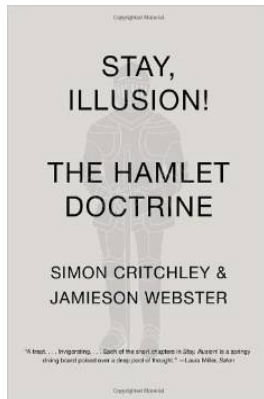


Hamlet – and the Ghost of Freud

by J. E. G. Dixon (September 2014)



A review of [Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine](#) by Simon Critchley & Jamieson Webster (New York, Pantheon Books, 2013) and [Hamlet Made Simple](#) by David P. Gontar (Nashville & London, New English Review Press, 2013).



It is a little over one hundred years since Freud published his interpretation of Hamlet, immediately acclaimed as a work of genius. It has cast a pall over much *Hamlet* commentary since. Freud's theory was demolished 50 years ago by Bachofen¹ but that did not deter one Dr. Eugene Mahon from publishing "A Parapraxis in *Hamlet*" in 1998.²

One was tempted to "laugh like parrots at a bagpiper." But it is a matter of dismay to find yet another study this year that applies psychoanalysis to Hamlet. Of the two new books under review here, *Stay-Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine* devotes no fewer than 90 of its 230 pages to Freudian psychoanalysis. Hamlet, writes Jamieson Webster, "suffers from unknown repressed wishes both incestuous and rivalrous. Split off in this fashion, Hamlet, guilty, cannot but bring down punishment upon himself – the same punishment as his father whose murder he cannot

avenge because *he* had wished for it at one time in the past.” (p. 103) Dwelling on the Freudian theory of parricide and rivalry would be bad enough but she is also bent on demonstrating the prince’s obsession with sex, especially incest.

Webster has recourse to a later disciple of Freud, a French psychiatrist named Jacques Lacan:

For Lacan, to understand this configuration requires an elaboration of Freud’s original interpretation of the play. What Freud thought so correct and obvious in Hamlet proves more complicated. Why, for example, should his Oedipal desire for his mother not lead him to kill Claudius swiftly? We see him ... with two tendencies; the one over-riding tendency which is doubly commanded him by the authority of his father and the love which he bears him; and the second of wanting to defend his mother, and of wanting to keep her for himself, which ought to make him go in the same direction and kill Claudius. Therefore two positive things, this is a curious thing, will give a zero result.

In her attempt to resolve this dilemma the author writes, “The problem is Hamlet’s relation with desire. His desire is preoccupied with his mother’s desire.” We are simply taken back to square one, and we will move on to her co-author.

Simon Critchley has recourse to the philosophers who have commented on Hamlet. As everyone knows—or most people familiar with Hamlet claim to know—Hamlet’s problem is his procrastination, his inability to take action to avenge his father’s murder. Critchley states the problem thus:

For some, and it is a popular view that goes back at least to Goethe, Hamlet is a man who simply cannot make up his mind: he waits, hesitates, and is divided from himself in his “madness”... In this view, Hamlet is a creature of endless vacillation...

Thought and action seem to pull against each other, the former annihilating the possibility of the latter.

Critchley does not mention Coleridge, but according to A.D. Nuttall, “Coleridge saw Hamlet as a man paralysed by excess of thought.” But why is he so sure that thought can inhibit action, let alone annihilate it? Where is the reflection on the possibility that Goethe and Hegel, of all men, would know from experience that thought leads to action; that, on the contrary, the whole purpose of thought is to act. Thought that does not inspire action is not thought: it is wool-gathering and fantasizing, like Lennon’s *Imagine*.

Critchley refers to Hamlet’s “evident impotence” as “the most indecisive character in world

literature.” And then: “Where Oedipus begins knowing nothing ... Hamlet knows everything from the get-go. What is revealed [by the Ghost] is that this knowledge does not lead to action but its opposite.”

