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God: an Absent Presence in the House of Denmark

Hamlet is the product of a time and place bathed in religious certainty—at least on the existence of the Christian God. God is widely present in the play beginning with the ghost of Hamlet's father (which presumes an afterlife), to the numerous mentions of reconciliation—God's power to cleanse the soul if one repents their sins. While the existence of God is not up for debate in *Hamlet*, the nature of God's presence is. The presence we see in the play is not physical. There is no almighty voice commanding Hamlet to stop before running his sword through Polonius, nor staying Ophelia before she drowns herself. God is there in the language of the characters, permeating their lives without actually being there. God is an absent presence. While a nonsensical contradiction, the operation of a God of absent presence in *Hamlet* reveals concrete consequences for the notion of free will, consequences that only become clear when analyzed through the proper methodology.

The work of poststructuralist linguist Roland Barthes provides such a lens by which to interpret God's absent presence, allowing us to think of God and *Hamlet*'s characters in terms of an Author and readers. Through Barthes' deconstruction of the fiction of an Author-God—omnipotent and controlling of meaning, like the classical view of God—and the subsequent differentiation between a work and a text, God's role in can be labeled without irresponsibly claiming that historically, God is a fiction in *Hamlet*. Under Barthes' schema, God's absent presence in such scenes as Claudius' prayers for forgiveness, and the gravediggers' discussion of

Ophelia's post-suicide Christian burial, can be read as affirmations of the potent agent of free will in *Hamlet*. The language and grammar in these particular scenes deconstruct the notion of an actively omnipotent God and reveal the power of humans over their own fates, much like the interpretive power of the readers in a Barthean text. This revelation champions human freedom, and keeps *Hamlet* relevant to modern theological discussion despite its antiquity.

In his short essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes deconstructs the fictional notion of the Author, and ultimately advocates for decentralizing literature from an obsessive focus on said fiction. According to Barthes, an Author holds complete control over a work, going so far as to relate the Author to the divine: an Author-God (1468). The Author produces the work, existing before it, and thus its one true meaning comes from him. Thus the reader can have no dynamic, personal relationship with the work since there are no interpretations to be made. However, with what Barthes calls the death of the Author comes the birth of the reader, and a radically different relationship between text and reader (1470). In an intimately connected essay, "From Work to Text," Barthes differentiates between a work—an object with a unilateral meaning—and a text, which is a fluid concept, allowing for infinite interpretations (1471). By doing away with the Author a work is allowed to become a text, and the reader gains unlimited power to interpret the text in any number of ways. With the death of the Author, Barthes isn't suggesting that a text is creator-less, but it is instead continuously co-authored by the reader as it grows in constant and renewed interpretation (1468). Barthes' methodology reveals and respects the tangible power of the reader instead of exalting the tyrannical power of the Author-God.

The notion of the power of human interpretation and free will in *Hamlet* due to God's absent presence is most blatantly given to us through the comedy of the gravediggers, as they speak of Adam in Genesis:

FIRST CLOWN: ... There is no ancient gentleman but
 gard'ners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's
 profession.

SECOND CLOWN: Was he a gentleman?

FIRST CLOWN: 'A was the first that ever bore arms.

SECOND CLOWN: Why, he had none.

FIRST CLOWN: What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand
 the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digg'd: could he
 Dig without arms? ... (5.1.28-36)

Here the two clowns are arguing the meaning of Scripture; the humor of this exchange obviously rests on the dual nature of the word “arms,” both referring to the appendage and the idea of the coat of arms that aristocratic families held. However, the merits of this scene don't just lie in its comedic value, the theological consequences of this pun are vast. At the end of the exchange the First Clown brings up the Bible and asks the Second Clown, “How dost thou understand the Scripture?” In a fundamentalist view, the Bible is the direct word of God, physically dictated by God to the scribes that wrote the words down. In this view God is the tyrannical Author, thus there is only one way to “understand the Scripture.” However, the clowns suggest that this is not the case. In this scene they talk about Scripture—the Word of God—but it isn't physically there, showing, without telling us that God isn't there either. With their comical misunderstanding they reveal the omnipotent Author-God to be a false notion. The simple question, “How dost thou understand the Scripture?” opens up a whole can of hermeneutics; it suggests that there is more than one way to “understand” or interpret the Bible. The clowns show us through a simple comedic mix-up that while God permeates language and conversation, God doesn't dictate that

language. The Clowns are free to interpret the text into multiple meanings, clearly demonstrating the existence of free will in *Hamlet*.

