge mission. Such constant adherence to Christianity is unique when compared to Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* who seeks inspiration for his revenge mission from what clearly appears to be a classical hell modeled after Senecan revenge tragedies. Similarly, in one of Shakespeare's own revenge plays "Titus Andronicus urges his

kinsmen to dig a passage to Pluto's region, with a petition 'for justice and for aid'" (Catherine Belsey 111). For Hamlet, however, the concepts of justice and aid must be synchronized with an exclusively Christian and biblical worldview.

Additionally, Hamlet gives a wider public and divine dimension to his private revenge by enlarging its scope: Claudius has not only treacherously killed his beloved father but also—as he mentions in his first soliloquy—a just, kind and fair king who was loved by his subjects (1.2.39-40). As Hamlet goes on to mention in this soliloquy, Claudius—"My father's brother"—has married his mother (1.2.51-2). Claudius has polluted the fountainhead of Denmark with corruption and sin. Even the Ghost gives Hamlet strong hints as to why his revenge could also be pursued as a public cause:

If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not,
 Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
 A couch for luxury and damned incest (1.5.81-3)

Thus, by killing Claudius Hamlet would not only purge Denmark of an evil ruler, but he will also punish a gross violator of divine laws, as judged by the biblical perspective and Christian doctrine. As the events of the fifth act's duel scene unfold, for one random but fortuitous moment, for Hamlet, the performance becomes action and brings about the play's long-delayed ending through realization of revenge.

Revenge, Performance and Procrastination in *Hamlet*

Most revenge tragedies end when the criminal is killed or brought to justice by the protagonist or the prime revenger. In *Hamlet* too, Claudius is killed eventually. However, Claudius's killing

does not come across as a carefully planned murder. As Greenblatt puts it in his introduction to the Norton Shakespeare edition: “The act of revenge itself happens in a flash of rage, without planning, without any self-vindication by Hamlet to Claudius, and without any public confession of guilt by the usurper” (1073). Furthermore, unlike many other revenge plays, the consummation of revenge does not bring Hamlet any real satisfaction; for example, he does not even feel comforted by the fact that finally he has proved himself as a worthy son and relieved his father’s purgatorial torment. In many revenge plays the ghosts of the murdered are supposed to derive succor when their kin take revenge on their behalf. In *Hamlet*, however, neither Hamlet nor Horatio mentions the Ghost at the end of the play, despite the fact they both know about the purgatorial suffering of the Ghost. By contrast, in *Julius Caesar*, Cassius feels that the death and defeat of Caesar’s assassins will bring comfort to Caesar’s tormented spirit. He dies with these words: “Caesar, thou art revenged,/ Even with the sword that killed thee” (5.3.44-5). In *Hamlet*, though revenge is wrought in the end, the word “revenge” is never mentioned. Moreover, as Greenblatt points out, what dying Hamlet does feel is “intense anxiety over his ‘wounded name’” (*Norton Shakespeare* 1073). Thus, even when the act of revenge is realized in the play it achieves effects that run counter to the design of most other contemporary revenge plays. Indeed, once Hamlet has completed his assigned mission by killing Claudius, the performance of the revenger is no longer required and is quickly dispensed with. Taken as a whole, the play becomes a mere register of Hamlet’s character’s psychological and spiritual journey as seen through the religious (Christian) struggles raging within his mind over the issues of revenge and murder. It is the *performance* of revenge that allows Hamlet to move towards and finally, when the fortuitous moment presents itself, complete his revenge in a fit of rage.

In their research on revenge tragedies Hallett and Hallett focus a great deal on revenge as a performance or an act of madness. They posit a theory that the whole structure of a revenge

tragedy contains the revenger's efforts to break free from the qualms of pursuing revenge. It is "a process that involves moving from sanity to madness" (9). Forsaking the need for revenge forms "a civilized rational man" (9). Therefore, madness frees the revenger from reason and from the constraints of civilized or moral conduct. In this context, Laertes's mad fury, for example, allows him to disregard any conventions or piety that may encumber his pursuit of revenge. Indeed, it is Laertes's madness that makes transgression possible for him; he rails thus before Claudius and Gertrude: "To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil!/ Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!/ I dare damnation" (4.5.105-7). However, to begin with, this theory of the Halletts ignores the obligation to take revenge under *lex talionis* that has existed in many societies for thousands of years. The principle of *lex talionis* does not require the revenger to be mad and lose control of his or her senses. Instead, it provides a rational and honourable justification for revenge. Bound by *lex talionis*, it becomes the revenger's solemn duty to take revenge. Therefore, the revenger's madness is not necessarily a process of losing control over one's mental faculties. Nevertheless, a performance or pretense of madness, as typified by Hamlet's "antic disposition", can be a great enabler to a revenger as I will discuss later in this chapter.

The Halletts propose that during the phase of becoming mad the revenger "hardens himself" to carry out his revenge. This period is represented symbolically by the delay until "The delay leads to and ends at the play-within-play, for entrance into this self-created illusory world is what finally allows the revenger to act" (10). Indeed, the madness of Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* and of Titus in *Titus Andronicus* plays a prominent role in their revenge. Titus has hardened to such a degree that he gives his revenge a morbid twist first by gruesomely murdering Tamora's sons and then by cunningly making her eat their flesh. In his madness Titus also has no compunction about killing his own daughter. Hieronimo rages against the authorities as well as God to intensify his madness and outrage after his son, Horatio, is

murdered. All the same, it is problematic to consider that Hieronimo, Titus and other revengers purposely generate madness to *motivate* their need for revenge. Why indeed their madness or furious state not be a natural reaction based on *lex talionis*? In other words, it is quite possible that their intense grief over the pending revenge on behalf of a murdered loved one itself produces madness. In addition, there is a significant difference in the madness of other protagonists—for example, Hieronimo—and Hamlet’s madness. As I will try to demonstrate further, Hamlet’s madness is feigned; it allows him to keep up his revenger’s performance.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Christian symbols do not aid Hieronimo’s revenge (Hallet and Hallet 147). “Hieronimo’s experience tells him that heaven no longer hears the prayers of man. Its walls have become impenetrable: they ‘give my words no way’...” (139). Gurr states that in the “vindicta mihi” speech Hieronimo turns “from public to ‘wild’ justice” (xiii). I submit that in *Hamlet* the process is exactly reversed, that is, Hamlet withdraws from the idea of wild justice and moves towards the idea of revenge as public and divine justice. Meanwhile, unlike Hieronimo, Hamlet’s reliance on Christian doctrine never wavers to the extent that he would become completely disillusioned with his religious belief. In effect, Hamlet’s madness is quite different from the vengeful fury shown by other revengers. Even the Halletts admit that despite having the revenge tragedy structure, *Hamlet* “is better approached as the study of a young man’s dawning awareness of the existence of evil in the world” (13). Indeed, “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* transcends the revenge theme...” (181). Therefore, Hamlet does not so much become mad as *feign* madness. During his mad phase Hamlet shows remarkable control over his mental faculties. He is able to fool almost everyone with his mask of madness. Polonius seems to suspect the genuineness of Hamlet’s madness: “Though this be madness, yet there is/ method in’t” (2.2.194-5). Claudius’s suspicions are more elaborate:

Love? His affections do not that way tend;

Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
 Was not like madness. There is something in his soul
 O'er which his melancholy sits on brood... (3.1.163-6).

