Stony Brook University

The Role of Christian Doctrine in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

May 2016

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Abstract:

The following work analyzes Shakespeare's use of Christian doctrine in his 17th century drama, *Hamlet*. The focus is to see how and for what reasons Shakespeare used his knowledge of Christian texts to construct *Hamlet*'s dialogue and setting. This research draws mainly from Shakespeare's primary sources, the Geneva Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Observing *Hamlet* through a biblical lens brings to light topics such as, the existence of purgatory and the rites of passage to heaven or hell. Taking into consideration Shakespeare's contemporary society, views on topics such as purgatory, suicide, and confession, would have been mixed. Therefore, this analysis also looks at *Hamlet*'s reception by both its Protestant and Catholic audience. By examining Shakespeare's use of Christian texts and how they correspond with his work, it is possible to find deeper meaning as to the development of *Hamlet*'s characters and how the play functions as a whole.

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Introduction:

Analyzing *Hamlet* through Shakespeare's use of Christian doctrine yields a new perspective on how intimately religion permeated his contemporary society. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the Geneva Bible as a primary source to help shape characters, construct their dialogue, and act as a guide for religious reference within the plot. Raised at a time where church attendance was mandatory and religious instruction was a daily event, Shakespeare became familiar with a variety of religious material. Being a man of the theatre, Shakespeare gave the controversial issue of religion a place to have a voice. He used the stage as a pulpit from which to express the disconcerting issues surrounding religion.

Scriptures had a powerful effect on Shakespeare's writing. According to *The Norton Shakespeare* 3rd ed., "scholars have identified over three hundred references to the Bible in Shakespeare's work" (19). Shakespeare not only quotes the Scriptures, but alludes to biblical stories and morals. For example, in *Hamlet*, there are parallels found between the biblical story of Cain and Able and Shakespeare's story of Claudius and King Hamlet. Paralleling stories and connecting themes, such as this, can lead an audience to infer the fate of a character. If Shakespeare intended for Claudius's character to mirror Cain, then it is to be certain that Claudius will not get away with murder. The confession of sins is a theme that is brought up continuously throughout the play. In Hamlet, confession, or the lack thereof, illustrates the purity of a characters soul, prior to death, and how that soul will be judge by God. Knowing that King Hamlet was unable to make confession before he was murdered, the audience is left to question whether the ghost is an evil spirit or King Hamlet is surfacing from Purgatory, Shakespeare does not answer these questions directly, but he leaves his audience with the entertaining option of debate. The religious material that he uses as a source in *Hamlet* gives his

Christian audience a common reference. It is organized religion that divides the answers.

The undeniable fact is the presence of sin and the breaking of Commandments throughout *Hamlet*. Polonius, Claudius, Ophelia, Gertrude and Hamlet all fall victim to sinful immoral acts. According to Robert Potter, Shakespeare's plays often place characters in situations where they must make decisions based on morals. Shakespeare uses parabolic theology to teach his audience what it looks like to live under God's law versus the laws of the king. Moral lessons, such as the parables, are disguised within the plot to transmit a message to the audience. The characters in *Hamlet* decide between selfishness and virtue. Their decisions often result in their fate. The question of who will be going to heaven and who will be going to hell can be brought back to the Scriptures. Acceptance into heaven or the denial thereof would be dependent upon the spiritual condition of the person right before death.

In *Hamlet*, in addition to the Geneva Bible, Shakespeare employs his knowledge of other religious material such as the Book of Common Prayer, hymns, and ceremonies. For example, by a close reading of the burial rites found in the Book of Common Prayer, it is evident that Ophelia's burial does not follow the traditional Christian ceremony. The audience, at that time being familiar with the Book of Common Prayer, is able to understand the actions and reactions of Shakespeare's characters, why the priest refuses a proper burial, why Laertes is so angry with the priest, and the possible cause of Ophelia's death. The Book of Common Prayer also includes Psalms which Shakespeare references as well. According to Naseeb Shaheen, Psalms were part of everyday prayer for Shakespeare's contemporary society, making them an easily recognizable reference; Shakespeare also refers to them "more frequently than any other book" (45). For example, Hamlet's monologue "What a piece of work is man" echoes Psalm 8, "What is man, say I…" and the story of Creation. With reference to such important Scriptures in the Bible,

further investigation helps to define Hamlet's character.

Hamlet questions human existence, more precisely, living in God's will or self-will. To analyze the answers to these questions it is necessary to turn to the religious material thought to be used by Shakespeare. Insight into these religious implications leads the reader, or at that time the audience, to find deeper meaning in *Hamlet's* characters and a better understanding as to what drives the plot.

Analysis:

It is hard to say exactly where Shakespeare received his religious education. "Apart from the assumption that he attended Stratford Grammar School as a young boy, nothing is known of his education or of his occupation before he appears on the London literary scene in his late twenties" (Asquith 27). Growing up during the Reformation, it is certain that Shakespeare received religious education in school. But critics believe that his literary works show a vast amount of knowledge that far exceeds what would be taught in school. In the 16th and 17th century, Bible study in school was required and Church attendance was mandatory. If citizens did not attend church, they would be forced to pay a fine. Loyalists composed a list of people that were not seen attending church on a monthly basis. The list identified those who "were found out by the endeavors of the said commissioner to be Jesuits, seminary priests, fugitives or recusants ... or [are] vehemently suspected to be such" (Bearman 428). John Shakespeare, William's father, was found on this list. His lack of church attendance had more to do with the fear of being arrested for failure to pay fines, than any issues he may have had with the reformation. The biblical knowledge that John acquired would have come from the times he was

