

Hamlet, Luther, and the Protestant Hero

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Abstract

Literary criticism of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* suffers from a light treatment, or a relative absence, of its title character's association with Protestantism. The purpose of this paper is to propose a fresh connection between Prince Hamlet and the Protestant champion Martin Luther. Only two books draw specifically Protestant parallels: John Curran, Jr.'s *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency: Not to Be*, and Roland Mushat Frye's *The Renaissance Hamlet*. The former argues that Hamlet, by adopting a kind of fatalistic Calvinism, loses his possibility to act within the possibilities of choice. The second explores *Hamlet's* use of religious themes, including Protestant themes, and observes similarities between some of Hamlet's words and some of Luther's. These sources demonstrate how *Hamlet* has on occasion been read through a quasi-Protestant lens, pointing out similar motifs, but both fail to account for similarities of action and attitude that both Prince Hamlet and the earliest Protestant heroes share at a deeper level. Thus, my thesis is that as a type of Protestant hero, Prince Hamlet, through his final confrontation with King Claudius, lives up to the bold resistance of the great champion Martin Luther. First, the historical Martin Luther was known as a champion of Protestant faith through his brave resistance to the Catholic Church. The unfolding of his confrontations with the Church establishes his heroic resistance. Second, *Hamlet* arranges six elements around its title character: (1) Hamlet's education in Wittenberg; (2) the way his soliloquy mirrors Luther's combativeness; (3) the way Hamlet's exile parallels Luther's excommunication; (4) Hamlet's "convocation of worms" and Luther's Diet of Worms; (5) the similarity of "readiness" in both Hamlet and Luther; and (6) the parallel confrontation scenes—Luther's at Worms, Hamlet's in the fencing match. Since the memory and myth of Martin Luther as a Protestant hero inform these six parallels, Hamlet eventually lives up to Martin Luther's brave/heroic resistance of Catholic authority. My paper thus suggests new possibilities for interpreting the relationship between *Hamlet's* religious content and characters.

Keywords: Hamlet, Luther, Protestantism

1. Body of Paper

Scholars have pointed out many of the religious elements and motifs to be found within William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Its Protestant and Catholic themes have been analyzed and dissected this way and that. Yet with everything that has been said about the religious elements in *Hamlet*, there is still room for fresh discoveries of particularly Protestant themes and narratives to be found in the play. One such discovery—for which this paper will argue—concerns the man whom history remembers as the original Protestant, Martin Luther. As a type of Protestant hero, Prince Hamlet, through his final confrontation with King Claudius, lives up to the bold resistance of the great champion Martin Luther.

Literary critics have had plenty of things to say about the broader subjects of Shakespeare and religion. In his article "Luther, Cranmer, Service and Shakespeare," David Evett traces William Shakespeare's understanding and employment of the theological concept of "service" from its evolution within Anglicanism back through its non-Anglican usage in Martin Luther and beyond him all the way back to the Church Fathers. While Evett explores the

evolving theological meaning and function of "service" across Protestant and Catholic denominations, he does not apply the concept to Shakespeare's tragic heroes, such as Prince Hamlet himself.¹ Other examples of Shakespeare criticism focus specifically on *Hamlet* but say little or nothing of religion. In his essay "Hamlet, Laertes, and the Dramatic Function of Foils," Richard Levin argues that Hamlet functions as a foil to Laertes, without referring to religious faith in general, let alone Protestant faith in particular.² In another article, "Readiness, Ripeness: *Hamlet, Lear*," Yves Bonnefoy analyzes Prince Hamlet's sense of readiness without connecting it to theology in any way that is meaningful to the character.³

Other critics of Shakespeare address both *Hamlet* and its Christian themes. In *Shakespeare*, Germaine Greer suggests that Hamlet has "heroic doubt"⁴ and that the knowledge of uncertainty "is the natural mode of the Christian skeptic."⁵ Her discussion of Hamlet and heroism brings us nearer to our focused topic but not all the way there. Two other Shakespeare scholars come even closer. In *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency: Not to Be*, John Curran, Jr., draws together the play *Hamlet* and Protestant faith, but he concludes that the Danish prince, upon discovering Calvinist fatalism, has lost any ability to act within a contingency of choice.⁶ Finally, Roland Mushat Frye's *The Renaissance Hamlet* explores the way in which *Hamlet* employs a number of religious themes, Catholic and Protestant, including pointing out some similarities between Luther's words and Hamlet's.⁷ That said, much of Frye's book jumps back and forth between Prince Hamlet and Luther, or Hamlet and the New Testament, without making any substantial character connection.