In effect, madness for Hamlet is a way of procrastinating while he tries to find a way out of his dilemma. After his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet carefully plans the performance of his madness; as he reveals to Marcellus and Horatio under oath: “As I perchance hereafter shall think meet/ to put an antic disposition on...” (1.5.178-9). Therefore, Claudius’s observation is quite accurate—Hamlet is trying to use his feigned “antic disposition” and melancholic mental state to some particular ends. Additionally, Hamlet’s performance is of dual nature: one public and another private. Through his public performance Hamlet plans to confound others while he tries to resolve his dilemma. His public performance of madness is quite successful and often becomes a source of much humour, especially when Polonius translates it as Hamlet’s lovesickness over Ophelia’s rejection. Claudius is perhaps the only character who clearly sees through Hamlet’s performance of a lunatic prince.

I propose that along with his public “antic disposition” Hamlet also has to keep up the private performance of a willing revenger in order to assuage his guilty conscience burdened by his father’s remembrance and *lex talionis*. Hamlet’s performance as a revenger begins when the expository scene with the Ghost ends. At the beginning of the play we notice Hamlet—as he laments in his first soliloquy—in the grips of suicidal depression. In this very soliloquy he states the prime reason that has caused his profound gloom, that is, his mother’s overhasty marriage to “My father’s brother” (1.2.151-2). Also, Hamlet is grieved that Gertrude did not mourn for her dead husband long enough before marrying Claudius: “O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer...” (150-1). Soon, Hamlet’s grief turns into outrage, especially when he sees Claudius and Gertrude’s marriage through the lens of his

Christian beliefs and morality: “O most wicked speed, to post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (155-6). Hibbard in his notes to this description explains that Hamlet calls the marriage incestuous “because marriage to a deceased husband’s brother was forbidden by the church, whether Catholic or Protestant” (164). It is no coincidence then that in the fifth scene of the first act the Ghost too will raise the issue of this incestuous marriage. Notably, till this stage Hamlet has many reasons to be aggrieved and outraged, but no reason to take revenge on Claudius whose crime is still hidden from Hamlet. Also, Hamlet seems more focused on Gertrude’s offense than Claudius’s. But the scales are tipped enormously after Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost when Hamlet becomes burdened by the duty to take revenge on Claudius. While the Ghost is narrating the crime of his wrongful murder Hamlet is genuinely stirred to the thoughts of revenge. He urges the Ghost to reveal the murderer’s identity so that he “May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.31). It is significant that Hamlet calls it “my revenge”. He is in no doubt that it is his solemn duty to take revenge on behalf of his murdered father. However, by the scene’s end Hamlet has realized that it is easier said than done. In effect, he cannot take revenge without committing a premeditated murder, which directly comes in conflict with his Christian beliefs. Hamlet fears eternal damnation. It is this realization that makes him lament, “O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!” (1.5.196-7). I propose that it is precisely here when it becomes necessary for Hamlet to take up the performance of the revenger—rather than simply taking vengeful action—in order to assuage his conscience through denial and self-delusion.

Like his “antic disposition”, Hamlet’s revenger’s performance allows him to procrastinate and delay the ultimate action. Perhaps, the starkest display of this revenger’s performance appears in the scene where—after determining Claudius’s guilt during the staging of *Murder of Gonzago*—Hamlet comes upon Claudius who is alone and appears to be praying. Hamlet draws his sword to kill him but stops after reasoning thus: “A villain kills my father; and for

that/ I, his sole son, do this same villain send/ To heaven” (3.3.77-9). Coleridge notes Dr. Johnson’s horror at Hamlet’s cold and calculated plan not only to murder Claudius but also to ensure that his soul goes to hell (175). But, as Coleridge adds, Dr. Johnson failed to understand the character of Hamlet: “the determination to allow the guilty King to escape at such a moment is only part of the indecision and irresoluteness of the hero. Hamlet seizes hold of a pretext for not acting...” (175). Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, Hamlet himself is not fully convinced by his cited reason for not killing Claudius; hence, he displays much guilt and fear upon the Ghost’s reappearance in the closet scene. After elucidating on Hamlet’s character, Coleridge concludes that Hamlet is a noble man with just one flaw: he is “living in meditation” to such a degree that he fails “by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve” (177). In this thesis, I have tried to explain that Hamlet is continually making resolutions because doing so is essential to his performance of the revenger who nobly pursues his solemn duty to revenge his father’s murder; on the other hand, Hamlet resolves—that is, *act* on his resolutions—nothing because, as per his belief in the Christian doctrine, the very resolution or conclusion of his revenge mission requires him to commit murder that in turn would damn his soul to perdition. Hence, Hamlet procrastinates through his performance while searching for a safe way out of his dilemma.

As discussed in the second chapter, Curran believes that Hamlet’s delay can be further explained in terms of “Catholic doctrine of merit: a performance of being and seeming to which God responds in proportion to its excellence” (104). I would assess this claim again as per this chapter’s focus on Hamlet’s performance. If, as Curran claims, Hamlet’s procrastination is an act of prayerful performance to appease God, why, then, is Hamlet so tormented about the procrastination itself? As I have tried to show, procrastination is rather the byproduct of Hamlet’s performance of a revenger. Rist writes of Hamlet’s focus on his dead father’s remembrance and further adds that in the Hecuba speech Hamlet is aggrieved because “The

player's performance of remembrance is an ideal against which Hamlet claims to fall short" (64). However, I submit that although at the beginning of the play Hamlet bemoans Gertrude's lack of mourning, the issue in the Hecuba speech is not insufficient mourning, prayerful remembrance or performance of remembrance but insufficient action to take revenge. If Hamlet were a genuine and willing revenger—like Laertes, for example—he would not procrastinate through his performance, and he would surely not miss opportunities to kill Claudius. Although procrastination brings temporary relief to Hamlet, it also causes immense grief not only to him but also the Ghost. Indeed, Hamlet procrastinates to such a degree that the Ghost has to appear before him the second time and remind him: "Do not forget. This visitation/ Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.102-3). In the previous scene, Hamlet has missed a great opportunity to kill Claudius on an invented pretext. But the Ghost can see through Hamlet's revenger's pretense and performance, which are causing unnecessary delay. Confronted by the Ghost for the second time, Hamlet himself is overwhelmed by guilt and realizes that his performance of a revenger is a sham that will only lengthen his father's purgatorial torment. Therefore, at the Ghost's second visitation his feelings are a mix of guilt, fear and pity, which he expresses in these lines:

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
Th'important acting of your dread command? O, say! (3.4.99-101).

In these lines Hamlet precisely explains the cause of the Ghost's displeasure and grief, that is, his utter failure in the "acting" of the Ghost's "dread command". I have proposed in this thesis that Hamlet dreads the Ghost's command because carrying it out will certainly bring—as seen through Hamlet's doctrinal beliefs—eternal damnation for Hamlet. Therefore, Hamlet forsakes

action for performance. Hamlet's performance of a revenger does not constitute action; it merely enables him to procrastinate.