in attendance. The incorporation of religious teachings in the Shakespeare household is uncertain. As bailiff or mayor of Stratford, John Shakespeare could certainly afford to purchase an English Bible, particularly from and after 1575-76, when for the first time the Geneva Bible was allowed to be published in England. But if it is true that Shakespeare's parents were illiterate, the chances that the Bible was read in Shakespeare's home would be greatly reduced (Shaheen, "Shakespeare's Knowledge of the Bible--How Acquired" 201). Shakespeare's expansive knowledge of religious material must have come from a personal relationship with the Scriptures. Working intimately with a variety of religious material, Shakespeare created the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet is a play of contemplation. The characters are often questioning their own actions or the actions of others. The audience is left to ponder the same questions, the first being, what is the nature of the ghost? Today, this question has been exhausted by Shakespeare's critics. The answer is left up to the spectators' religious beliefs. Shakespeare's audience, consisting of multiple religious backgrounds, had opposing views as to what the apparition was. Even though Catholics were required to renounce their faith and convert to Protestantism, some Catholics held strong to their beliefs, only pretending to be Protestant for the sake of their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their family. With that said, if the spectator was raised under the laws of Catholicism, he would be convinced that the ghost was the spirit of King Hamlet, visiting from purgatory. On the other hand, since Protestantism denies the existence of purgatory, the spirit was undoubtedly evil. Because the ghost is the catalyst in Hamlet's storyline, the audience's interpretation of the ghost can have an effect on how they view the rest of the play. Bernardo and Horatio come in contact with the ghost in I.i, but it is not until Hamlet arrives in I.v that the audience gets to hear the ghost speak. The ghost does not directly state

where he has traveled from, but his words depict an ungodly place. He threatens that it would be too much to bear if they knew where he came from. The ghost explains:

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away. (I.v.9-13)

This is all the ghost is allowed to say regarding this topic, stating directly afterwards that he is "forbid / To tell the secrets of [his] prison house" (13-14). The imagery that Shakespeare uses in these lines, illustrate the torture of both purgatory and hell. Therein lies the debate.

According to the Bible and Shakespeare's dialogue, it is possible to weigh in on both sides of this argument. The audience can see Hamlet as a son avenging his father's death, as so instructed by his father's spirit, or he can be portrayed as a man driven by the manipulation of an evil spirit. Protestants believe that this debate can be resolved by turning to the Bible. According to Strong's Concordance, the words *heaven* and *hell* are mentioned a total of 636 times in the Bible; not once does the word *purgatory* appear. There is a clear discernment between heaven and hell in the Bible, but no mention of the purgatorial waiting room. Therefore, Protestant spectators would believe that, for King Hamlet to return as a ghost, he must be an evil spirit. Otherwise, he would be resting in heaven.

Catholics, on the other hand, believe that the Bible makes a clear reference to purgatory, not by using its name directly, but by alluding to its existence. Steven Greenblatt suggests, in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory*, that one example used to defend this claim exists in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

> Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

In this Scripture, Paul describes how, and by what standards, man will be judged in the afterlife. He states that there are six foundations by which a man builds his spiritual foundation; three of them are flammable (wood, hay, stubble) and three of them are impenetrable (gold, silver, precious stones). Catholics understood the word *fire* to mean the fire found in purgatory or hell. According to the Catholic reading of this Scripture, man is judged, "tried" by the fire, and then pardoned or punished by the Lord. For Shakespeare's contemporary society, there was a second Book in the Bible that would defend the existence of purgatory, the Book of Maccabees. Found between the Old and New Testaments, in the Apocrypha, 2 Maccabees explains that prayer and sacrifice can save a soul from being sent to hell (Greenblatt 140). Therefore, in the case of King Hamlet, there was hope for his salvation. 2 Maccabees states:

> When [Judas] had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of 2,000 drachms of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection: for he had not hoped that they that were slain should have risen again, it'd been superfluous and vain to pray for the dead. And also in that he perceived that there was great favor laid up for those that died godly, it was an holy and good thought. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin" (12:43-45, KJV).

Judas Maccabeus collects money to pay for Indulgences. Indulgence serves to remove the dead

from purgatory and allow them to rise into heaven. Protestants did not believe that the Book of Maccabee was divinely written, therefore they did not follow the ideology written within the Book, nor did they live according to any of the Books contained in the Apocrypha (Greenblatt 139–140). They also did not consider the Books in the Apocrypha to be canonical. With that, the concept of purgatory was nothing but an over analyzed fraudulent Scripture.

For the Catholic spectator, the defense of King Hamlet's purgatorial existence is revealed in I.v, when Hamlet meets the ghost for the first time. He tells Hamlet that he is confined to his "prison house…till the foul crimes are…burnt and purged away" (I.v.12-13). *Purged* is often read as being a reference to purgatory. Yet, a stronger defense of the ghost's existence can be found by Shakespeare's use of the conjunction "till." The ghost states that he will be confined *until* his sins are purged away, thus proposing that there will be some type of transition, an exit from confinement, after his sins are purged. By reason of Catholic belief, if the ghost was residing in purgatory, his first request would have been for prayers. This is not the case. Instead, he demands that Hamlet "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.25). At first, Hamlet's emotional reaction to this request conveys a strong desire to avenge his father, "Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge," but his actions prove otherwise (I.v.29-31). Hamlet does not move with "swift" wings. The initial adrenaline produced by seeing his father's ghost and hearing the news of his murder lessens. He, just like the audience, begins questioning the nature of the ghost:

"The spirit that I have seen
May be a dev'l, and the dev'l hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,

As he is very potent with such spirits,

Abuses me to damn me" (II.ii.517-522).