The demonstration of free will in light of the absent presence of God isn't just local to the gravediggers. It permeates the entirety of the play, all the way up to the character of highest royalty: Claudius. In his iconic scene of prayer to God prompted by half-formed feelings of guilt over murdering his brother, Claudius reveals the consequences of free will for the individual that the absently present God necessitates:

O limed soul, that struggling to be free
 Art more engag'd! Help, angels! Make assay,
 Bow, stubborn knees, and heart, with strings of steel,
 Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!
 All may be well. (*He kneels.*) (3.3.68-72)

Although by pleading "Help, angels!" it is the divine that Claudius is praying to in hopes of cleansing his "limed soul," it is Claudius, not God, that is controlling his actions in the scene. Claudius is praying to God in reconciliation, hoping for a radical transformation of his soul. The diction Claudius uses to describe his current physicality suggests rigidity: "stubborn," "steel." However, he wishes to be transformed into a new, softer state, like that of a "new-born babe." But it is not God that transforms Claudius' "stubborn knees" into something more pliable; Claudius does that himself. Claudius pleads to God for help, saying "Make assay, / Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinew of the new-born babe," but Claudius is the one to command his own body. "Bow," comma, "stubborn knees" makes "bow" a command that Claudius gives to himself. God doesn't actively put Claudius on his knees, in fact, and there

is no God physically there to even do so. Claudius willfully puts himself there, exercising his human freedom.

This show of free will is carried out with tangible consequences at the end of Claudius' session of prayer when the end results of his reconciliation are revealed. Physically signaling the ends of his prayers by rising from the ground he says, "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: / Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-8). Here the difference between "words" and "thoughts" refuses to be defined. It seems impossible that thoughts can be without words, and vice versa, so Claudius is speaking of something abstract and non-existent. He is literally sending nothing to heaven, and therefore nothing will come from heaven in return. The nonsensical disconnection between words and thoughts also negates the sincerity of his prayers for reconciliation. "Words" come from the mouth, and "thoughts" from the mind, so there when his "words fly up" but "thoughts remain below" he is not saying what is really on his mind. Out of his mouth comes pleas for forgiveness, but he openly admits that his mind doesn't match. Although murder goes against the sixth commandment, there are no divine consequences for his lack of repentance or the act itself. His human freedom is so absolute that he is able to live as a murderer with minimal guilt, and at this particular moment, no consequences. Whether Claudius' actions are moral or not, he is free to do what he wishes and interpret or ignore God's divine law as he pleases, just as a reader of a text is free to interpret meaning in the absence of a tyrannical Author-God.

The gravediggers continue to valuably contribute to the discussion of the absently present God when they discuss the circumstances of Ophelia's death and burial. Ophelia is allowed to have a Christian burial despite the questionably suicidal nature of her death, directly contrasting the tradition to bury individuals who committed suicide without honor and outside of Christian

graveyards, a practice that was actively in place up until Vatican II. A seemingly inconsequential exchange because of its rustic and circular humor, this scene vitally illustrates two peripheral characters ruminating over the quintessential contradiction of an absently present God and invites readers to do the same. Their mildly confusing ruminations reveal the ability of free will to affect not just the individual practicing it, but other individuals as well:

FIRST CLOWN: Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she
willfully seeks her own salvation?

SECOND CLOWN: I tell thee she is, therefore make her grave
straight. The crowner hath sate on her, and finds it Christian burial.

...

SECOND CLOWN: But is this law?

