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"To Be Sexy, Or Not To Be Sexy: The Controversial Grief, Religion, and Politics of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*"

AJ Jones

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Helen Keller once wrote of grief "What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us" (qtd. Han). Grief does not discriminate between man or woman, child or adult, Monarch or commoner. The laws of "Man" or "Church" cannot confine grief. It cannot be placed neatly in a box, to be tucked away and never thought of because it is inconvenient in the moment. Grief is both calm and aggressive. It is both orderly and chaotic. The very nature of grief is rational and irrational. It is this very contradiction of a rational irrationality that can push even the most logical person to commit the most illogical acts. Enter: William Shakespeare. This essay will explore the world, works, and mental state of William Shakespeare from the period 1595 to his death in 1616. It will discuss how the death of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway's only son, young Hamnet Shakespeare, coupled with the death of William's father, John Shakespeare, transformed the Bard. Further, it will seek to address what parts these deaths played in the creation of two controversial Shakespearian plays, and what affect they made have had on William's relationship with Queen Elizabeth I and the Church of England. The essay will seek to lay bare the theory that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* would have been considered controversial plays for their time because of their religious and supernatural undertones, which would have defied Queen Elizabeth's ban on the subject in theatre.

Although Shakespeare's works make him a fascinating historical figure from a theatrical and literary perspective, his personal life and the tragedies that followed him also make him noteworthy. William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway were parents to three children. Suzanna Hall (née Shakespeare) was the eldest child and was born on May 26th, 1583. Judith Quiney (née Shakespeare) and her fraternal twin, Hamnet Shakespeare, were born sometime during 1585. Although Judith would lead a relatively (albeit somewhat controversial life, thanks to her husband), Hamnet would not live past the age of 11 years old, passing away in August of 1596. By all accounts, William was a kind, loving, and attentive father. Although no records exist that state this point explicitly, the consensus is that William was undeniably transformed by his son's passing.

Hamlet is a fantastic piece of writing for many different reasons. As Peter Bray states, the play offers "a unique view of complicated masculine grief and loss" (Bray, 95). In his article "Men, Loss and Spiritual Emergency: Shakespeare, the Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet," Bray talks at length about the effect Hamnet's death likely had on William by an examination of grief itself. Bray's article is essential from many standpoints, which makes it an invaluable resource for this essay. Definitions and observations that Bray makes allow us the opportunity to see the Bard through a new lens. An examination of *Hamlet* with a psychological eye gives audiences a glimpse into the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and low self-esteem that William likely would have been forced to endure (Bray, 97). Further, Bray notes that although perceptions are currently evolving in Western civilizations, during the Elizabethan era it would likely have been thought that William was grieving in a way contrary to how men should behave. Bray offers up the point, though, that this assumption is now being "superseded by the

belief that an individual's response to death is unique regardless of gender" (96). It should come as no surprise, given the psychology at play in *Hamlet* that dissection of the drama and its themes have not been limited to just literary scholars. Bray quotes one of the forefathers of psychology, Sigmund Freud, when he writes "Freud's suggestion that in Hamlet the audience is confronted with " "the poet's own psychology" " observes that following the deaths of both his father and his son, Shakespeare was made more vulnerable to his own "childish" feelings towards his father and presumably to his needs as a father" (qtd. Bray, 102). Freud quotes included, Bray's article makes good points which should not be ignored, even in the context of a 'theatrical' history essay. "Men continue to fail to disclose their feelings to each other and to their families and make less use of mental health services than women" (Bray, 96). In implicitly writing of his grief, was William Shakespeare ahead of his time, in this too?

During the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare's act of disclosing as he did may have appeared odd, but it is likely that, to him, the writing and performance of the play acted as a catharsis. "Men may consider the possibility of death and all forms of loss in the course of a lifetime. Grof and Grof (1990) have suggested that confrontation with the issue of death is a pivotal part of the self-actualizing process…" (Bray, 95). With this point in mind, one could argue that William wrote *Hamlet* as a means of achieving closure with his son. Did William, as Bray posits, "…creatively [externalize] his inner representation of Hamnet as Hamlet…" to "immortalize" their bond, and if so, what are the implications of the religious content?