Just like the fruit in the Garden of Eden, the ghost appears in what should be a pleasing shape, the shape of Hamlet's father. Even though Hamlet is apprehensive, he is more apt to speak to a ghost that resembles his father, a man that he loved deeply, than speak with and trust in a ghost of any other form. The Bible often refers to the devil as being one that is deceiving by sight, a sort of shape shifter. In 2 Corinthians 11.14, Paul testifies that "…Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of light." Knowing this, Hamlet is aware that this ghost may only appear to be the spirit of his father, an "Angel of light." Having lost his father, Hamlet is vulnerable. He knows that his lack of emotional stability may have been the host the devil was looking to latch onto. Using Hamlet's mourning-spirit to his advantage, the father-like image may be the devil tempting Hamlet to sin against God. The ghost explains that he was the one deceived by the serpent in the garden. He explains how he was murdered:

… sleeping in my orchard,

A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark

Is by a foragèd process of my death

Rankly abused. But now, thou noble youth,

The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown. (I.v.35-38)

The ghost explains that, while asleep in the orchard, he is deceived by his brother. He refers to his brother as a serpent, thus alluding to Satan in the Garden of Eden. Shakespeare uses the word *ear* in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Literally, the ear is the organ through which King Hamlet is poisoned. Metaphorically speaking, the new King Claudius poisons the ears of men

and women of Denmark with lies. Claudius new position as king, gives more authority to his words. In Bryan Crockett's book, *The Play of Paradox: Stages and Sermons in Renaissance England*, "he argues that the usual [Renaissance] Protestant claim that biblical ideas are imparted not primarily by reading but by the spoken word" (55). The Word of God is spoken by ministers and received through the ears of the congregation, making the Word just as important and valid as what is written in the Bible. King Hamlet claims that Claudius has not only stung the ear of Denmark and the ear of his brother, but he has also seduced Gertrude's ear.

Claudius's seduction of Gertrude, as proclaimed by King Hamlet, and the events in the orchard, bear a close resemblance to the accounts in Genesis 3. Seen below are some of the notes that precede Genesis 3 in the Geneva Bible.

1 The woman seduced by serpent. 6 enticeth her husband to send. 8 They both flee from God. 14 The three are punished. 19 Man as dust.

There is an undeniable comparison between the serpent, Adam, and Eve, and Claudius, King Hamlet, and Gertrude. The ghost explains to Hamlet that Gertrude was tricked by Claudius; she did not act on her own accord. Similarly, Eve claims that the serpent "beguiled" her in the Garden of Eden, charming her into eating the forbidden fruit. The ghost goes on to say that it was the,

> Incestuous, that adulterated beast,
> With witchcrafts of his wits, with traitorous gifts —
> Oh, wicked wit and gifts that have the power
> So to seduce! — won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (I.v.42-46)

By calling her "seeming[ly]-virtuous, the ghost expresses his disgust with his wife's decision to

marry his brother, his murderer. Yet, the ghost believes that Gertrude's lack of virtue, just like Eve, is due to her defenselessness against the bedevilment of seduction and desire. When Hamlet points out her lack of virtue, reprimanding her for her brief mourning, she does not admit to any wrongdoing. She does not turn to God to confess any sins. Claudius and Gertrude are given opportune moments to confess their sins to God, yet they choose not to. Just like King Hamlet, dying without a chance to repent, they will be punished. The note for Genesis 3:19 states that after the three are punished, "man is dust." Hamlet discusses this idea of "dust" in II.ii as he pontificates on the current state of man; this will be discussed in greater detail later.

The union between man and woman is often drawn from the creation of Eve, found in Genesis 2:23-24, "Then, the man said, this now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shalbe called woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh." Hamlet makes reference to this scripture in III.vi. 48-49. Leaving for England, Hamlet says goodbye to Claudius, yet refers to him as mother, claiming that Claudius is "one flesh" with Gertrude. Hamlet explains that "father and mother is man and wife, Man and wife is one flesh…." According to their marriage rites, even though King Hamlet is dead, Gertrude is still part of King Hamlet; under the eyes of God, they are still married. So, would this not be adultery? Wouldn't Claudius be coveting his brother's wife? Critics argue that the Sixth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' and the Ninth Commandment 'Thou shalt not covet they neighbor's wife' are both broken in *Hamlet*. Holly J. Braun claims that the "Ghost speaks of the adulterous intrigues of Claudius on Gertrude" (Braun 13) when telling Hamlet about Claudius's crime, "Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.42). By a close reading of Hamlet's dialogue and referencing the marriage rites found in The Form of Solemnization in the Book of Common

Prayer, it is possible to assume that Hamlet also considers his mother's relationship with Claudius as being adulterous. The Form of Solemnization was recited at most wedding ceremonies at the time of *Hamlet*'s production. It stated that "man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be as one flesh" (Church of England and Dix 256). In Nicole Blinco's article "Is Gertrude an Adulteress," she argues that "the English Protestants maintain that the widow's flesh remained one flesh with her husband even after his death. In 1556, the Catholic theologian Nicholas Hartsfield rejected the Protestants idea that the wife is the flesh of her dead husband, holding instead that the death of either spouse caused a total dissolution of the marriage union" (Blincoe 20). By solely referencing what was socially accepted during the production of Hamlet, one can state that adultery was not committed. Yet by citing the Bible, which was one of Shakespeare's primary sources, Matthew 5:27-28 states, "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Therefore, even if Claudius simply lusted after Gertrude prior to their marriage, he has committed adultery within his heart.

Gertrude and Claudius' relationship is further exhibited in Hamlet's production of The Mousetrap. Hamlet chooses this play because he feels that the plot will reflect a similarity to the supposed sins of Claudius and Gertrude. In the opening scene of The Mousetrap, the Player King and Player Queen discuss their love for each other, with the Player Queen professing that she will not take up a second husband after his death, only women that have plotted their husband's death do that, "In second husband let me be accurst: / None wed the second but who killed the first…A second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed" (III.ii.164-165,168-169). The Player King is then killed by his nephew Lucianus. He pours

poison in the Player King's ear while he is resting in the garden, just as Claudius has done to his own brother. Hamlet uses this performance in hopes that Claudius and Gertrude will reveal their guilt after hearing the promises made by the Player Queen and watching the villainous acts of Lucianus. The audience is not altogether clear as to what exactly Hamlet believes Gertrude to be guilty of. It is uncertain if he believes her to be part of the plan to kill King Hamlet. What they do know is that she is quick to remarry, which deeply upsets Hamlet. The King rises and leaves the play after Hamlet provides him with a brief summary of the rest of the play, including all the important parts that may appear very familiar to Claudius, "A poisons him i'th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago, the story is extant and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (III.ii.242-245).