FIRST CLOWN: Ay, marry, is't—crowner's quest law. (5.1.1-5, 20-1)

The twisting nature of this quick conversation—where initially the Second Clown assures the First Clown of the legal nature of Ophelia's burial, but then the uncertainty of the topic leaves the First Clown assuring the Second—uncovers the ambiguous and uncertain fluidity of the correlation between the absently present God and human free will. However, the language used in this passage again triumphs human freedom. Firstly, the First Clown describes Ophelia to “willfully seek her own salvation.” The adverb “willfully” qualifies the nature of Ophelia's action to be born of her own volition. The urge to seek her own death was her urge, done upon her will, and not on the behalf of God. God then, is not the sole Author of Ophelia's life, rather she is co-authoring it by making her own decisions.

It may have been Ophelia's individual choice to commit suicide, but her actions do not live in a vacuum: they also play on the ability of other characters to exercise their free will.

Ophelia's actions prompted the coroner to exercise his free will by breaking what was then regarded as Christian law and give Ophelia a Christian burial. This decision, partially prompted by Ophelia's social status as the Second Clown suggests that if she "...had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out a' Christian burial, demonstrates that human freedom is universal in widespread in *Hamlet*, not limited to just a few characters. The Second Clown assures the First, "The crowner hath sate on her, and finds it Christian burial." The subject here in the sentence—the one who decides the state of Ophelia's burial—is "crowner" and not God, demonstrating the power that free will imbues in humans to interpret God's divine law and even ignore it. Linguistically, "crowner" also plays on the word "crown" and its royal connotations, giving the coroner the unilateral freedom of a king to act outside of any law in this situation. The validity of this statement of power is emphasized once again through a role reversal of assurance when the Second Clown asks "But is this law?" to which the First replies "Ay, marry is't—crowner's quest law." The word "law" has connotations of officiality, and can either refer to divine law, or mortal law. Here it refuses to become clear as to which it refers to. It may refer to the mortal law in both of these instances, giving the exchange the interpretation an emphasis on the general power of the coroner. He has the authority in the community to dictate the nature of one's burial. However, the nature of "law" is ambiguous in this situation and could mean divine law in the first instance, entirely amplifying the emphasis on the power of mortality over divinity. The question the Second Clown poses clarifies whether or not the allowance of Ophelia to be buried in a Christian manner aligns with divine law, and the First Clown dismisses the need for the divine law, replying that it is the "crowner's quest law," and his law is the only law needed for them to proceed. Either way, what is obviously lacking here is the presence of

God. God is not displayed physically exercising power. Through God's absent presence the existence and strength of human free will is magnified.

A slippery, ambiguous topic in *Hamlet* just as in reality, the implications of the obviously absent present God in Shakespeare's play are brought into light through Barthes' linguistically poststructural work. By taking his notion of the emerging power of the readers to infinitely interpret a text in light of the absence of an omnipotent Author, and scaling it up to represent the God and humans of *Hamlet*, the power and sanctity of human freedom becomes clear. Because of the conflicting language used throughout the play, which attributes power to the humans, a solely tyrannical Author-like power of God in *Hamlet* is impossible. Speaking of God in terms of an essay entitled "The Death of an Author" seems a little dangerous in its possibility to create atheistic rhetoric about a play born out of a time where the existence of God was not questioned. But the point of this essay is not that God doesn't exist in *Hamlet*; quite the opposite, actually. God permeates *Hamlet* linguistically, just not physically. This opens up God's presence and intentions to interpretation—or misinterpretation—by the characters. God's absent presence in *Hamlet* actually champions free will by eliminating the possibility of divine intervention. It heightens the moral responsibilities of the characters and magnifies the physical effects their actions can have on one another. By taking God out of the physical equation, we see the birth of a more diverse, complex, and authentic world than one where God could unilaterally intervene. Although written in antiquity, the theological discourse in *Hamlet* feels authentic to present-day Process theology—especially in its notions of God's inability to individually intervene on Earth—and has the ability to positively contribute to, and further the discussion.

Works Cited

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