What, then, would effect the dread command's acting? The exact answer to this key question is scattered all over *Hamlet's* text and often Hamlet exhibits a keen awareness of it. Only the use of violence and commission of a premeditated murder (of Claudius) will constitute the desired action. In the Hecuba speech Hamlet poses this question contrasting himself with the player: "What would he do,/ Had he the motive and the cue for passion/ That I have?" (2.2.448-50). It is a rhetorical question. Hamlet knows that the expected thing in his position, bound by his murdered father's remembrance, is to readily take revenge by murdering the criminal. Hamlet realizes that he needs to do much more than merely performing the revenger's role. But to Hamlet's utter torment, he cannot commit murder due to his belief in Christian doctrine. As he mentions towards the end of the Hecuba speech: maybe the Ghost is a demonic spirit who "Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.236). Indeed, Hamlet is worried that by emotionally provoking him and invoking issues of remembrance and *lex talionis* the Ghost is trying to get him to commit a murder that would condemn him to hell. Therefore, Hamlet vows to attest the veracity of the Ghost's testimony and Claudius's crime. However, as I've discussed before, just because Hamlet establishes Claudius's crime, it does not make it any easier for Hamlet to commit murder. In fact, confirmation of Claudius's crime only intensifies his torment over the issues of murder and revenge. It becomes harder and harder for Hamlet to procrastinate through his revenger's performance.

Hubert states that from the standpoint of "metatheater", *Hamlet* features "a conflict between a playwright proposing to stage a drama of revenge and his protagonist, an actor doubling as a critic, in search of a much more sophisticated part than that of an avenger" (137). Hamlet appears to be constantly improvising, inventing and reacting instead of acting (89). As I will discuss later, this improvisation plays an essential part in bringing the play to a close. At

this stage, it is important to ask: if Hamlet is role-playing, procrastinating and inventing, then, what is it that drives his performance? I submit that from the beginning till the end of the play it is Hamlet's obsessive adherence to Christian doctrine that drives his decisions, action or inaction. Hamlet's constant reliance on the biblical text and Christian doctrine enables him, as Hubert puts it, through "five long acts in protracting and enhancing his spectacular stage presence" and avoid the necessary action to take revenge "demanded by his father and awaited by the audience" (88). While I agree with Hubert's assessment, I add that Hamlet's performance cannot be separated from his strong Christian characteristics.

It is generally concluded by many scholars that Hamlet is a procrastinator by nature and that he over-analyses at the expense of taking action. However, it is important to note that Hamlet uses procrastination in order to avoid contravening the Christian doctrine. His first act of procrastination is not that he delays taking private revenge or committing murder but that he defers and then completely rules out suicide because he fears perdition. It is reductive to say that Hamlet is prone to inaction. There are several instances in the play where we see Hamlet quickly making up his mind and executing his plan. The first of these occurs at the beginning of the play when he decides to accompany the guards at night in order to encounter the Ghost. When the Ghost does appear, Hamlet instantly wants to follow it to a removed ground against the advice of Horatio and Marcellus who try to stop his rather rash action. But Hamlet makes up his mind readily: "It will not speak. Then I will follow it" (1.4.43). Hamlet repeatedly ignores Horatio and Macellus's warnings against following the Ghost, until he has to issue an angry warning to his friends and urge the Ghost to proceed: "By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me./ I say, away!—Go on, I'll follow thee" (61-2). Moreover, Hamlet shows a strong will and resolution throughout his "antic disposition"; he expertly plans his playlet and executes it. Also, Hamlet determines to "speak daggers" to his mother before the closet scene and does so without flinching (3.2.379). Hamlet's only longstanding procrastination is that of

not murdering the King. Due to his belief in Christian doctrine Hamlet cannot bring himself to do so. But he is free to procrastinate.

Soon after Hamlet's playlet *The Murder of Gonzago* verifies the Ghost's words about Claudius's crimes, Hamlet recognizes the need for violence. Here is what Hamlet says when he is left alone after all the commotion that follows the end of his playlet: "Now could I drink hot blood,/ And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on" (3.2.373-5). This need for premeditated violence and bloodshed is expressed most categorically in Hamlet's aforementioned long soliloquy in scene four of the fourth act that ends with this resolution from Hamlet: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4.102 Signet Classics edition). After delivering the soliloquy Hamlet is missing for the next three scenes of the fourth act and reappears by the end of the first scene of the fifth and last act, in the famous graveyard scene. This long interim, as I will explore in the next section, forms Hamlet's transition during which his performance of the revenger incorporates the ideas of divine will and Christian resignation. I argue that it is not Hamlet's character that undergoes transformation but rather Hamlet's performance of the revenger's role.

In the graveyard scene we still do not encounter a revenge-bent Hamlet who displays—what Hallett and Hallett would call—revenger's madness. Indeed, Hamlet is not mad but calm. The first half of the graveyard scene (most editions of the play record the scene's setting as a churchyard) is replete with Hamlet's philosophical musings—often tinged with black humour—on human mortality. Notably, the scene opens with gravediggers' discussion on whether Ophelia's soul will go to hell for committing suicide. Soon, Hamlet engages with the gravediggers in a conversation about the dead. In this scene we can barely notice any thirst for revenge or murder in Hamlet's character until he picks a fight with Laertes. It is quite possible that Hamlet creates the whole fracas with Laertes since he still has to keep up his lunatic's performance or the "antic disposition" in public. As for his private revenger's performance,

however, as the next act shows, what we might mistake initially as passiveness is actually a quiet but firm determination to steadily move towards killing Claudius through improvisation and following “divine” cues. In the next section, I will explore how Hamlet is able to put an end to his procrastination and focus on the long pending “bloody” task of revenge by co-opting the ideas of public good, divine justice and Christian resignation to his revenger’s performance.

From Private Revenge to Divine Justice and Public Good

As I’ve explored so far, even in the penultimate scene of the play Hamlet’s focus seems to be veering off the “bloody” thoughts of revenge. In fact, while meditating on human mortality, he almost appears to be reverting back to his mental state at the beginning of the play—he emphasizes the triviality of human existence, and mocks earthly existence. Such Stoicism can only dull his revenge. What Hamlet needs is “revenger’s madness” that the revengers of other contemporary revenge tragedies develop. In *Hamlet*, revenger’s madness is much more aptly expressed through the character of Laertes. But unlike Laertes’s boundless thirst for a violent revenge, in the graveyard scene Hamlet’s constant brooding, again, only seems to be an attempt at procrastination or Stoicism and Christian fatalism that detracts from the urgency of his revenge mission. He has come back from the sea after a lucky escape. Moreover, the only reason for him to come back to Denmark is to complete his revenge. Thus, Hamlet is still keeping up the performance of the revenger without actually acting out the bloody revenge. At this stage it is almost impossible for Hamlet to delay any longer as he knows Claudius’s multiple sins and guilt beyond doubt. As we learn in the next scene, Hamlet has returned from the sea voyage with a firm purpose to consummate his revenge mission, although he still does not know how exactly he will kill Claudius.