Throughout the play Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet are either seducing or being seduced — be it physically or verbally. By the end, they meet their demise without an opportunity to confess their sins to God. Under the laws of Catholicism, those that are aware of their sinful acts prior to committing them are committing mortal sins. Yet, there are also those that may be unaware they are committing a sin due to seduction or manipulation. Awareness and lack thereof, plays a big role in defining the type of sins *Hamlet's* characters commit. According to Catholicism, a mortal sin (i.e., adultery, murder, idolatry) is committed when the sinner is aware of his actions. For example, Hamlet takes a very active role in killing his uncle. Even though he hesitates, he is forever ruminating over the thought of committing murder. He deliberates, questions, and devises plans; he is aware of his actions. A sin that is not as grave in matter is considered by the Catholic Church to be venial. Venial sins are often committed without awareness of one's actions. The Bible does not identify a separation of mortal and venial sins. In fact, the words are not in the Bible at all. Categorizing sins was a construct of the Catholic

Church and are most clearly defined today in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism is comprised of Christian Law as seen by the Catholic Church. It states that "Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law. It also implies consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. [Furthermore,] one commits *venial sin* when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without complete consent" (III, sec.1, art.8.IV.1859,1862). However, Protestants believe that if they repent, truly, and address God directly, they will be forgiven, regardless of the severity of sin.

What can be agreed upon is that the sins that *Hamlet*'s characters commit defy one or more of the Ten Commandments. Even though the audience consisted of different religious perspectives, one thing that they had in common was awareness of the Ten Commandments. Shakespeare's contemporary society was "required to memorize [all] Ten Commandments as they appeared in the catechism" (Shaheen, *Biblical References* 226). Whether the spectator was Catholic or Protestant, they were well acquainted with the gravity of sin committed when breaking one of the Ten Commandments. Of these Commandments, 'Thou shalt not kill' appears to be an issue weaved into the story line of each main character. Claudius has killed his brother in order to become king and marry the Queen. The story of Claudius and King Hamlet parallels the story of Cain and Able found in Genesis 4:8-10,13. The similarity between Claudius and Cain lies not only in fratricide, but in their unwillingness to confess their sin freely to God. God asks Cain where his brother is. Cain has the opportunity to confess what he has done, and instead replies with a question, "I cannot tell. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Similarly, in III.iii.36, Claudius begins his soliloquy by admission of his guilt. This admission is

not to be confused with being a true confession to God, just self-recognition of his wrongdoings. Claudius states, "O, my offence is rank: / it smells to heaven; it hath the primal eldest curse upon't (36-37). Claudius believes that God knows what he has done regardless if he confesses or not. He is aware that his rank offence, the murder of King Hamlet. Yet, he refuses to say the words out loud to God. For both Cain and Claudius, the resistance to confession is due to the fear of punishment. God curses Cain for his sins. This is the "primal eldest curse" that Claudius refers to in III.iii.37. The curse placed on Cain destroys all possibilities for him to do the work he was born to do. He will no longer be able to grow fruitful crops. Cain loses his purpose in life for the sin he has committed; Claudius does not want to suffer the same consequences. Cain's response to God is that the punishment is "more than he can bear." Claudius will not confess his sins because he, too, feels he will be unable to handle the pain of losing his "ambition," his seat as King, and Gertrude (III.iii.55).

In this scene, Claudius questions whether or not following through with his confession is worth risking all he has. Would it even be possible for God to forgive him for murder, or has he committed an unforgivable sin? Claudius asks, "Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / to wash it white as snow?" (III.iii.45-46). Here, Shakespeare is making a direct reference to Isaiah 1:15-18. In these verses, Isaiah speaks to the Jews. He tells them that their sins will be washed away if they change the way they live. They must "learn to do well: seek judgment, relieve the oppressed: judge the fatherless, *and* defend the widow" (17). In doing so, "…they shall be made white as snow: though they were red as scarlet, they shall be as wool" (18). Neither the warning implicated in the story of Cain and Able, nor the promises prophesized in Isaiah were enough to convince Claudius that he would only be saved if he confessed. Claudius believes that he will be unable to submit to the terms in Isaiah 1:15-17. He would have to

change the way he lives, and in doing so, he would have to give up the crown he stole. Desiring a life cleansed from sin and a life of authority, Claudius finds himself "trapped between heaven and earth" (Flaherty 80). Claudius references this trap during his incomplete confession. Within this trap, his words cannot reach heaven: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (III.iv.97). Since Claudius's dialogue is internal, Hamlet can only assume, by Claudius's appearance, that he is confessing. The audience, on the other hand, is privy to Claudius's lack of confession. Even if the audience was not well versed in Scripture, or if they were not aware of Isaiah's prophesies, most of them knew that the way to be free from sin was to pray directly to God and truly repent. John 1:9, read every day from their Morning Prayer book, says that "if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."