At first glance, it may seem that this brief survey of religious elements in *Hamlet* suggests a hopelessly confusing situation. Is there any way to sort out the mess of references? Offering a possible answer to that question requires cutting into the meat of the focused topic. The thesis of this paper, which argues for Hamlet as a type of Protestant hero in the tradition of Martin Luther, approaches this Hamlet/Protestant double motif from a new angle. First, we will explore Martin Luther's resistance as a feature of history, and then we will examine where and how Prince Hamlet mirrors Luther and lives up to his heroic resistance.

The historical Martin Luther was fearless, confrontational, and combative in his opposition to Catholic excesses in doctrine and practice. For bravely resisting Pope and Emperor alike, he became known as a champion of the faith. Let us look at the chain of events that led Martin Luther to become a champion or hero of Protestantism. First, in 1517, Luther issued his 95 Theses, which denounced some of the practices and doctrines of the Catholic Church. According to Derek Wilson, author of the biography *Out of the Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther*, the reformer challenged papal abuses of authority, the purchase and effectiveness of indulgences, and the requirement of penance as a substitute for repentance.⁸ Second, Luther's supporters printed and distributed his Theses throughout Europe, where they sparked a widespread movement of protest against Catholic corruption.

Third, as Wilson notes, Pope Leo X in 1520 reacted to Luther by issuing a papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, that excommunicated him from the Church. Later that year, Luther publicly burned the bull, along with other scholastic-era Catholic documents, on a pyre in Wittenberg,⁹ openly defying the Pope's decree. Fourth, Luther was promptly summoned to appear before an imperial assembly at the Diet of Worms the following year. In his trenchant book, *The Reformation*, church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch observes that "Luther arrived [in Worms] after a triumphal tour across Germany."¹⁰ Before the Holy Roman Emperor, Luther acknowledged his works and bravely refused to recant his "heresies"—as papal supporters called them. Luther's standing up to papal/imperial intimidation to recant was regarded as a necessary victory for leader-hungry German Protestantism. The outcome of his refusal was predictable enough: Alister McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* explains that the Edict of Worms condemned Martin Luther as a heretic and an enemy of the state and that it called for his imminent apprehension, penalizing anyone who might be inclined to receive, aid, or favor him in any way.¹¹

The course of these events resulted in a growing trend to memorialize Luther. In fact, the movement he began adopted his name, calling itself "Lutheranism." According to Wilson, Luther's public image had grown to enormous proportions:

...by then [1522] he had become, in the popular imagination, a saint, a miracle-worker, a prophet, the apostle of the last days, almost a reincarnated Christ. He had been allotted a place in the multi-layered mythology of the German people.¹²

Within just a few short years of the Protestant movement's origins, Martin Luther's nearly inestimable reputation as a hero or champion of the true faith, against Catholic deceptions, was causing him to be memorialized within Germany.

The historical chronology we have followed—Luther's triumphal tour of Germany, the Edict of Worms' condemnation of him, and the movement that adopted his name—as well as the Luther-mythology that gives meaning to that chronology, establish Martin Luther as a champion or hero of the emerging and resisting Protestant

movement. The movement may be called "resisting" because its civic leaders, especially in Germany, imitated this quality of resistance. Thus, Luther functioned as the founding hero; future Protestant leaders would follow his example of opposition, such as when the German electors stood up to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in 1530, bravely resisting his demands that they shut down Lutheran churches and forbid its preachers to teach the new, protesting faith.¹³ As Luther was prepared to resist Catholic power and authority, so too were other early champions of Protestantism. Their bold, courageous resistance to the injustices (real or imagined) of Catholicism places them in the same tradition as Protestant champions, after the example of Luther.