It becomes clear in the next and final scene that despite Hamlet's determination to kill Claudius, he has not turned into a mad revenger. Instead, Hamlet incorporates the idea of divine justice and providence to his revenge mission. Robert Ornstein notes that Hamlet, after his return from the sea voyage is "calm if not resolute, buoyed by a vaguely optimistic fatalism that is half-Christian, half-Stoic" (215). Curran notes Hamlet's change as a form of religious conversion, which makes him forsake Catholic faith and the contingency it provides for "the dictates of Protestantism and all the philosophical ramifications they entail" (3). Again, this statement by Curran is problematic in that it inaccurately assumes Hamlet is predominantly Catholic at the beginning of the play and later becomes predominantly Protestant. I propose that Hamlet has incorporated the idea of divine will and providence to his revenger's performance in order to resolve his tormenting dilemma that started after his first encounter with the Ghost. He has not switched Christian denominations or even undergone religious transformation. Curran states that Hamlet has succumbed to the idea of "being bound in a nutshell..." (3). As for his so called transformation, Curran again notes that "He is, simply, not trying anymore and this is precisely what lends Act V its sense of fatalism and despair" (202). Although such an impression may be formed if one only reads the first scene of the fifth act, the next and final scene leaves no doubt that instead of being fatalistic Hamlet is very actively involved in bringing his performance to a satisfactory conclusion. He quite readily accepts the duel challenge when Claudius's messenger, Osric, introduces him to the idea. As I discuss further, Hamlet does not surrender to the Protestant idea of providence, but rather he appropriates it in order to complete his revenge mission.

Regarding the role of divine justice in Hamlet's revenge mission Fredson Bowers focuses on Hamlet's repentant words right after he kills Polonius: "But heaven hath pleased it so,/ To punish me with this, and this with me,/ That I must be their scourge and minister." (3.4.62-4). In the Elizabethan society people widely subscribed to the idea of divine justice ("Hamlet as

Minister and Scourge” Bowers 743). It was held that God often used accidents, illnesses and natural calamities to punish the guilty. However, sometimes God also used human agents, and “for this purpose God chose for His instruments those who were already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation” (748). If God’s agent needed to perform a serious crime, such as murder, “only a man already damned for his sins was selected, and he was called a scourge” (743). Therefore, Hamlet’s killing of Polonius can be seen as a pivotal moment in the play when he begins to incorporate the idea of divine justice to his revenge mission. Hamlet is apparently shocked that he has killed an innocent man. Hamlet is aware that despite Polonius’s spying and intrusiveness he did not deserve death. As I have noted earlier, Hamlet tries to put the blame on Polonius for bringing his own death upon himself. At the same time, Hamlet begins to consider himself as the scourge of God. As Bowers notes, “the scourge” maybe an agent of God but his position was not “enviable” because he was already condemned (743). Hamlet also calls himself the “minister” of God, which is distinguished from the “scourge” as an agent of God who brings about justice through good acts and fair play (744).

But why would God want Hamlet to be a scourge and minister? Throughout the play, both the Ghost and Hamlet keep repeating Claudius’s multiple sins. Yes, Claudius has treacherously murdered Hamlet’s dear father whose tormented soul cries out for revenge. But Hamlet cannot pursue private revenge. Still, Hamlet has enough proof that Claudius has committed gross sins of incest and adultery that are severely condemned in the Bible and Christian doctrine. Adultery was considered a very serious crime in Elizabethan England. “From the latter half of the sixteenth century on, there was a series of bills introduced in Parliament criminalizing adultery...” (Debora Shuger 30). These bills were introduced in 1584 and 1604, and finally in 1650 Parliament made adultery a capital offense (30). In Elizabethan culture the mention of adultery would evoke strong reactions. Hamlet and the Ghost’s preoccupation with adultery would hardly seem exaggerated. Furthermore, Claudius has also murdered a beloved King and

brought corruption to the throne of Denmark.¹⁷ Consequently, Hamlet sees himself as an agent of God who must purge Denmark and Christendom of Claudius. Even so, Hamlet does not exhibit uncontrolled violence; rather he waits for heavenly cues to complete his revenge mission, whether it is as a “scourge” or “minister” or both. I would add that Hamlet’s momentous claim to be God’s “scourge and minister” only marks as a further modification of his revenger’s performance that must operate within his doctrinal beliefs. As I will argue in what follows, Hamlet’s revenger’s performance continues to evolve until the end.

Citing examples from *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Antonio’s Revenge*, *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Hallett and Hallett write of the revenger protagonists who modify their revenge mission so that they “can locate the Good in violence and murder”; thereby, the playwrights “allow the hero to ‘discern’ that he is an agent of God...” (77-78). Then the revenger “sees himself as the one just man left in the universe” whose “act of revenge will bring about a good, and the God therefore desires him to *act*” (78). While this observation is valid, it has to be mentioned that unlike the other revengers Hamlet’s conception of the divine is almost exclusively Christian and biblical. Hamlet’s eventual incorporation of providence to his revenger’s performance is expressed most clearly when Horatio reads Hamlet’s letter that carries a rather providential account of his escape on the high seas. In the next scene when Hamlet personally narrates the account of his escape to Horatio, the latter asks Hamlet how was he able to forge the letters that sent Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to their deaths in England. Hamlet explains that he happened to have Claudius’s signet in his purse, which could be used to create official Danish seal. Hamlet qualifies this coincidence: “Why, even in that was heaven ordinant” (5.2.49). This further suggests that by now Hamlet has concluded that his revenge mission is nothing but part of the divine plan. As Bevington puts it, Hamlet “is

¹⁷ The contemporary English society was strongly monarchical; therefore, Claudius’s regicide would be noted as a gross transgression.

aware that he is performing a role in a drama scripted by supernal powers” (74). As seen from Hamlet’s perspective, God Himself has ensured that he survives an assassination attempt so that he could kill Claudius and purge Denmark’s crown of the perfidious sinner, conspirator and murderer that Claudius has proved to be. Hamlet has definitely got rid of his earlier Christian compunctions about committing murder, as long as the murder can be justified under divine law and providence. In a remarkable display of his new, self-assured rationalization, here is how Hamlet justifies sending Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to their death:

Why, man they did make love to this employment.

They are not near my conscience. Their defeat

Doth by their own insinuation grow (5.2.58-60).

This kind of justification has already been used by Hamlet when he—inadvertently—stabs Polonius to death in a fit of panic and rage. Soon after killing him, Hamlet assuages his conscience by an angry diatribe in which he seeks to put the blame on Polonius: “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell” (3.4.33). However, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his justification is elaborate and calm, rather than uttered in a fit of rage. Furthermore, Hamlet has also accrued numerous reasons for killing Claudius as he explains to Horatio: “Dost it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon—/ He that killed my king and whored my mother...” (5.2.65-6). Hamlet has concluded that it is now incumbent upon him to murder Claudius. Besides, as Hamlet tells Horatio, Claudius has attempted to have him assassinated, meaning, he also needs to kill him for self-defence. Indeed, instead of suffering a guilty conscience over a premeditated murder, now Hamlet is ready to pursue this act with “perfect conscience” (5.2.68). Yet more remarkably, Hamlet has aligned his personal revenge mission with the public good and divine injunction that he cannot ignore as he tells Horatio:

And is't not to be damned
 To let this canker of our nature come
 In further evil? (5.2.69-71).