Not only does Claudius struggle with his virtue in this scene, Hamlet does as well. He is resentful of the fact that his father did not have an opportunity to confess his sins. He states that his father was killed "full of bread." To be "full of bread," Greenblatt explains, is to be spiritually unprepared for heaven, full of sin (Shakespeare et al. 1816, n.8). Conversely, to be rid of "bread," in Christian terminology, can either represent the elimination of sin or the spiritual practice of fasting. Again, due to his untimely death, King Hamlet was not able to do either. Shakespearian scholars, William W. Heist and Sidney Homan, believe that Shakespeare's use of the term "full of bread" is most likely a reference to Ezekiel 16:49: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness." In this scripture, a prophet describes the fruitfulness of Sodom's land, calling it "full of bread." The sin is not the fruitful land that God gave the people of Sodom; the sin is that they were prideful and lazy, and they did not share their abundance with others. Hamlet feels that if his father was full of bread

when he was murdered, then so it must be for Claudius. He is again at odds with the power of God's will over self-will. If Claudius confesses prior to being murdered, he will have the opportunity to stand before God. Hamlet does not want to murder Claudius in the midst of confession and be the reason that Claudius is granted the right to go to heaven. Even though Hamlet feels justified in punishing Claudius for his sins, he knows that God will have the final say. In III.iii, while spying on Claudius supposedly confessing, Hamlet acknowledges God as being the ultimate authority over the fate of man, admitting that Hamlet himself can be the cause of death, but that God will judge whether or not Claudius's soul is fit for heaven.

> Now might I do it, but now 'a is a-praying.
> And now I'll do't [*He draws his sword*.] And so 'a goes to heaven,
> And so am I revenged — that would be scanned:
> A villain kills my father, and for that
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
> Why, this is base and silly, not revenge.
> 'A took my father grossly, full of bread,
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May —
> And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven? (73-38)

Hamlet's awareness of his power vs. the power of God causes him to, once again, hesitate in avenging his father. Hamlet knows that he will be no different from his uncle if he commits murder. He is not so much afraid of murdering his uncle, but more of murdering his uncle when as he is confessing all of his sins. Hamlet wants his uncle to die in the same "gross" spiritual state as his father, "full of bread." Hamlet, in his moments of hesitation, knows that God will

have the final say in what happens to Claudius's soul, "And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?"

Hamlet's soliloquy echoes Romans 14. In this Scripture, the apostle Paul discusses the unlawful act of man condemning man for his sins. In verses 10-12 Paul asks,

> Why dost thou condemn thy brother? or why dost thou despise that brother? for we shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, I live, saith the Lord, and every knee shall bow to me and all tongues shall confess unto God. So then everyone of us shall give accounts of himself to God. (Geneva 1599)

In Roman's 14, Paul illustrates two cases where Christians wrongfully judge the actions of other men. He explains that if a man chooses to eat or not eat a particular meat, it is not the responsibility of the Christian to judge this man's choices. If a man celebrates certain holidays and not others, it is not the Christian's job to set this man straight. He preaches that Christians are not the arbiters of anyone's conduct or beliefs. Regardless of how Hamlet believes Claudius should be punished for his sins, Claudius will still "appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Even though Hamlet is aware of this, he still works to prepare Claudius's body for an un-repented, sinful death. Just as King Hamlet was killed, "cut off even in the blossom of [his] sin," (I.v.76) Hamlet wishes Claudius to die under these same circumstances. For most of the characters, the battle between God's will and self-will is an ongoing internal conflict. Hamlet's dependence on self-will evolves. He goes back and forth, first believing in God's authority, and then playing God.

In III.iii, Hamlet thinks before murdering Claudius; he is patient before reacting. He takes a moment to think about how God would judge his actions. As Hamlet's anger increases, his self-restraint decreases. By the following scene, Hamlet's lack of control leads him to

accidentally murder the spying Polonius. Polonius is often characterized as being foolish and nosey, but he is also considered to be a good father. He gives his children direction in the form of proverbs. In I.iii, at Laertes's departure to France, Polonius runs down a long list of how Laertes should behave while away from home. He wants his son to be safe and use his common sense. It is here that Polonius breaks into his well-known proverbial speech, coining the phrase "to thine own self be true," a phrase often mistaken as being biblical (77). It is possible that Shakespeare's use of proverbs in Polonius's speech was inspired by Proverbs 4. There is a similarity of purpose and tone between the fatherly advice given by Polonius's and Solomon's teachings documented in the Proverbs. Polonius may have changed the words, but the meaning remains intact,

> Hear, my son: and receive my words, and the years of thy life shall be many (4:10).
>
> Keep thine heart with all diligence: for thereout cometh life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and put wicked lips far from thee. Let thine eyes behold the right, and let thine eyelids direct the way before thee. (Proverbs 4:23-25)

In these verses, Solomon tells the young men of Israel to, first, listen to his advice because it will benefit them for years to come. Then he instructs them to keep a pure heart, mind their words, and to seek the right path in life. By following this advice, Solomon claims, they will live long lives. Polonius, too, tells his son to make the right decisions, strongly advising him to watch his tongue. As seen in Polonius's own character, he desires his son to be more of an observer than a participant. Ironically, it is by the act of observing, "spying," that Polonius is murdered.

According to the Book of Common Prayer, the act of murdering another was not the only way of breaking the 6th Commandment. "Thou shalt not kill" also included killing oneself, thus adding suicide to the list of mortal sins. Along with the Geneva Bible, the Book of Common

Prayer also influenced Shakespeare's writing. Published in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the Book contained Morning and Evening Prayer, the services and rite of the sacraments, the epistles and gospels read on Sundays, and the Psalms (1549). "According to the Book of Common Prayer 'thou shalt doe no murther,' was generally interpreted to also forbid self-slaughter" (Shaheen, *Biblical References* 539). In V.i, the gravedigger explains the difference between accidentally drowning and drowning oneself: "Here lies the water, good; here stands the man, good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, willy-nilly he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life" (14-19). It is in this discussion that Shakespeare marks the difference between dying due to an outside force, the water rising and drowning the man, and committing suicide, the man going to the water and drowning himself. The Church looks at these differences, and makes a decision regarding burial rites based upon the coroner's inquest. The coroner uses both the physical evidence (the deceased body) and any witness account to identify the cause of death. Because Ophelia's death was the result of self-slaughter, Cannon Law forbids her a proper Christian burial. In Shakespeare's time, the only way that a suicide would be considered for Christian burial was if the act was brought on by insanity. This "understanding had governed Christian thought and practice for over 1,000 years when the enacted funeral cortège brought the 'corse' of Ophelia onto the global stage. Both the coroner's verdict of Christian burial and the audiences direct observation of Ophelia's madness would have led theatergoers at the Globe to expect something very different from what [she receives as her burial rites]" (Frye 300). Some of the spectators would have agreed with Hamlet when he refers to Ophelia's funeral as having "maimèd rites" (V.i.198).