Critchley then turns to Hegel, who

... asserts that in the portrayal of individual characters Shakespeare stands “at an almost unapproachable height,” making his creations “free artists of their own selves.” As such, Shakespeare’s tragic characters are “real, directly living, extremely varied” and possessing a “sublimity and striking power of expression.” Yet—and here comes the dialectical underside of this claim—creatures like Hamlet lack any resolution and capacity for decision. They are dithering figures in the grip of “a two-fold passion which drives them from one decision or deed to another simultaneously.” In other words, ... they are vacillating characters inwardly divided against themselves. Upheld only by the force of their conflicted subjectivity, characters like Hamlet or Lear either plunge onward or allow themselves to be lured to their avenging deed by external circumstances, led along, that is, by contingency (p. 84-85).

These two conflicting assessments of character provide the key to the dilemma – not to Hamlet’s dilemma but the academic’s attempt to resolve it.

The philosophical and the psychoanalytical in Webster and Critchley are separate and distinct. Surely there is a crying need for the philosophical to interrogate the psychoanalytical. The philosopher would accuse Freudian psychoanalysis of viewing man in a wholly somatic and mechanistic light. He is possessed by drives and instincts; by unconscious drives and instincts. It would not be going too far to say that he is a victim or prisoner of his unconscious. A few statements by one better qualified to comment are here in order:

Freud saw only unconscious instinctuality, as represented in what he called the id.

Psychoanalysis destroys the unified whole of the human person, and then has the task of reconstructing the whole person out of the pieces. This atomistic view is most evident in Freud’s hypothesis that the ego is made up of ‘ego drives’.

Possessed of such an atomistic, energistic, and mechanistic concept of man, psychoanalysis sees him in the final analysis as the automaton of a psychic apparatus.³

Is not such a view of man a far cry from Shakespeare’s? Hamlet accepts the task laid upon him in the sure knowledge that he, and he alone, can accomplish it; that he will be called upon to

make decisions affecting the lives of others; and that he is equal to the task. For he, like Shakespeare, believes in free will.

Where does this leave Critchley and Webster and "The Hamlet Doctrine"? What is the Hamlet Doctrine?

At the end of the book Critchley discovers or remembers Nietzsche, who had written an interpretation of Hamlet near the end of his life. To simplify – which doubtless means distortion – he sums all up in the term "disgust." Hamlet is disgusted with Gertrude; he is disgusted with Claudius; he is disgusted with the world and politics; and he is disgusted with himself. He is convinced that nothing is worth doing any more, that it matters not whether he takes action or not; and that he might as well act as not act.

My view is that Shakespeare would not agree for one instant, for two reasons: one, Hamlet sees his father's murderer finally done in; and two, he dies content to know that a virtuous ruler, Fortinbras, replaces a corrupt ruler. There is a third reason, which we will come to later.

In the end this book has little of interest or value for the actor, the director, the theatre-goer or the student of Shakespeare.

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Hamlet Made Simple puts us in a very different exegetical frame – original, stimulating, even provocative, as all good criticism and interpretation should be. Professor Gontar's book comprises eighteen essays, of which the last gives the book its title.

This essay in its turn is subdivided into eight sections, in which are analysed the essential problems posed by the drama: the authenticity of the Ghost, and hence the import, and even legality, of the task imposed by him on Prince Hamlet; the origin and cause of Hamlet's rage, directed mostly against Gertrude and Claudius; and the question of the delay: Hamlet, having ostensibly sworn to avenge his father's death immediately, seems to tarry and procrastinate endlessly, until events contrived by others presents the opportunity, which he seizes with both hands.

To those is added a fourth: why does Claudius become King of Denmark instead of Hamlet, the rightful heir? That "this undead ambassador is the prime mover of the play, the enigmatical figure which sets in motion the wheels of tragedy," this reviewer agrees unreservedly. That Hamlet accepts the Ghost's self-identification as his father also seems beyond question. Yet Gontar casts a serious doubt on this claim. He writes, "it is when we turn to the ghosts's own

words that our doubts should coagulate and turn to accusation. Evil stares us in the face. For this foul pilgrim is

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."

Gontar comments: "Grant that Claudius poisoned Hamlet the Dane. A simple accurate statement of the accused can hardly achieve so great a rehabilitation that his entire story should be credited."