Hamlet has certainly turned his fear of perdition over the issue of a premeditated murder upside down. Now—after learning everything about the incestuous, adulterous, murderous and treacherous Claudius—he risks damnation if he allows Claudius’s evil to propagate and cause more hurt to more people in Denmark. Indeed, he would be an “accessory” if he allows Claudius to continue with his criminal and “sinful” acts (Bowers “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge” 748). Thus, Hamlet has reversed his opinion about the issues of revenge and murder. As per Hamlet’s new understanding, revenge and murder have become justice. Only Hamlet knows the extent of Claudius’s crimes, and only Hamlet can stop his further crimes. It is apparent, then, that if Hamlet does not kill Claudius and put an end to his evil plans, Hamlet will be judged before God. Now, for Hamlet, to allow sin will be tantamount to becoming sinful himself. This biblical injunction from Matthew 12:30—incidentally, in this very scene Hamlet refers to verses from Matthew’s tenth chapter—could scarcely be lost on Hamlet: “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad”. Therefore, as per Hamlet’s new reasoning, now, by not assassinating Claudius he will go against the divine will and, just as in the case of Moses or Jonah in the Bible, it is both sinful and futile for him to resist God’s will.

Furthermore, the whole issue of remembrance has come full circle for Hamlet, leading to the sole conclusion—Claudius must die. As I have noted earlier, the issues of remembrance, for Hamlet, begin at the very beginning of the play, with his attempts to forget Gertrude’s and Claudius’s adulterous and incestuous marriage and Gertrude’s unwillingness to mourn her

husband in—what Hamlet considers to be—an adequate manner. Hamlet wishes to forget it all but he just cannot and laments: “Heaven and earth,/ Must I remember?” (1.2.42-3). Later in the play, the Ghost’s command to “remember” is only a call to commemorate his loving memory by taking revenge on his behalf. Additionally, Hamlet must remember that his father’s soul is languishing in the torments of Purgatory; his delay will only prolong its hellish suffering. Hamlet himself solemnly vows to forget all “trivial fond records” and to exclusively remember the Ghost’s words soon after it departs: “Now to my word:/ It is ‘Adieu, adieu, remember me’./ I have sworn’t” (1.5.111-3). For Hamlet’s Christianized conscience, this vow of remembrance has potential for confusion as far as the issue of revenge is concerned (Foakes 121).

As I have discussed earlier, the biblical text itself presents a very muddled picture of private revenge. I propose, then, that Hamlet has to foreground (or remember) certain sections of the Bible in order to aid his revenge mission. He does so towards the end of the play by remembering and quoting certain biblical passages that underline God’s providence. Hamlet also remembers and reveres the Christian doctrine and the canon that expressly forbid suicide as well as murder. Commission of either sin can condemn one’s soul to eternal damnation. If at the beginning of the play Hamlet cites the canon to abandon his plans to commit suicide, the same canon will also stop him from pursuing a revenge mission that can only culminate in a murder. Therefore, towards the end of the play, as Hamlet remembers and foregrounds certain passages of the Bible, concurrently, he also has to turn his mental focus away from the biblical sections that explicitly condemn private revenge and murder. Thus, although Hamlet struggles with very complex issues of remembrance, it is through remembering and appropriating selective parts of the Bible and Christian doctrine that Hamlet is able to resolve his struggles of remembrance in order to consummate his revenge mission. In his speech towards the end of the play, here is how Hamlet makes a specific mention of providence in the first line and the

rest of the speech moves towards Christian resignation—declared by the final “let be”—that eventually facilitates Hamlet’s task to revenge his father:

There’s a 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 now,
 yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man knows
 aught of what he leaves, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be. (5.2.66-70)

As Hibbard writes in the note to the Oxford edition of *Hamlet*, Hamlet is borrowing his rationalization from Matthew 10:29: “Are not two little sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not light on the ground without your father” (344). Furthermore, repeated references to “it” in Hamlet’s speech signify death as an occurrence within God’s will: “The importance of being ready to face death at any moment had been central to the teaching of the Church for centuries” (344). English literature preceding Shakespeare often echoes this Church doctrine, for example, in the work of Chaucer (344). Focusing on the same speech of Hamlet, Frye writes that “With Hamlet, the ‘readiness’ is not only linked to but even seems to summarize the declaration of his reliance upon New Testament promises” (138).

A predominant refrain in the Bible is to “remember”, which is scattered all over the Old and the New Testament, spoken by both Jehovah (also in the Ten Commandments) and Jesus. God and “His” people—Jews in the Old Testament and all humanity in the New Testament—are united through bonds of remembrance. They both are to remember each other in order to continue their relationship. First, in Genesis, God makes a covenant with Noah to protect him and his family. God says that whenever a rainbow appears in the sky “I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh...” (Genesis 9:15).

Conversely, God's people are to remember Him and His laws and role in their lives. Before giving Israelites the Ten Commandments God reminds them: "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). As the Bible records, in the Ten Commandments God puts a particular emphasis to mark one day in the week in prayerful remembrance: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (20:8). In the New Testament Jesus commands his disciples to celebrate the Eucharist: "this do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). The biblical account also tells us that at the time of crucifixion, one of the thieves who is also being crucified alongside Jesus, makes a specific mention of remembrance after his conversion in order to be saved: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 24:42). Lastly, the resurrected Jesus too speaks of the need for remembrance: "the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 15:26). St. Augustine in his *Confessions* put a special emphasis on remembrance: "The encounter with the biblical text...was decisive both as remembered experience in itself and as a model by which other remembered events in...life might be organized and remembered" (Girard 84). Accordingly, Hamlet too strongly values remembrance of the biblical text and doctrine that clashes with his father's call for remembrance. I propose that in the play Hamlet must go deeper into his resources of remembered Christian worldview and theology in order to find a way out of his dilemma and accomplish his revenge mission. As the play progresses, Hamlet modifies his religio-ethical system and theologizes his way to a conscience that is both resigned and active within the concept of Christian providence. More importantly, as Hamlet puts it, he achieves a "perfect conscience" while pursuing his goal of killing Claudius.

Violence can be accommodated justifiably in Hamlet's new role as heaven's revenger. Hamlet never fears violence itself but instead he fears the consequences to his soul if he acts violently against someone in cold blood. Bevington writes that Hamlet is not "squeamish at the

thought of blood” (56). However, he lacks the justification for being violent—that is, until he incorporates the idea of divine justice and providence in his revenger’s performance. In this way, in the final stages of his revenger’s performance, violence is not something that Hamlet has to generate; rather it comes almost as a divinely inspired instinct. Hamlet tells Horatio how he has discovered a new feeling in his heart that “was a kind of fighting” (5.2.4). Hamlet adds, “And praised be rashness for it” that comes to one’s aid especially when one’s plans begin to lose impetus (7-11). Thus, Hamlet tells Horatio, rashness is not something that he himself can generate, rather, it comes to him from some unknown source for which he is grateful. Hamlet ends his speech with a significant statement of faith regarding divine role in his pending revenge mission: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will” (10-11).

In the next and final section of this chapter I focus on the element of improvisation in Hamlet’s revenger’s performance. After incorporating the ideas of public good and divine justice in his revenger’s performance it has not only become possible for Hamlet to assassinate Claudius but rather it is now incumbent upon him to do so or he will risk damnation by going against the will of God. Even so, Hamlet also needs to incorporate improvisation in his revenger’s role. He has to wait for the right opportunity as well as the right provocation at the right time. He will not run up to Claudius’s palace to murder him, as Laertes almost does. Instead, Hamlet will patiently wait for his divine cues. In the next section I will explore how Hamlet’s improvisation leads to Claudius’s killing and the closure of the play.