According to Wikipedia, in February of 1570 Pope Pius V issued a Papal Bull (a public decree issued by the Pope and the Vatican) called "Regnans in Excelsis" (or "Reigning on High" in modern English). The drafting of the Papal Bull was in response to actions taken by Queen

Elizabeth I that the Catholic Church felt were heretical. Following the passing of Queen Mary, Elizabeth had stripped many Northern Catholic Lords of their lands, replacing them with lower Lords whose allegiance to her rule and the Church of England was guaranteed. These actions by Her Majesty led to several violent and bloody rebellions, which the Queen was quick to quell in equally violent fashion. These actions were the significant points that Pope Pius V used to justify the "Regnans in Excelsis," which effectively excommunicated Queen Elizabeth from the Catholic Church and released all Catholics under her rule from their fealty to her. "Elizabeth," The Papal Bull declared, "[was] the pretended Queen of England and the servant of crime" (BBC, Wikipedia). Likely in response to this excommunication the Queen and the Church decreed that religious content in plays would not be permitted outside of the Church. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the period between 1599 and 1601, near the end of the Queen's reign, but still within the ban. How the Queen felt about Shakespeare and his use of theological elements in his craft, remains unknown. What is commonly known, though, is that the Queen held a deep affinity for Shakespeare, going so far as being the patron for his company "The Lord Chamberlains Men." If the Queen choosing to turn a blind eye to the conflict in Shakespeare's works was not controversial enough, there was also the matter of his own, personal, religious leanings that likely would have complicated things further.

Until relatively recently, there was little debate over Shakespeare's religious and political beliefs. Most assumed that he was "agnostic" to such conventions or, perhaps, that his "universal genius transcended such immediate issues" (Lockerd, 2). However, for someone who held neither faith or disbelief in the Christian God, Shakespeare's works contain strongly worded language and references that may counter those claims. In *Hamlet and the Heretic: The Princes*

Albigensian Rhetoric, the lines spoke by the character Claudio in *Much Ado* are used to illustrate this point. “Impose me to what penance your invention / Can lay upon my sin” (qtd. Lockerd, 2). The word “penance” is essential, as it refers to the repentance of sins in the Catholic sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession. In the 1750s, evidence surfaced that Shakespeare and his family were devoted followers of Catholicism and the Pope. According to historical documents, one Joseph Mosely found a six-page manuscript detailing John Shakespeare’s “spiritual testament” while he worked on the roof of the Shakespeare family house. The original document has since gone missing, but its reported contents provide a fascinating insight into the Shakespeare family and their beliefs. If William was indeed a Papist, as scholars believe, some evidence might be found in this later works after Hamnet’s death when William had seemingly thrown caution to the wind. Some of the best examples come from *Hamlet* itself.

At least one source contends that the first recorded showing of Hamlet was on the decks of The Dragon, an East India trading company ship, in 1607, nine years before Shakespeare passed (RSC). Audiences at the time would have been unlikely (or perhaps disinterested enough to care) about Shakespeare’s motivations for his work. All audiences would have cared about was that the play was entertaining. The plot of the production was intriguing. A man comes home to find his father deceased. His mother is found remarried to his Uncle. His father returns from the grave to task son with seeking justice. Of course, we know the plot is far more complex. Perhaps Benjamin Lockerd states it best in “Hamlet the Heretic: The Prince’s Albigensian Rhetoric” when he suggests that a certain duality is at work in the play when he writes that “Hamlet [is] a play about a Catholic ghost in an increasingly Protestant world” (3). The character of Hamlet demonstrates this duality very early in the play. When he first encounters the ghost of

the elder Hamlet, his father, he remarks that it must be "a spirit of health or goblin damned." Lockerd contends that this is indicative of a Protestant perspective. However, soon after when the spirit identifies itself, the senior Hamlet reveals that his soul is suffering, trapped in Purgatory, which is a Catholic concept. In response, the titular Hamlet invokes the name of "Saint Patrick"—the patron Saint of Purgatory in Catholicism (Greenblatt, qtd. Lockerd, 1). Although he remains entertaining, Hamlet is a dark, brooding, tragic, and at times loathsome character. Many of his beliefs would have run contrary to the Protestant beliefs, for example, that procreation is a blessing, which Hamlet consistently regards the act as something evil and burdensome (Lockerd, 6). As has been already alluded to, it is impossible to say how The Church of England, and by extension Queen Elizabeth, would have reacted to the Hamlet character at the time. It is likely, though, that the Queen and Church would have been unimpressed.