Let us go back to the accusation made by the Ghost: "The foul crimes done in my days of nature." Unless I am particularly obtuse, I understand Gontar would have us believe that "the foul crimes" amounts to a self-accusation, to crimes that he had himself committed. It seems to me, rather, that they refer to others' or to another's deeds. The reason why the Ghost is "confined to fast in fires" is that he, King Hamlet, was murdered "unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd" – that is, not having received the holy sacrament, unprepared, and not have received extreme unction. Moreover, the most he says of his personal defects is summed up in the two statements: "Cut off even in the blossom of my sins" and "With all my imperfections on my head" (I, v, 76-79).⁴ His self-confessed sins and imperfections do not amount to "foul crimes." These significant lines are not quoted by Gontar.

What now of the task the Ghost imposes on Hamlet? The answer to this question will set the investigator on either the right or the wrong path of his inquiry. Our author makes the following statements: the Ghost "suborns a gentle prince to regicide." And: "He is immediately thrust upon a path of reprisal." And: The Ghost is "deputized to enlist the Prince's services in his quest for vengeance." And: "Say the ghost seeks revenge not as a poultice for Purgatorial pains, but in spite of them, heedless of the consequences" (pp. 378 *et seq*).

Note the terms he uses: regicide, reprisal, vengeance, revenge. Note further that these are terms used by our author: he does not quote the actual words spoken by the Ghost. So we are not sure, in reading Gontar, of the precise nature of the task he imposes on Hamlet.

The further problems – namely, that of Hamlet's rage, and the elucidation of his delay in executing his father's injunction – are intimately related by Gontar. But in brief, what makes

Hamlet so furious with his mother? And having sworn immediate revenge, why does Hamlet tarry? Gontar answers first, that Hamlet's rage at his mother expresses his unconscious suspicion that he might be, not the offspring of King Hamlet, but, on account of his mother's chronic infidelity, the bastard son of detested Claudius, and genetic inheritor of his faults and flaws. Secondly, Gontar says Hamlet hesitates to kill the king because he is Hamlet's own father.

I am not convinced that the second conclusion necessarily follows from the first. But we must admire the author's creative and imaginative solution to the puzzle. Or is it more fanciful than realistic? The reader will have difficulty in finding any textual evidence for it.

On the question of rage, there is a simple answer, which Claudius himself divined, and which he took so seriously as to conspire with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England and do away with him: "I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness rage" (III, ii, 1-2).

The question of the succession is also an unusual one, and is worth more than a casual glance. One would expect that the Prince, being the king's son, and only son – as we the playgoer and reader are led to believe – would automatically become king on his father's death, no matter how long it took him to return to Denmark from Wittenberg. But Claudius does instead. How? And why? There is "an unstated pediment: he is the bastard son of Claudius." And: "if it were generally understood that Hamlet was the bastard son not of the King but of the King's brother by the King's wife, his chances of inheriting the throne would be nil" (p. 399-400).

At least there is an admirable consistency in Gontar's thesis. But we have, methinks, already protested that there is little, if any, textual evidence, directly or by inference, for this interpretation. We will make "Hamlet ... Simple" simpler.

Claudius kills the King in order to have the throne, while Hamlet the son is far removed from the scene. Mention is made of an election; and Laertes returns from Paris for the coronation, accepted as legitimate by all, and confirmed by his marrying the Queen. Hamlet's rage, which nearly drives him mad, is levelled at both principals for very simple motives. I suggest that the dominant motive is the murder of his father by a man, his uncle, who is known universally to be a lecher, a drunk, a dicer and a blasphemer. This is the man who is going to rule the State in place of the wise and virtuous ruler that his father was. On top of this, incest by his mother with the rogue fills him also with disgust. But on a lower level. State before Person. This was the conclusion of Nietzsche the philosopher: there is no philosophy to speak of in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is a moral dilemma, a moral quest, and a moral tragedy from beginning to

end.

Does Hamlet covet the throne? There is no evidence to suggest that he does. Gontar quotes Hamlet's reply to Rosencrantz's inquiry into Hamlet's malaise: "I lack advancement." What does he mean by "advancement"? I suggest that it does not mean "promotion" or "succession," as Gontar interprets it. I think it means, rather, "progress," that is, progress in his quest. What quest? Why, his quest not for reprisal or revenge, but, as we shall see, for justice.