Christian Resignation and Improvisation in Hamlet’s Final Revenge Performance

One of *Hamlet's* antecedents, Saxo's version of Amleth, is an unapologetic story of a bloody revenge (Bevington 11). There is no engagement with Christian or biblical elements in Saxo's tale. Another adapter of Saxo's work, Belleforest, does add a Christian dimension to Hamlet's story by depicting Claudius's incest and him murdering his sibling (12). Yet, in Belleforest's version the overthrowing of the usurper is "as bloody and savage as in Saxo..." (14). However, as this thesis has shown, Shakespeare's Hamlet exhibits a particular aversion to committing acts of violence and cold blooded murder. By contrast, as Peter Mercer points out, in *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo "not only expresses a wild intensity of grief, but sustains it, feeds it, keeps it aflame until it can be discharged in the heat of terrible action" (45). This kind of sustained and bloodthirsty ferocity is exactly what is missing from Hamlet's revenge. Although Hamlet frequently speaks about bloody acts and violence in his performance, he never acts them out. Perhaps Hamlet himself describes his situation best right before he goes to meet Gertrude in the famous closet scene: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.379). This is precisely what Hamlet does while pursuing his revenge mission: he repeatedly talks about being violent, shedding blood and committing shocking acts, yet he never actually puts his words into practice. Hamlet's first, albeit inadvertent, murder is that of Polonius. Hamlet is grief-stricken to notice that he has killed Polonius. Hamlet believes in playing fair. Even though Polonius spies on Hamlet, he is unarmed and has no intention of causing physical harm to Hamlet. As such, Hamlet is disturbed soon after discovering that he has committed a murder and blames Polonius for his own death. More significantly, Hamlet considers this particular sin of murder as God-ordained:

For this same lord,
 I do repent. But heaven hath pleased it so,
 To punish me with this, and this with me,

That I must be their scourge and minister (3.4.161-4).

As these lines show, even before Hamlet has undertaken the perilous sea voyage, he already has faith in God's providence, a concept he will later expand on and incorporate into his revenge mission. However, another important aspect in this speech is Hamlet's capacity for improvisation—within the Christian doctrinal framework—in the face of a devastating accident. To Elizabethan audience murder of Polonius by Hamlet was “a criminal act of blood” that has inescapably trapped and doomed Hamlet both in the eyes of God as well as the state (Bowers “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge” 744). However, Shakespeare has Hamlet suddenly turn a disaster into a divine licence to kill Claudius and complete his revenge mission. Even so, this incorporation of divine justice and providence is not enough in itself if Hamlet is to achieve his goal. What Hamlet needs, in addition, is constant invention and improvisation, so that he does not become an ordinary murderer acting on his own and risk perdition. Therefore, even at this stage he needs to rule out the hotheaded and premeditated assassination in the manner of Laertes and Fortinbras. In other words, Hamlet must wait for divine cues and take obedient steps towards consummating his revenge mission within providential will as opposed to his own.

Many scholars who claim that Hamlet comes back from the sea voyage as a remarkably transformed man miss the point that Hamlet does not go through any transformation in his core Christian doctrinal beliefs but only appropriates and emphasizes certain doctrines in his revenger's performance to suit new circumstances. In the last scene of the play Hamlet shows a steady determination to take revenge. He does not seem to waver. His methodical and detailed rationalizations about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death prove that he has firmly incorporated the idea of divine justice and predestination into his revenger's performance. Now, armed with divine injunction, Hamlet can do no other but kill Claudius. However, at this

stage Hamlet does not have physical access to Claudius as before. Claudius is very alert to the fact that Hamlet has escaped an elaborate assassination plot and that Hamlet knows who is behind it all. Claudius recruits the vengeful Laertes to kill Hamlet before Hamlet kills him. Hamlet has to be very cautious as he tries to reach the King. So, in the last act Hamlet does not delay because he necessarily lacks the will—as in the earlier acts—but because he lacks the opportunity. Bowers states that, after his return from the sea voyage, Hamlet becomes heaven's "minister waiting on the expected opportunity which should be provided him" as opposed to him finding it (745).

In the last scene of the play, soon after Hamlet has revealed to Horatio his renewed and God-ordained mission to assassinate Claudius, Osric enters as Claudius's messenger. Osric tells Hamlet about the proposed duel between him and Laertes. Many other characters try to dissuade Hamlet from getting into a duel with Laertes who appears to be in much better physical state and more skilled at swordsmanship than Hamlet. On the surface, Hamlet seems overoptimistic about his chances as he readily accepts the challenge for the duel. However, the real reason for Hamlet's acceptance of the challenge is that it will bring him within reach of the King. To Hamlet, then, Osric's arrival seems nothing less than providential. Hamlet is a determined revenger now who will not waver after modifying his revenger's performance. At the same time, providential events must keep giving cues to Hamlet. He will murder Claudius but still not without the divine instructions as to when exactly to act. Hamlet will never be the traditional revenger who, as Bevington puts it, "is bloody, bold, driven to extremes of violence..." (51). Hence, although Hamlet's final revenger's performance is resolute, it must also be improvised as a series of actions to match divine instructions.

Eventually, when through his improvised performance Hamlet does kill Claudius, he does so as a Christian revenger acting on God's command and within the divine will. Hamlet is certain that God "will take care of everything and will give him his cue when it is his turn to

act” (Bevington 74). Referring to the biblical text (Matthew), Hamlet talks to Horatio of “special providence”. Bevington points out the theological influence behind Hamlet’s new reasoning: “Hamlet speaks the language of an Elizabethan Protestant Christian steeped in the teachings of John Calvin” (74). Speaking of this theological conclusion in Hamlet’s revenge mission Bowers writes that it “is not lip-service or religious commonplace, but the very heart of the matter” (748). As I have concluded earlier, regardless of the significance of Hamlet’s statement of faith, it does not mark Hamlet’s “conversion” to the Calvinist strain of Protestantism. Rather, Shakespeare has Hamlet appropriate the contemporary popular theology for his own purposes. Accordingly, as if to make the best dramatic use of Hamlet’s renewed faith in providence, he gets all his final cues to kill Claudius only at the end of the last scene.

The critical events that would seem very providential to Hamlet occur rapidly. It all begins with Gertrude’s drinking from the poisoned cup in support of Hamlet’s performance in the duel against Laertes. Gertrude also ignores Claudius’s warning against taking the poisoned drink. Moments later, Laertes treacherously wounds Hamlet with the poisoned tip of his sword. Soon enough, the duel has turned into a scuffle in which Hamlet gets hold of Laertes’s envenomed sword and fatally wounds him too. By now Claudius has realized that things have suddenly got out of control and he instructs others to stop the duel: “Part them. They are incensed” (5.2.255). Before Claudius’s command is obeyed, Gertrude falls to the ground as the poison in her drink takes effect. Laertes, overcome with guilt in his dying moments, reveals to Hamlet that it has all been Claudius’s plot to poison the drink and envenom the point of the sword. This is cue enough for Hamlet and he stabs Claudius with these succinctly improvised words: “The point envenomed too? Then, venom, to thy work” (5.2.275). It would seem as nothing less than heavenly instruction to Hamlet that just when he learns about Claudius’s final plot to kill him he happens to hold the envenomed sword in his hand. In a way, the sword becomes an instrument of heaven and Hamlet merely wields it on God’s behalf.