Where does Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* fit into this tradition? The play abounds in religious references, but more particularly, it alludes to symbols, events, and themes that spring from Martin Luther's life and arranges these Protestant elements around its title character. The first Protestant element is Prince Hamlet's education in Wittenberg, a town known for being the birthplace of Protestantism. King Claudius, who encourages him not to return there,¹⁴ is a symbol of the Pope not just because he is Hamlet's enemy and murderer of his father. Poisoning strengthens the link between himself and the Pope. His being poisoned near the end of the play corresponds to Pope Leo X's narrow escape of poisoning, a historical detail noted by the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*.¹⁵ That Claudius poisons Hamlet, Sr. reinforces his connection to this theme. Poisoning is a significant motif in both cases.

The second element comes from Hamlet's "to be" soliloquy.¹⁶ In this speech, Hamlet's expression "to take up arms against a sea of troubles"¹⁷ mirrors Luther's combativeness toward the Catholic Church—especially his defiant act of burning the papal bull. Hamlet's words "to take up arms"¹⁸ foreshadow a future personal confrontation that he must have with Claudius, just as Luther's bull-burning in some sense foreshadows a much closer confrontation that he must have with the Roman Church at Worms. Sooner or later, each will oppose his enemy.

Both the third and fourth elements involve politics. The third element concerns Claudius's removal (or exile) of Hamlet from Denmark; this removal parallels Leo X's ejection of Luther from the Catholic Church. The former's exile corresponds to the latter's excommunication. The fourth element, a textual allusion, relates Hamlet's "politic worms" speech¹⁹ to Martin Luther's appearance and speech at the 1521 Diet of Worms. Hamlet's full statement "A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet"²⁰ clarifies that he is in fact alluding to this event, a convocation at which the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was present and at which Martin Luther resisted and denounced papal authority. Line 21 seems to suggest that in the battle of food, the worm reigns supreme because it feeds on the decomposition of all formerly living things. This victorious "worm" corresponds to Luther's victory at Worms—namely, the Reformer's refusal to recant. Hamlet's words about the fat king dying and being eaten by the worm²¹ foreshadow Claudius's eventual fate. The two scenes—Hamlet's and Luther's—also mirror each other in attitude. Hamlet essentially tells Claudius he can go to hell: "seek him i'th' other place yourself,"²² just as Luther's remark to Emperor Charles V—"since I do not accept the authority of Popes and Councils for they have contradicted each other"²³—rejects the Pope's authority, effectively damning its value.

A fifth element concerns Hamlet's readiness, a preparedness to confront/resist Laertes and Claudius that resembles Martin Luther's preparedness to confront/resist the Imperial Council at Worms. At Worms, MacCulloch notes, Martin Luther reportedly asked for "a day's grace" during which to prepare his reply to his charges²⁴: to compose the shape of his answer and to ready its delivery. The fact that Hamlet, in his convocation-of-worms speech, speaks so boldly of a king feeding a worm²⁵ in a thinly-veiled reference to Claudius himself may suggest that he is summoning the courage to talk back to Claudius. This courage will grow over the course of his sea voyage to England, before culminating in his readiness for a fully-blown and fatal confrontation with Claudius at the end.