As outlined in The Book of Common Prayer 1549, a Christian burial service begins by

reading passages from the Holy Scripture, followed by reciting or singing multiple psalms, blessing the dead while casting dirt into the grave, and reading "lessons taken out of the XV chapter to the Corinthians, the first Epistle" (Church of England and Dix 272). The service ends with a reading from the Gospel, the response to the petitions, and the Lord's Prayer. In *Hamlet*, the priest reluctantly performs a very private funeral service, one that is missing many of the aforementioned formalities. Laertes is distraught that his sister is not receiving the proper burial. The priest argues that she has received more than she deserves,

> Priest: Her obsequies have been as far in large
> As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful;
> And but the great command where sway the order
> She should in ground unsanctified been lodged
> To the last trumpet: for charitable prayers,
> Flints and pebbles should be thrown on her.
> Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,
> Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
> Of bell and burial.
> (V.i.205-213)

Because Ophelia's father was counselor to the King, she has been granted the rites to passing bells, strewments, and a dirt covered grave, as opposed to the "flint and pebbles" that the priest believes should be thrown on her unsacred grave (Shakespeare et al. 1849, n.8). Laertes, in a threatening tone, tells the priest that his sister will one day be "a ministering angel," ascending to heaven, and when the priest dies, he will be sent to hell (V.i.220). According to Hebrews 1:14, "ministering angles" are servants of God. In this verse, the prophets ask the rhetorical questions:

"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" Laertes believes this to be true. He does not comment on her cause of death, be it suicide or not. He believes that Ophelia will serve God. Since it is impossible for Ophelia to confess her sin of self-slaughter prior to her death, Shakespeare's audience would assume that her resting place would be in either hell or purgatory.

Hamlet's character is extremely concerned about the afterlife. He wants to do the right thing so that God allows him into heaven, but his overpowering desire for retribution works against him. Hamlet needs assurance that his sinful actions will not be in vain. Not fully convinced of the nature of the ghost, Hamlet waits until he has proof that Claudius has killed his father before he follows the ghost's instructions. He does not want to rush off and kill a man, if the information is coming from the devil. In III.ii.138-250, during the production of The Mousetrap, Hamlet watches as his uncle leaves the theatre after Lucianus pours poison into the Player King's ear. Hamlet interprets Claudius decision to leave as a sign of guilt. Even though Hamlet has been given sufficient proof that his uncle has killed his father, he will not kill him until the time is right. Hamlet begins to play God, making it his duty to judge those who have sinned and seek vengeance upon them. Later, in Claudius's confession scene, Hamlet believes that he must carry out the work of God, making reference to Romans 13:3-4:

> 3. For Magistrates are not to be feared for good works but for evil. Wilt thou then be without fear of the power? do well: so shalt thou have praise of the same.
>
> 4. For he is the minister of God: but if thou do evil, fear: for he beareth not the sword for naught: for he is the minister of God to take vengeance on him to do with evil. (Geneva)

Hamlet believes he has the right to decide when someone should be forgiven and when someone should be punished. He considers himself both "scourge and minister" (III.iv.176). R.W. Desai,

author of "Hamlet as 'The Minister of God to Take Vengeance,'" compares and contrasts the words "scourge" and "minister." Both nouns illustrate God's reactions to sin, "scourge" being a harsh punishment from God and "ministering" being "the compassionate aspect of God's righteousness" (Desai 23). Hamlet takes on both roles as scourge and minister. For him, the main difference in the words is that scourge results in murder, and ministering results in pardon. Being that Claudius is an evil-doer, Romans 13:4 would suggest that Hamlet is free to scourge Claudius for his sin.

Claudius is not only guilty of fratricide and regicide, but he is also guilty of incest. In 17th century England, for a man to marry his dead brother's wife, papal dispensation was necessary. One reason that incest was considered acceptable was in the case of royal intermarriage for dynastic reason. For example, when Henry's older brother Arthur died, he left behind his wife Catherine. Several years later, being granted dispensation, Henry married her. From a biblical standpoint, according to Deuteronomy, Catherine and Henry's marriage can be considered a levirate marriage. The reason that levirate marriage is often discussed when analyzing Gertrude and Claudius's marriage is because, Jewish tradition or not, it is cited in the Bible. Its premise was known by the Shakespearian spectator. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 explains the criteria for a levirate marriage, "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die and have no son, the wife of the dead shall not marry without, that is, unto a stranger, but his kinsman shall go in unto her, and take her to wife, and do the kinsman's office to her" (Geneva 1599), meaning, if a brother dies and he has no sons, his wife is allowed to remarry, but she may not marry outside of his bloodline. The verse begins by using the word "brethren," but is later followed by "kindsmen," thus indicating, not only can the widow marry her husband's brother, but also cousins and uncles. The one stipulation is that the woman must not have a son from the

previous marriage. Where this is acceptable terms for the marriage of Henry VIII and Catherine, such is not the case for Claudius and Gertrude. Since Gertrude has a son, their marriage would have been considered incest, not levirate. They have broken the Tenth Commandment, which states, "Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's wife, neither shalt thou desire thy neighbor's house, his field, nor his manservant, nor is maid, his ox, nor his ass, nor ought that thy neighbor hath" (Geneva, Deuteronomy 5:21).