As I have tried to show, Hamlet's improvised revenger's performance only operates within the concept of divine providence. Bevington notes that Hamlet's killing of Claudius departs from the Ghost's reliance on *lex talionis*. Eventually, Hamlet's revenge is not wrought according to *lex talionis* but rather Hamlet kills Claudius in accord with his renewed emphasis on divine providence. Even so, Hamlet has also managed to honour his father (by taking revenge) as well as obey the Ghost's particular command: "But howsoever thou pursuest this act,/ Taint not thy mind..." (1.5.84-5). Indeed, Hamlet has not tainted his mind by blaspheming against church, God or the Christian doctrine while pursuing his duty to revenge his father's murder.

The Eventual Fate of Hamlet's Soul

Due to the play's emphasis on Christian doctrine, it cannot end like most other revenge tragedies, that is, as soon as Hamlet the revenger has killed the culprit, Claudius. The audience must have some assurance that Prince Hamlet's soul will not be damned to hell. In fact, from the beginning a constant running theme in the play is Hamlet's fear about the fate of his soul. The Prince fears damnation whether due to an act of suicide or murder. The fate of the human soul after death is a subject that is almost never off Hamlet's mind throughout the play. Just before killing Claudius he lists all his sins and comments on his afterlife: "Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,/ Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?/ Follow my mother." (5.2.278-9). Despite having reconciled with Gertrude, Hamlet has concluded that her sins are too serious to be forgiven. Therefore, her soul has most likely gone to hell and Claudius will join her there. As for the fate of his own soul, earlier in the play—although he believes in Purgatory and readily accepts the fact that the Ghost is indeed his father's spirit—Hamlet needs to be absolutely certain that it is not the devil himself whose sole purpose is to compel him to

commit an act of murder. Hamlet fears that possibly the apparition “Abuses me to damn me” (2.2.592). At the end of the play, Shakespeare’s audience, attuned to the Christian doctrine about heaven and hell, too would need some assurance that Hamlet’s soul has not landed in hell during the pursuit of his revenge mission. To this effect, Bowers sums up the play’s Christian ending:

Despite the terrible action of his forcing the poisoned cup between the King's teeth, Shakespeare takes great pains to remove the blood guilt from Hamlet by the expiation of his own death, and to indicate that the open killing was a ministerial act of public justice accomplished under the only possible circumstances (749).

To further remove the “blood guilt” from Hamlet, Shakespeare writes an exchange of forgiveness between dying Hamlet and Laertes into the ending of the play. Laertes’s last words are addressed to Hamlet: “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./ Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,/ Nor thine on me!” (5.2.282-4). Hamlet’s response is quite significant: “Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee” (5.2.285). Indeed, this statement of Hamlet contains two inferences: one, Hamlet wishes that Laertes is washed of the blood guilt and thus goes to heaven, and more importantly, two, that he himself will follow Laertes to heaven instead of being eternally damned.

Conclusion

As Bevington observes, even at the end of the play Shakespeare highlights the fact that Hamlet is almost alone in his overwhelming adherence to Christian theology and doctrine. It appears that almost no other character in the play fully understands Hamlet’s singular focus on

Christian doctrine. Hamlet's best friend Horatio's assessment of his revenge mission fails to see anything providential (Bevington 76). Rather, Horatio talks "Of accidental judgments. Casual slaughters..." (5.2.35). However, to Hamlet, all the unfolding events were nothing but providential. Thus, Hamlet's character's belief in the Christian doctrine is critical to understanding *Hamlet's* plot, action and lack thereof.

Unable to pursue a private revenge, it becomes necessary for Hamlet to assume a revenger's performance. Hamlet's revenger's performance is commensurate with his unique Christian characteristics. Such a performance enables Hamlet to procrastinate, and at the same time it assuages his guilt in that his performance is merely a pretense aimed at self-delusion. No other character in the play has heard the Ghost's incriminating speech and thus none has the concrete evidence to prove that Claudius has indeed murdered King Hamlet. Unlike Bell Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy* who urges Hieronimo to take revenge, no living character in *Hamlet* ever compels Hamlet to take revenge. The Ghost is the only "witness" to Claudius's multiple sins. Additionally, the Ghost shares Hamlet's dogmatic Christian beliefs with which Gertrude and Claudius are condemned. The Ghost acts as Hamlet's doppelganger, which convicts Hamlet's conscience and urges him to revenge. However, instead of taking action, Hamlet seeks temporary relief through performance and procrastination.

In the beginning, through his performance, Hamlet talks about being violent and murderous without ever acting on the rhetorical claims. Hamlet fears damnation if he commits murder. Still, Hamlet's revenger's performance is continuously evolving. By the fifth act Hamlet incorporates the ideas of providence and divine justice in his performance. Hamlet also uses an element of improvisation in his performance till he manages to complete his revenge mission by killing Claudius. After Hamlet does kill Claudius the play continues to address the issue of Hamlet's soul. Consequently, even at the end of the play, Shakespeare includes an

exchange of dialogue between his characters—Hamlet and Laertes—strongly indicating to his audience that Hamlet’s soul has most likely gone to heaven.

Conclusion

This thesis began with the observation of scholars such as Brian Cummings who state that most early modern literature was deeply influenced by Christian religion and the Bible. The Reformation saw a great proliferation of Bible translations and printings, along with other religious and devotional matter. Such ubiquity of religious texts and resources engendered a culture of strong theological debates and biblical literacy. From the sixteenth century onwards, England began its cautious but steady march towards Protestantism. England's official Protestant status came rather suddenly due to the political and personal considerations of Henry VIII. Therefore, it was also a time when a great many people lived under the official Protestantism of the Church of England while still holding onto many Catholic beliefs and traditions. The Church of England was deeply suspicious of Catholicism's extra-biblical beliefs such as praying for the dead and the doctrine of Purgatory. Even though the Protestant clerics and theologians severely criticized the doctrine of Purgatory, many laypeople still held on to it. It was in this culture of religious and biblical permeation as well as doctrinal contentions and ambiguities that Shakespeare was born, grew up and wrote. Consequently, as my thesis notes, Hamlet's Christian characteristics show a Christian syncretism. I also conclude that Shakespeare does not set up Hamlet as an exclusively Catholic or Protestant character.

Like many other contemporary works of literature, Shakespeare's plays often engaged with contemporary Christian doctrine and the Bible. *Measure for Measure* is probably considered the play of Shakespeare's that deals most directly with the contemporary Christian debates regarding sexual morality, premarital sex, prostitution and capital punishment. But as I have noted in this thesis, *Hamlet* certainly deserves to be known as the play in which

Shakespeare creates a complex main character with a particularly Christian disposition that determines the play's plot. Much of the play's dramatic tension is created when Hamlet's firm convictions about Christian doctrine come in direct conflict with unavoidable course of action he is obliged to take. It is here also that Shakespeare makes best use of his audience's biblical and doctrinal knowledge in order to enhance dramatic tension, for example, by underlining the apparently purgatorial origins of Hamlet's father's ghost.

