Hamlet’s “Madness” as a Critique of the Protestant Worldview that Abandoned the Teachings of Catholic Christianity

The calamities of the fourteenth century inspired the inculcation of Christianity into every fiber of daily life for the people of Europe. In response to the catastrophes brought about by the Four Horsemen: Starvation, War, Destruction, and Death, many Europeans chose a path steeped in religious doctrine on the grounds that these catastrophes were the results of God’s wrath. This increase in religious piety concurrently led to the ever-increasing influence of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, whose leadership dictated how a citizen of this world should think and act. As the century came to a close, the search began for further guidance in sources outside of religion, finding solace in the works of Thucydides, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers. Through these philosophers, Europeans discovered new disciplines and ways of studying texts, thus rediscovering the ancient past with a new sense of history and perspective. Based on the study of these Greek classics, these scholars sought an educational and cultural program in pursuit of human dignity in order to become more cultivated, thus forming what is known as Humanism. Such studies involved the classical models of political governance, which was dramatically different than the monarchies that ruled Europe at the time. This increase in studies was compounded by Johannes Gutenberg’s invention, the printing press, which allowed for the widespread dissemination of the printed page. This invention was so revolutionary that by 1500ce, six million books had been printed in Europe.

This widespread pursuit for personal cultivation inevitably led to some controversial ideas. Dissatisfaction with the church prompted Christian intellectuals to use their scholarship towards social reform, pondering ideal societies based on morality.
These Christian Humanists placed an emphasis on Christian piety. Exemplifying these newfound ideas is the thoughts of the former monk, Martin Luther. Luther’s eyes were opened when the Archbishop ordered the sale of indulgences to cover the cost of constructing St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and also to aid in the cost of his elections. Utilizing the Humanist technique of close reading, Luther exposed the hypocrisy of such indulgences, as it bordered dangerously on simony, or the purchasing of church offices or favors. Already deep in a personal crisis in faith, Luther rediscovered his faith in a breakthrough: “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words [in Romans 1:17], namely, ‘In [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘he who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith.”¹ This belief that faith can be established through the study of the bible alone, and not through the rituals of Mass as in the Catholic Church inevitably led to conflict with the church authorities. The flames of frustration soon erupted into a wildfire of discontent when in 1517ce, Luther composed ninety-five theses that questioned the peddling of indulgences and the purchase of church offices. Once public, these theses unleashed a torrent of pent-up resentment and frustration among the laypeople, engulfing the Holy Roman Empire in conflict. By his death in 1546, half of Western Europe had renounced their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church, leading to widespread turmoil and new attitudes about the nature of religious and political authority through fractured Christian unity.²


Luther’s clash with the accepted establishment is exemplified in Shakespeare’s well-known tragedy, *Hamlet*. Like Luther, whose, “…personal crisis in faith led him to break with the Roman Church and establish a competing one,”[^3] Hamlet is portrayed as a character who sees through the transparent façade of the royal court, and whose sensibilities are offended by what has happened in the aftermath of his father’s death. As seen through the corruption of the Catholic Church and the citizens’ response, the concern over the place of purgatory in the Protestant view, and the often violent means to which the splits occurred, Hamlet’s anxiety and “madness” offers a critique of the Protestant worldview that abandoned the ideas and teachings of Catholic Christianity.

“A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye: In the most high and palmy state of Rome, a little ere the mightiest Julius fell... as harbingers preceding still the fates and prolongue to the omen coming on, have heaven and earth together demonstrated unto our climatures and countrymen.”[^4] By referencing the fall of Julius, Horatio both shows his Humanist intellect and prophesized the impending misfortune upon the first appearance of the ghost, just as the theses of Martin Luther painted a picture of corruption of the Catholic Church that inspired a future of turmoil in Western Europe. The Catholic Church had grown far removed from their humble, pious foundations, becoming an empire steeped in unparalleled wealth and power. However, despite the luxury and seemingly boundless influence within the walls of the Pope’s empire, the laypeople were growing restless with frustration spurred on by the influence of Luther and other reformers. Similarly, the jovial atmosphere within the walls of the Royal Court in Denmark (in scene two of act


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one) contrasts greatly with the atmosphere of dread and despair in scene one. Hamlet speaks of the corruption that overshadows the virtue of his late-father’s Kingdom just as the profiteering of the Catholic Church is buried beneath its scandal: “Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace, as infinite as man may undergo, shall in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault. The dram of evil doth all the noble substance of a doubt, to his own scandal.”