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It remains for the reviewer who has disagreed with the author he reviews to put forward his own interpretation, if only to accord him the opportunity to rebut in their turn – or perhaps to nod modestly and to murmur to himself: "Now why didn't I think of that?"

At the time of King Hamlet's murder, the Prince was studying at Wittenberg, – and he rushed home the minute he was apprised of the treasonous crime. The long time it takes Hamlet to find a way to bring Claudius to justice – the famous question of the "delay" – is not the central problem, although it points the way to it. It is unfortunate that Freud's theory and the sycophancy of his disciples have deflected criticism from the discovery of the path that leads to a truer understanding. In my view no one will come close until they have jettisoned that intellectual baggage and opened their minds to the likelihood that Shakespeare's tragedies, and none more than *Hamlet*, are first and foremost steeped in the conviction that man is a moral being with both the capacity to distinguish between good and evil and the freedom to choose between them, and aided and sustained by a moral code recognized by all.

When Hamlet returns home from Wittenberg he is immediately confronted by the ghost of his father, King Hamlet, in that eerie and memorable scene in which the ghost reveals (a) that he was murdered, (b) how he was murdered, (c) by whom, and (d) why.

Now the words or revelations of a ghost reported second-hand are not admissible in a court of law and can scarcely be accepted as proof by a moral tribunal. The question arises: Since Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is convinced of his uncle's guilt, why does he not confront him and provoke a duel, or, more simply, seek him out and kill him? First, in a duel Hamlet might himself be killed and Claudius go free, his crime unpunished. Secondly, killing Claudius would itself be a crime, not an act of justice, and not be seen to be an act of justice. Moreover, people might think that Hamlet's motives were personal, his act done to get the throne, although wrongfully deprived of it by his uncle's crime, and to exact revenge. Then again, Hamlet was ever conscious of his public name and repute, as the son of his virtuous father.

Hamlet was acutely alive to his position vis-à-vis the State and the people of Denmark. His first concern was for his people. His father the King had been an exemplary ruler whose virtues had earned the reverence of his people, and the State had prospered. (Immediately, under the rule of the evil Claudius, things began to unravel, and for that very moral reason.) Hamlet was resolved to follow in his father's footsteps. Justice required that the criminal be publicly exposed and that the law take its course. And that is precisely the task that the Ghost of King Hamlet lays upon Prince Hamlet. To put it again in Freud's words, which we have quoted already: "What is it, then, that inhibits him from accomplishing the task which his father's ghost has laid upon him?" The answer, it seems to me, is clear:

But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven ...

These very words are quoted by Critchley and Webster, but the sole lesson they draw from it is the injunction laid upon him not to pursue his mother, who is an innocent party (except in the mind of Freud, *et al*). "Taint not thy mind": these words are attached to the preceding injunction, that is: in exacting vengeance and pursuing justice.

All hinges on the precise meaning of "taint." I think it has both an intellectual and a moral connotation, and means "infect," "contaminate," "corrupt." Examples given by the OED are: "the truth, With superstitions and traditions taint" (Milton) and, "The poison of their doctrines has tainted the natural benevolence of his disposition" (Junius). So we interpret thus this injunction, which sets in motion the whole action of the tragedy: "In seeking to expose Claudius and bring him to justice, do nothing, and think no thoughts, that would in any way corrupt your mind and pervert the principles of justice." It may not have been clear to many, but it was certainly clear to the public, including the groundlings in the audience, who heard those words as they were spoken. Not only spoken, but declaimed. The play is not being read, it is being acted; and the mere words are powerfully reinforced by gestures and tone of voice, so there can be no question of these crucial words being cast vainly in the air. Shakespeare, who himself is reputed to have played the part of the Ghost, would have made sure of that.

From this moment on, it is Hamlet's inner resolve that he somehow contrive that Claudius be exposed publicly as the murderer of his father, and that justice not only be done but be seen to be done. This alone would suffice to explain the delay, "the law's delay," in bringing the vile felon to book. In the end it is a higher court, that of Providence, that sees justice done. Hamlet is the mere agency, but the one indispensable agency, both willing and reluctant at the same time.