As we read in *Hamlet's* graveyard scene, even gravediggers and clowns debate Christian doctrine and the biblical interpretation over the issue of the eventual fate of Ophelia's soul because she has most likely committed suicide. The final fifth act of *Hamlet* opens with a seemingly comical single sentence that asks a profound question; the first clown says this about Ophelia: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" (5.1.1). Further, he chides the second clown: "What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the scripture?" (5.1.34-5). But it is the character of Hamlet in the play who often takes his adherence to Christian scripture and doctrine to exaggerated ends. Where most other Christian characters in the play seem readily to do without theological and doctrinal idealism, Hamlet's adherence to the same is such that it often amounts to theological pedantry. Hamlet's intensely theological mode of thinking comes to the fore when he invents a pretext for not killing Claudius during the prayer scene. Hamlet founds his rationalization on doctrinal and theological grounds. However, the Ghost is unimpressed and complains about Hamlet's unnecessary delay based on theological niceties. Hamlet's peculiar religious disposition is carefully introduced by Shakespeare at the beginning of the play when Hamlet is incapable of committing suicide because the Christian canon forbids it. Conversely, later in the play he decides to assassinate Claudius only after he establishes firm Christian theological and doctrinal grounds for such an action. Horatio, his fellow student at Wittenberg, does not show such academic obsession in religious matters. Therefore, it is Hamlet's character's religious

obsessions and theological pedantry that set him apart from the revenger protagonists of other revenge tragedies.

At the beginning of the play Shakespeare establishes two crucial points about Hamlet's character: one, he rather obsessively analyses and follows the Christian doctrine; and two, he fears eternal damnation of his soul as per his belief in the Christian doctrine. Shakespeare underlines Hamlet's Christian characteristics further in the expository scene during his encounter with the Ghost. In this scene, Hamlet shows a ready belief in the supernatural and in Purgatory, as opposed to his sceptical friend, Horatio. Also, Hamlet shares the Ghost's outrage and grief over Claudius and Gertrude's sins of incest and adultery. But what really starts Hamlet's profound torment is the knowledge that Claudius has treacherously murdered his father whose spirit—languishing in Purgatory—cries out for vengeance. Hamlet is bound by the tradition of *lex talionis* to avenge his father by murdering Claudius. This call for revenge is further strengthened by Catholic beliefs about remembrance of the dead in order to ease their purgatorial suffering. The Ghost's desperate parting call for remembrance, in effect, becomes a call for revenge. However, Hamlet due to his devout beliefs in Christian doctrine, fears that the pursuit of private revenge and commission of a premeditated murder will condemn him to perdition. This is Hamlet's tragic dilemma rooted in his deep Christian beliefs.

A comparison of *Hamlet* with other contemporary revenge plays shows that it remarkably departs from the basic structure of a generic revenge play because of its peculiar character whose inner life and dilemma become the real focus of the play. In this regard, *Hamlet's* comparison with *The Spanish Tragedy* sheds light on its uniqueness. Despite *Hamlet's* similarities with *The Spanish Tragedy*, it radically differs from its dominating themes of the pursuit of a bloody revenge and violence. Hallett and Hallett note, "*Hamlet* is the first revenge play in which the delay lingers on as a theme" after the play-within-a-play has concluded (212). More importantly, unlike the playlets in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*,

Hamlet's *Murder of Gonzago* does not end in real violence or bloodshed. In the aftermath of the playlet, Hamlet's dilemma is not resolved but becomes even more intense. Therefore, because of its singular focus on Hamlet's inner life and Christian characteristics *Hamlet* stands unique among contemporary revenge plays.

In the third and final chapter of this thesis I conclude that Hamlet finds temporary relief from his dilemma through the performance of a revenger. As a performer, Hamlet resolves to revenge but does not act by inventing various pretexts. Meanwhile, Hamlet suffers a great deal of guilt that is further aggravated by the Ghost's second appearance before him during the closet scene. Hamlet now fears the "dread command" which is in stark contrast to his resolve in the first act to remember the Ghost's command: "And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain,/ Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, Yes, by heaven!" (1.5.102-4). Thus, the play focuses on the torments in Hamlet's inner life, which cannot be understood properly without taking into account his Christian characterization.

Eventually, I conclude, that *Hamlet* is a play that deals with its protagonist's issues of remembrance. Hamlet has imbibed Christian beliefs and doctrine through years of serious study and reflection. Interpreting events in his life through an exclusively Christian perspective—that often verges on the obsessive—is second nature to Hamlet. As a strict adherent of Christian doctrine Hamlet cannot forget that one cardinal sin—be it suicide or premeditated murder—will damn his soul to hell for eternity. Despite his claim to wipe previous records from his memory to remember only the Ghost's command, it is impossible for Hamlet to forget the Christian doctrine. Hamlet must resolve his issues of remembrance through deep reflection and improvisation as the events unfold. Hamlet's journey towards England and then his fortuitous escape make him more and more convinced of the role of divine providence in his revenge mission. This realization allows Hamlet to incorporate the idea of providence and divine justice to his revenger's performance. Through his newly improvised revenger's performance Hamlet

eventually manages to kill Claudius. The killing is done in a highly unpredictable and improvised way; additionally, it comes about in a manner that does not portray Hamlet as a mad and bloodthirsty revenger but rather as heaven's scourge and minister. As I have noted, it is fortuitous that just as Hamlet learns about Claudius's final villainy from dying Laertes, he also happens to be holding the envenomed sword with which he stabs Claudius. Hence, the sword and Hamlet literally become heaven's scourge and minister that liberate Denmark from Claudius's corrupt and sinister rule.

After Hamlet's death, although Horatio does not see the momentous series of events towards the end of the play as providential, he does say a prayer for Hamlet's salvation. As interpreted through the Christian doctrine, the fate of his soul is a constant concern of Hamlet from the beginning till the end of the play. Similarly, an Elizabethan audience would need some assurance of Hamlet's salvation. To this effect, this is what Horatio prays: "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (5.2.112-3). Groves writes that Horatio's prayer "unmistakably echoes the Latin antiphon sung during the Requiem Mass...(May the angels bear you to paradise, and may you have eternal rest)" (4). Thus, at the end of the play Shakespeare has even the skeptical scholar Horatio say a prayer showing faith in Hamlet's salvation. Hamlet also receives forgiveness from Laertes who frees him from blood guilt for Polonius's death. Furthermore, Hamlet's own observation earlier in the play strongly suggests that as per the Christian doctrine of grace, his soul will go to heaven. In the second scene of the second act, having compared Polonius to Jephthah, Hamlet says this to him: "Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping?" (2.2.519-20). Hamlet's observation strongly echoes the recurrent theme of God's grace in the salvation of universally imperfect human beings, as repeated by Paul in Romans: "As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one..." (3:10). It also shows that Hamlet's faith in God's saving grace and providence is not something he only achieves in the fifth act of the play. Rather, there are

various references much earlier in the play that show it is part of Hamlet's core religious beliefs. As the play progresses Hamlet emphasizes different aspects of Christian doctrine at different times according to the changing needs of his revenge mission.

Groves observes: "The Bible was a unique resource for early modern playwrights as, unlike the classics or even the chronicle histories, it was known by the vast majority of their audience" (11). As I have noted in this thesis, Shakespeare made expert use of the biblical text, popular religious beliefs as well as the Christian doctrine to create a unique revenge tragedy, which resonated with his audience, especially when it dealt with one of the most hotly debated religious questions of the time: the eventual fate of the human soul.

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