Through the power of influence and manipulations of faith, the Holy Roman Empire does just as Polonius says in his instructions for Reynaldo when tasked with spying on his son Laertes’ private life. He teaches Reynaldo how to ask leading questions of Laertes’ acquaintances, and other ways in order to use words to alter the truth. As in Claudius, who manipulated the royal court with his speech in Act 1, Scene 2, words become a tool used to manipulate minds and to control one’s perception of truth. With this technique, the Papacy used the misinterpretation of the Bible as a poison of the ear, just as Claudius literally poured poison into the ear of King Hamlet, with each occurring at the victims’ time of weakness; the laypeople at Mass and the King while he slept.

Gross misinterpretation of the doctrine in the bible led to a universal belief in the existence of Purgatory. This was plainly addressed in one of Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses, article XXII, where he wrote: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration, as well of images as of reliques, and also invocation of saints, as a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.”

While opening the eyes of many people to what it means to be a true Christian, it was also unsettling: Where were the souls of their


loved ones then? When trusting those who offered indulgences in order to ensure their souls reached heaven, did they in fact condemn themselves to hell? These concerns are illustrated by the hypocritical speech of Claudius concerning the death of King Hamlet: “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death the memory be green, and that it is befitted to bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom to be contracted in one brow of woe, yet so far hath discretion fought with nature that we with wisest sorrow think on him together with remembrance of ourselves.” Combining the finality of death and decay with greenery and rejuvenation in the case of King Hamlet, a man who died suddenly without receiving penitence, conflicted with the fact that he most certainly was in Purgatory, if such a place existed. Just as how Claudius eulogizing his brother simultaneously while marrying his brother’s widow was of concern to Hamlet, so too was of concern that the Catholic belief in Purgatory and pardons could be found through petty forgiveness; forgiveness that can be bought for a price, or mediated by a man with no more than a title, Priest. However, this outlet of forgiveness could be found nowhere in the texts of the Bible. With the knowledge that his father was killed without receiving penitence, was the ghost that Hamlet spoke with truly his father? If so, then it is true that he exists in Purgatory. If such a place does not exist, then was the ghost an evil spirit summoned to tempt Hamlet into committing the devil’s work? It is evident through such a tale how the Protestant sects of Christianity caused a great stir of despair in the minds of the laypeople. After all, according to Martin Luther, the men that they sought to earn forgiveness from, Priests, were lay people themselves: “Faith alone, not good works or penance, could save sinners from damnation. Faith came from the believer’s personal relationship with God, which he or she cultivated through individual study of scripture.

Ordinary laypeople thus made up ‘the priesthood of all believers,’ who had no need of a professional caste of clerics to show them the way to salvation.\(^8\) Luther’s anticlerical message inspired resentment toward the clergy among the merchants and artisans of Western Europe because of their tax-exempt status, but the peasants had even more reason for their discontent; they paid taxes to both their local lord and the church.\(^9\) In 1522ce, Luther translated Erasmus’s Greek New Testament into German, and the Old Testament in 1534ce, due to the belief that everyone should read the bible for him- or herself.\(^10\) Meanwhile, a French Humanist named Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples translated the Vulgate New Testament in French, allowing entire regions of Western Europe to shuck the chains of the clergy and discover faith for themselves.\(^11\) The means to which the church hierarchy went to quell the Reformation showed that violence was in the not too distant future when an Englishman named William Tyndale translated the Bible into English. Upon having his version printed in Germany and the Low Countries, Tyndale smuggled copies into England. Upon the discovery of his crime, he was swiftly burned at the stake as a heretic.\(^12\) This collective denunciation of the role of the clergy, combined with the blatant corruption and willingness for violence of the church stoked the fires of violence and rebellion for years to come.