Hamlet addresses his mother's incestuous deed in III.vi during a lengthy exchange between mother and son. In this Act, Hamlet berates his mother, showing her pictures of her deceased husband and her new husband, so that she can come face to face with her sins. He demands that she admit the wrongs she has done, "Confess yourself to heaven, / Repent what's past, avoid what is to come" (III.iv.147-148). Accusing her of incest and adultery, Hamlet wants his mother to confess these sins out loud so that God can hear her. This is Hamlet's way of ministering to his mother. Although ministering often assumes a compassionate tone, Hamlet still considers this demand as a form of guidance given to his mother. Hamlet demands that Gertrude refrain from all intimacy with Claudius, that she not be tempted by him anymore. Hamlet wants his mother to repent and live a life free from sin. Again, assuming the role of God, Hamlet believes he has the right to pardon and punish. He believes that if Claudius is murdered during an unholy act, God will have no choice but to send him to hell. He waits for a time where Claudius is "in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed, / At game, a-swearing, or about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't (III.iii.90-92). Thus, rationalizing his own sinful act of murder as being justified.

Hamlet is melancholy in the beginning of the play. His attitude towards his mother changes after he finds out the truth about his father's death; his emotions evolve from loathing

self-pity to violent rage. III.vi is the first time that Hamlet directly addresses his father's murder. He confronts his mother, insulting her ability to know right from wrong,

> Sense sure you have
> Else could you not have motion, but sure that sense
> Is apoplexed, for madness would not err
> Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so enthralled
> But it reserved some quantity of choice
> To serve in such a difference. What devil was't
> That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
> Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
> Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all…
> (III.iv.71-79)

Facetiously, Hamlet states that Gertrude must have some "sense" or she would not be able to function as a human. He argues that there is no way she is using her common sense, being evident by her poor marital choices. He insists that she must be mad not to notice the immense difference between Claudius and King Hamlet, claiming that the devil must have blindfolded her, removing her sense of sight. The word "sense" in this monologue, refers not only to Gertrude lack of common sense but the five human senses, sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Shakespeare's dual use of "sense" reflects Psalm 115 (Shakespeare et al. 1818, n.1).

> They have a mouth, and speak not: they have eyes and see not. They have ears, and hear not: they have noses and smell not. They have hands, and touch not: they have feet, and walk not: neither makes a sound with their throat. They that make them are like unto them: so are all that trust in them.

In this Psalm, David uses the pronoun "they" referring to idols, the same idols and graven images that are forbidden in the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt make thee no graven images, neither any similitudes of things that are in heaven above, neither that are in the earth beneath, nor that are on the waters under the earth." The Psalmist claims that the idolaters are without senses; they do not speak, see, hear, or smell. They may appear to have human faculties, but they are unable to use them. Idolaters are the opposite of the omnipotent God. Psalm 15:8 describes the characteristics of false idols and explains that those who worship these idols share the same qualities, or lack thereof. Hamlet believes that Gertrude is like those that make false idols, she is "like unto them." She has gone blind to the fact that her husband has recently passed away. She has lost sight of God's laws and now believes in and lusts after a new King.

Hamlet is depressed from the start of the play, but after his interaction with the ghost, he proceeds to get worse. Gertrude sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to check on him. They try to find the cause for his melancholy. After admitting that he has not been taking care of himself, he pontificates, criticizing the present condition of mankind,

> What a piece of work is a man — how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals — and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (II.ii.269-274)

Hamlet acclaims God's creation of man, remarking on man's ability to function intellectually, physically, and morally. Where it appears that Hamlet is fascinated with God's creation, he is merely setting up a picture of what man should be, only to break down what man has become. Hamlet's tone is one of irony. He feels that, with all God has instilled in man, how can man commit horrible sins like murder and incest. In Hamlet's speech, Shakespeare quotes Psalm 8:4-

9, “What is man, say I, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him. For thou hast made him to have dominion in the works of thine hands, thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen: yea, and the beast of the field: the foul of the air, the flesh of the sea, and that which passeth through the paths of the seas. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy Name in all the world!” In this Psalm, David praises the Lord for his creation of man, whereas Hamlet, on the other hand, finishes his monologue questioning, with disgust, what man has become, “What is this quintessence of dust?” Stephen Greenblatt explains, “It was thought that the heavenly bodies were composed of the fifth element (“quintessence”), superior to the other four (earth, air, fire, and water) and also the purest distillation of earthly objects” (Shakespeare et al. 1794, n.4). Hamlet claims that man is composed of this heavenly fifth element. However, due to the current state of man, Hamlet is no longer impressed.

Hamlet’s tone changes drastically by the close of the play. His character shifts from fighting the circumstances of his life to surrendering to God’s will, admitting he knows that God will take care of him. This change occurs in V.i when Hamlet meets the gravedigger. Hamlet comes face to face with the reality of death. It is at this point where his fear of death is overcome by the comfort of fond memories. Hamlets watches as the gravedigger playfully excavates a grave. At first, he is appalled that the gravedigger can be so jovial while handling the remains of those that have passed. Hamlet sees the skulls as still having rank, being that of a politician or a courtier, and is disgusted at the way the gravedigger handles these important remains. His feelings are quickly overshadowed when the gravedigger presents to Hamlet the skull of Yorick, a man that treated Hamlet like a son. Hamlet is moved, remembering the loving relationship he had with Yorick. It is after Hamlet reflects upon his memories with Yorick that he can understand the lack of importance attached to the tangible skull, now being able to see the skulls

in the same way the gravedigger does. Hamlet is comforted by the idea that after death it is the memories that are valuable not the physical remains.