It should now be clear also that *Hamlet* is not a tragedy of revenge. (Our authors use the terms “revenge” and “avenge” seemingly interchangeably.) Revenge is a personal matter; and although nothing could be more personal than bringing to justice the murderer of one’s father, Hamlet must do the almost impossible: detach himself from the action and the means to action. What Francis Bacon writes in “Of Revenge” seems almost a commentary on *Hamlet*:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior ...

Is Hamlet upset, disturbed, out of sorts? Oh, no! He is outraged at his mother’s unseemly haste in sharing Claudius’s bed. He is distraught at the prospect of having to find means of proving Claudius’s guilt to the public. He is beside himself with anguish at the thought of Claudius’s treacherous crime in murdering his father, and his own brother, for the fell purpose of usurping his crown and lusting after his wife. He is incensed at the sight of his country going to rack and ruin in the hands of such a villain. He is driven almost mad with frustration by his thinking that does not lead to decisive action. Above all, he is almost beside himself in the knowledge of his father’s torment in the fires of hell, dying as he did “unhousel’d, disappointed, unanel’d,” and will not be saved until justice is done.

These things combine to nearly drive Hamlet out of his mind.

One marvels, not so much that Hamlet tends to go mad, but that he is so much in control of himself. He is, it seems to me, kept largely on an even keel because he never loses sight of the compelling urge to protect his father’s, and his own, good name, their reputation for uprightness in their public and private lives.

We know the story; the groundlings know the story; the principals know the story; but the rest do not. At the very end, when Laertes is struck by his own sword, which he knows is poisoned, and forgives Hamlet; when Gertrude drinks poison intended for Hamlet and she learns the truth about Claudius; Hamlet, knowing he is dying, now stabs Claudius. Everyone, not knowing the truth, shouts out: “Treason! Treason!” Hamlet guilty of treason when he is carrying out the injunction of divine justice? There is irony for you! (Hamlet, seeing that Claudius is not dead, forces the rest of the poison down his throat.)

But who is this “everyone” – or, as the stage direction has it, “All”? They are the people who matter, the important people, the people listed in the *Dramatis Personae*: Courtiers, Officers, Lords and Ladies, who had anointed Claudius king. Hamlet’s greatest fear has been realized:

his public killing of Claudius, which they have just witnessed, is seen as an act of personal revenge committed in order to usurp the throne. Hamlet, knowing he is dying, says to Horatio: "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied." The "unsatisfied" are precisely those "All," those who are "not satisfied in respect of information or knowledge."

A few moments later, in his dying words, he imposes this task upon his good and faithful friend:

Oh God! Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath with pain,
To tell my story.

The all-compelling grand subject of the drama, I conclude, is not the delay itself – the delay is but an effect of the cause; and not Hamlet's seemingly endless procrastination, but the rejection of personal revenge and the faith placed by Hamlet in the workings of an official, impartial and retributive justice. "In the early sixteenth century it was commonly felt that God did in fact look after the necessary acts of retaliation and that when he did so he used human beings for the purpose."⁶

It will be recalled that we have twice mentioned that Hamlet was a student at Wittenberg when his father was murdered. Why Wittenberg? For the reason that Wittenberg was the home of Martin Luther. And the moral tone and moral laws by which Hamlet acts, and the theology in evidence in the play, are consistent with the doctrines of Luther. And of course with the Protestant church of England.

On a final note, the student of Shakespearean anachronisms will have noted that Lutheranism became the state religion of Denmark in 1536, about 300 years after the action depicted in the play.

1. Quoted by Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York, 1951), p. 201.

2. In "The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child" (Yale University Press, vol. 53, 1998, pp. 276-281).

3.. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, Basic Books, 2000), p. 27 et seq.

4. *The Tragedies of Shakespeare* ed. W.J. Craig (Oxford, OUP, 1956). Gontar uses a text which shows slightly different line numbering.

6. A.D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007), p. 203.

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