Inspired by Luther’s ideas, which were published in numerous German and Latin editions, this rebellion began as an urban movement before erupting into war in the countryside by 1525ce. Just as Marcellus declares, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” as he foresees the impending clash of the corrupt interior of the kingdom with

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those of the outside world, just that was occurring in Western Europe by the spring of 1525ce. Peasant bands, joined by merchants and artisans in southern and central Germany rose in rebellion, plundering monasteries, refusing to pay church taxes, and demanding the abolition of serfdom and the right to appoint their own pastors. In Thuringia, the rebels were led by a former priest by the name of Thomas Muntzer, and vowed to chastise the wicked and thus clear the way for the Last Judgment. This notion of “retributive justice,” that sin must be returned with punishment, is exactly the route Hamlet takes when he accepts the order of the Ghost to exact revenge on Claudius for the murder of his father. Plainly, Claudius has committed a sin, and now, in order to restore balance to the kingdom, the sin must be punished, just as Thomas Muntzer aims to do to the Catholic Empire. Towards the end of 1525, Luther attempted to mediate between the opposing sides of the Peasants’ War, “…criticizing the princes for their brutality toward the peasants but also warning the rebels against mixing religion and social protest. Luther believed that rulers were ordained by God and thus must be obeyed even if they were tyrants. The Kingdom of God belonged not to this world but to the next.” Paralleling Hamlet’s “madness”, despite being a reasonable, thoughtful individual, Luther called on the princes to destroy “the Devil’s work” and slaughter the rebels when the peasants ignored him and continued to follow Mutzer. Madness, in the form violent displays of power, is seen in other reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli, who upon hearing of laypeople known as Anabaptists setting up their own sect urged the Zurich Magistrates to impose the death penalty, despite that they were doing to him what he had done to the Catholic Church himself. This is not to say that the Catholic Church was

above establishing its power as in the case of the reformist John Calvin’s posting of broadsheets on the doors of Catholic churches in Paris. As a response to this, which became known as the “Affair of the Placards,” the government arrested hundreds of French Protestants and executed many of them, forcing into exile Calvin and many of his followers. The circle of “victim turns towards violence” is again apparent in 1541 when Calvin himself gained power in Geneva through conflict with the opposition, led by the traditional elite families. In the end, the Protestant Reformation never reached the peaceful ending it had hoped for, instead, ending more like that of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet.” Despite them beginning in a search for a pure means of which to practice their faith, many of the reformers became the tyrannical leaders they had rebelled against. Likewise, the end of “Hamlet” is equally as tragic. In Hamlet’s mission to exact revenge upon Claudius for killing his father, Hamlet’s paranoia leads him to accidentally kill Polonius by stabbing blindly through the curtains, much like how Zwingli attempts to quell a group with their own beliefs, the Anabaptists, and how Luther called for the destruction of the Rebels in the Peasants’ War. These troubles led to further displays of violence and disorder, as fictionalized by Ophelia’s despair and subsequent death, and the tragic ending of the sword fight. In this climax, the personal goals of the two rivals, Claudius and Hamlet, leads to the death of not only themselves, but Gertrude, who sips from the poisoned goblet meant to kill Hamlet, and Laertes, who accidentally cuts himself with the poisoned tip of his own sword. Similarly, one must wonder if the leaders of the Reformation and the Holy Roman Empire, like Hamlet and Claudius, could have avoided such a loss of life of the laypeople merely searching for salvation.

17 Hunt, The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, 479.

18 Hunt, The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, 480.
In conclusion, as seen through the corruption of the Catholic Church and the citizens' response, the concern over the place of purgatory in the Protestant view, and the often violent means to which the splits occurred, Hamlet's anxiety and "madness" offers a critique of the Protestant worldview that abandoned the ideas and teachings of Catholic Christianity. From their beginnings, through the search for moral truths and personal cultivation, the works of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others inspired revolutionary ideas on Christian piety. Combined with dissatisfaction with the church, laypeople used the lessons of these Reformers as inspiration. Just as Hamlet, who is portrayed as a character who sees through the transparent façade of the royal court and whose sensibilities are offended by what has happened in the aftermath of his father's death, so too are many of these Reformers. However, as the plot develops in Hamlet, the madness of the characters leads to unfortunate ends, much like the ends to those unfortunate enough to oppose a Reformer and the Holy Roman Empire, as in the case of the Anabaptists. Likewise, just as Hamlet does not achieve an ending that appeases the readers' taste for outright redemption, neither does the Protestant Reformation, which ends with a multitude of Christian kingdoms; not the "ideal societies based on peace and morality," that Christian intellectuals had dreamed of.  

Work Cited