Sadly (or perhaps fortunately) for Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I would not live to see the completion of what many people believe is his most exceptional work in *King Lear*. According to the Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare is thought to have written *King Lear* sometime between *1605* and *1606*, two to three years after Elizabeth had passed (RSC). Similar to *Hamlet*, *King Lear* deals with violence, death, betrayal, and subterfuge in a royal family. King James seemed to have held a less harsh view of religion in theatre. According to Andrew Dickson at the British Library, within days of the new King arriving in England he sent word to Shakespeare and his troupe that they would now be under his patronage. Shakespeare's "Lord Chamberlains Men" would become "The Kings Men." James became one of Shakespeare's most ardent supporters (Dickson). Within this new partnership, Shakespeare began to feel safe; his works became bolder than plays previous. Dickson notes that during the first several years of the new

King's reign, Shakespeare spent much of the "…transitional phase…flexing as well as testing several boundaries…" (Dickson). *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's works that pushed those boundaries. Shakespeare's version of *King Lear* was 'likely' adapted from an old English play by the name of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters* (Dickson).

Shakespeare's version of the play is violent, with subtle moments of humour peppered into the dialogue. Similar to *Hamlet,* it may have been thought of as being controversial for the depiction of Lear as a "Pagan King" (Rubinstein, 234). If readers are to believe Frankie Rubinstein in his article *Speculating on mysteries: religion and politics in King Lear,* "Shakespeare created a surrogate for sixteenth- and seventeenth century England" (Rubinstein, 234). Further he went on to suggest that although Shakespeare was grateful to his new patron, he was none-the-less angry over the constant secret plots that had been at work in Elizabeth's court, and that had been starting to occur in James' court as well. These "intrigues" (as Rubinstein calls them) Shakespeare saw as a detriment to the welfare of England, and through *King Lear* he sought to bring attention to them (Rubinstein, 234). Shakespeare's wit and sense of humour have been well documented through the ages, as has his use of puns. Many times, Shakespeare would insert words or phrases into his works that held double, triple, and sometimes even quadruple meanings. Shakespeare, a master wordsmith, had a penchant for using words and phrases that had meanings within meanings. This effect was used to support a variety of goals. "Shakespeare frequently achieved useful puns by exploiting alternative sounds of a phrase," Rubinstein writes, "and in 'God's spies,' he intended us to hear, also, God's (s)pies or God's pies" (236). This example we find in Shakespeare's *King Lear* Act V, Scene III, line 20 reads:

> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,

> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too -
> Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out -
> And take upon 's the mystery of things,
> As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,
> In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by th' moon.

Rubinstein goes on to give context, explaining that during the Renaissance, the term 'pies' referred to magpies, but also that in true Shakespeare fashion the term had another referent (236-237). "The 'pie' had another contemporary meaning, one that comes to the heart of the sort of s-py Lear envisions himself as. Because of its black and white plumage, the pie became a representation of a clergyman, and in Jacobean England specifically a bishop" (237). Rubinstein points out, further still, that the term 'pies' could have yet another meaning, alluding to the similarities between 'spies' (which is what Lear saw himself as), 'pies' (the term meaning both a bird, and a clergyman) and 'pious', which Lear most certainly thought of himself. The terminology is significant as it could be seen as a nod to Pope Pius V, who, as previously discussed, excommunicated the former Queen from the Catholic Church (238).

The world will forever remember William Shakespeare, the genius. Readers and writers will always see him as a wordsmith and playwright of the highest calibre. Audiences and scholars will always regard him as a man of intense moral substance with a strong sense courage of conviction. Aside from all these positive qualities, perhaps what Shakespeare should be remembered for, though, is the strength he showed in the face of all the adversity he endured in his personal life. Shakespeare, the writer, imagined worlds within his plays that were filled with tremendous loss and tragedy, but Shakespeare the man lived in a world that was more tragic and painful than most other people could ever conceive in reality. Perhaps it was this cycle of loss

that enabled William the man to become Shakespeare the playwright, who created thought-provoking, controversial, and compelling works of art, despite knowing the risk he was inviting upon himself.

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