Hamlet's change of tone towards death does not mean that he has lost all desire for revenge. He has simply submitted to the fact that death may come and that he is no longer afraid. Before the final fencing scene, Hamlet refers to Matthew and the analogy of the fallen sparrow. [1] In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out his twelve apostles to care for and bless those in need. He warns them that they will be persecuted for their actions, but God will speak through them and they will be saved. Jesus does not go into a detailed description as to what will exactly happen. He simply asks that they trust that God will take care of them on this journey. He provides them with a message of hope and faith, analogizing the death of a sparrow. Jesus tells his disciples that God knows the moment a sparrow dies. And if God knows about the death of a sparrow, he will undoubtedly be aware of the death of a disciple, a disciple being more valuable to God than any number of sparrows. Horatio tells Hamlet that he will tell the King that Hamlet is not fit to fight, physically or mentally. Hamlet replies, "Not a whit. We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all" (V.ii.191-194). Refusing Horatio's offer to cancel the fencing match, Hamlet claims that he will be watched over by God, just as God protects the sparrow. Hamlet explains that if God meant for him to die now, he will die now; if God did not mean for Hamlet to die now, then he will not. Hamlet has spent a majority of the play trying to manipulate life and death and he has failed. But by a close reading

[1] Since the King James Bible was not completed until 1611, *Hamlet*'s biblical references had to come from another source. During the production of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's contemporary society used The Great Bible, The Bishops' Bible, and the Geneva. Shakespeare's bias towards the Geneva is evident in Hamlet's "Fall of the sparrow" speech, given prior to his fatal fencing match with Laertes. After cross-referencing different versions of Mathew 10:28, Phoebe S. Spinrad claims that "Shakespeare almost certainly used the Geneva Bible as his source, rather than the Great Bible of 1540 or the Bishops' Bible of 1568, both of which translate the verse from Matthew with the sparrow "lighting" on the ground rather than "falling" (Spinrad 456).

of these lines, it appears that Hamlet is surrendering to God's plan, whatever it may be. In Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples that regardless of what happens to their bodies, it is their soul that will go to heaven, the fate of the soul being one of Hamlet's greatest concerns.

By the close of the play, each of the remaining characters has the opportunity to confess their sins out loud. Still consumed by pride and greed, Claudius allows his wife to be poisoned by his own hand. At first, Claudius tries to stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned cup, "Gertrude, do not drink" (V.ii.267). Yet, there is no assertion behind his words; he simply ends his statement with a period, not an exclamation mark. He does not yell at her and tell her that the cup is poisoned. As previously seen in Claudius's confession scene, he is too worried about his position to risk telling the truth; he allows his wife to die. As for Gertrude's sins, it is not clear what part she had in the murder of her husband; the audience is not privy to her relationship with Claudius prior to the King's death, nor do they know if she conspired with Claudius to kill King Hamlet. Where Hamlet had begged her to confess her sins earlier in the play, she now dies, possibly "full of bread." Laertes is the one character that does not pass up on the opportunity to confess and ask for forgiveness. Dying from his own poison, Laertes asks Hamlet to forgive him for his sins, as he will then forgive Hamlet for his, "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me" (V.ii.307-309). Hamlet complies and they both forgive each other for their sins. By exchanging forgiveness, Hamlet is admitting to killing Polonius and Laertes. The confession of sins between one man and another does not constitute Catholic confession to a priest or direct confession to God. Where this moment of forgiveness may provide a peaceful moment of closure for the audience, it does not satisfy Hamlet's concern regarding the destination of his soul. Even though this act of forgiveness may erase the resentment they feel, what has been reiterated again and again in

Hamlet, is that to be forgiven, one has to be forgiven by God.

Analyzing *Hamlet* under the scope of Christian doctrine allows for a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's motivation in constructing specific scenes and creating certain characters. Laden with Scriptural references, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* knowing that his audience would either understand or make speculations about why references were incorporated and what his implications were. By taking a closer look at Shakespeare's extensive use of allusion, the overall plot of *Hamlet* transforms from a play about revenge to a play about the questioning of religious beliefs, such as heaven and hell, good and evil, and self-will versus God's will.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare exhibits controversial issues of faith between Catholics and Protestants, neither declaring one perspective to be correct or incorrect. Being in the midst of the Reformation, doctrinal and religious controversy was something that the contemporary society was well aware of. At the time of Hamlet's production, all citizens were expected to reform into Protestantism. Those who refused were punished. With that said, the Globe should have been occupied by Protestants only; this was not the case. *Hamlet's* audience was filled with undercover Catholics. These two branches of Christianity had different beliefs, especially concerning topics such as the afterlife and confession; and what spectators believed would certainly influence their understanding of *Hamlet*.

The belief in purgatory and the method of confession played a major part in the audience's opposing views regarding the fate of some of the characters. Was the ghost from hell or purgatory? Some critics believe that the ghost must have been an evil spirit, due to his request for revenge instead of prayers, others believe that the ghost was given his Catholic right to purgatory. The aim here is not to end the debate; this would be impossible. Instead, by

presenting evidence found in 2 Maccabees and 1 Corinthians, it can be understood why Catholic spectators would be compassionate to the ghost's character, as opposed to believing it to be an evil spirit. Proving the ghost's origin can only be done by speaking to the author. The same can be said regarding the presence of adultery. When Hamlet speaks of "one flesh," is he insinuating that his mother and deceased father are still seen as one body under God? Again, this is a question that can be answered only by speculation. What *can* be proven is that Shakespeare used the Bible and other Christian doctrine to develop his character's dialogue as well as raise controversial topics among his contemporary audience. Having some understanding of Shakespeare's cited Christian texts helps an audience see a play steeped in murder and revenge and understand it more deeply as a play which regards faith and the human will.

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