The sixth and final element occurs when Hamlet directly resists and confronts King Claudius in a scene that compares to Luther's confronting and resisting Emperor Charles V. This final element is quintessential because it draws together the previous five elements/parallels in the final scene, when Hamlet's bold, aggressive, larger-than-life confrontation with Claudius lives up to Martin Luther's heroic opposition to the Catholic Church. The hopeful nature of this confrontation suggests that one aspect of John Curran, Jr.'s argument needs to be challenged—namely, that Hamlet's line, "the readiness is all,"²⁶ mourns the loss of his contingency of free choice and of his hope.²⁷ Says Curran:

In Act V after his sea voyage, [Hamlet] will finally meet that fate for which . . . Fortune had long before marked him. But oddly enough he will embrace it with no further anguish. The reason why is that he will have also embraced Protestantism and cast his Catholic hopefulness aside.²⁸

Curran is of course right to suggest that the sea voyage has prepared Hamlet for his confrontation with Claudius, but he is wrong to say that Hamlet has cast his hopefulness aside. The context of Hamlet's "readiness" line²⁹ makes it clear that he is, in effect, saying, "I'm going to wait for a divine opportunity." This is anticipatory; it looks forward to a coming occasion. Curran's fatalistic Hamlet runs contrary to the sense of the Prince's speech, because Hamlet's

readiness for the right opportunity is an act of free will; he is willingly embracing God's plan. Therefore, he is also embracing hope.

This opportunity, coming in the form of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, brings to a climax (and to closure) all of Hamlet's musings, speech-making, and waiting for the right moment, the "ready" moment, to act in courageous defiance of the corrupt King. If, as Greer indicates, Hamlet struggles with "heroic doubt,"³⁰ his doubt eventually gives way to heroic action and brave resistance, as he finally summons the full measure of his courage to confront Claudius. The first five elements find their resolution in this sixth element: the showdown. In the match, Hamlet's heroic resistance catches up to Martin Luther's; the prince finally "take[s] up arms against a sea of troubles,"³¹ that is, against Claudius. He stabs the King and pours poison down his throat.³² As Hamlet dies after confronting/resisting Claudius, so too Luther disappears after his Diet of Worms battle. Silence and absence are the price of victorious confrontation.

This reading of *Hamlet*, as a type of Protestant hero, as one who heroically resists the wicked Claudius, invites further exploration into the question of how *Hamlet's* Protestant/Catholic dichotomy might play out among the other characters—exploration that we can only hint at here. For example, Laertes' association with the (Catholic) University of Paris, on the one hand, and his hot-blooded desire to strike down Hamlet, on the other, seems to reinforce this Protestant-Hero reading of *Hamlet*. It would make Laertes, like Claudius, an antiheroic foil to Hamlet. Who else fits into this Protestant/Catholic, or heroic/antiheroic, paradigm? (It is not part of the present paper to answer that question, only to point out the question and its potential answers as the significance generated by this paper's argument.) The question itself is important because none of the previous Shakespeare criticism has addressed the framework that triggers it. Whether one agrees or disagrees, this paper brings all of these issues to light, holds up a new lens through which to view them, and calls for renewed dialogue about their subject matter.

2. Endnotes

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2. Richard Levin, "Hamlet, Laertes, and the Dramatic Functions of Foils," in *Hamlet: New Critical Essays*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (New York: Routledge, 2002), 215-30.
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4. Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare* (New York: Sterling, 2010), 76.
5. *Ibid.*, 78.
6. John Curran, Jr., *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency: Not to Be* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 193-200.
7. Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton, NJ: U of Princeton P, 1984), 164, 177-78.
8. Derek Wilson, *Out of the Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther* (New York: St. Martin's, 2007), 96-98.
9. *Ibid.*, 138-39.
10. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 131.
11. Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 5.
12. Wilson, *Out of the Storm*, 157-58.
13. *Ibid.*, 264-66.
14. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.2.112-14.
15. "Leo X," *Encyclopedia of World Biography* (2004), www.encyclopedia.com.
16. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.1.57-91.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.1.60.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 4.3.19-25.
20. *Ibid.*, 4.3.19-21.
21. *Ibid.*, 4.3.23-25.
22. *Ibid.*, 4.3.35-36.
23. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 55.
24. MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 131.

25. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 4.3.23-25.
26. Ibid., 5.2.220.
27. Curran, Jr., *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency*, 200.
28. Ibid.
29. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 5.2.217-22.
30. Greer, *Shakespeare*, 76.
31. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.1.60.
32. Ibid., 5.2.324-28.