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The Word of God

It is no secret that *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* (and for the sake of argument this essay will continue to operate under the same assumption of the existence of God as the characters hold), the nature of God's authoritative role in the play is. In traditional theological terms God is considered to be omnipotent, but physically, God is not observed to be all powerful throughout the course of the play. There is no almighty voice commanding Hamlet to stop before running his sword through Polonius, nor staying Ophelia before she drowns herself. It's a fool's errand to try to parse out the nature of God, but how, if not physically is God's authority present? And what is the relationship between God's presumed power, and the observable power of the human characters?

The work of poststructuralist Roland Barthes provides a lens by which to analyze the divine and mortal relationship in *Hamlet*. By thinking of God and the play's characters in terms of an Author and readers, we are able to make sense of their roles and relationship, for what is an author but a creator, and what is the largest creator (from a western, theological point of view), but God? Through Barthes' differentiation between an Author of a work—omnipotent and

controlling of meaning, like the classical view of God—and the Modern Scriptor—still present in the text, but leaving room for the reader to exercise freedom in interpretation—God’s role in *Hamlet* can be labeled without diminishing God’s importance or existence. Under Barthes’ schema, God in *Hamlet*, is a Modern Scriptor. In observable moments such as Claudius’ prayers for forgiveness, and the gravediggers’ discussion of Ophelia’s suicide and Christian burial, God is presumed to exist, but is not physically dictating the lives of the characters. The language and grammar in these particular scenes deconstruct the notion of an actively omnipotent God and rather reveal that it is the human characters who hold the power to control their own lives on Earth, a revelation that champions free will and diversity of life, and remains relevant to modern theological discussion despite its antiquity.

In his short essay, “The Death of the Author,” Barthes explores the consequences of and ultimately advocates for decentralizing literature from an obsessive focus on the Author. According to Barthes, an Author holds complete control over a text, 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 text 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). Doing away with the Author, and releasing the text from his binding law, gives the reader unlimited power to interpret the text in any number of ways. With the notion of the death of the Author, Barthes isn’t suggesting that a text wasn’t written by anyone, but instead by a Modern Scriptor. The Scriptor exists with a text instead of preceding it. Thus the Scriptor is still present in a work, but he cannot actively dictate the meaning of it (1468). The rise of the reader thus doesn’t suggest a creator-less text, but simply

acknowledges that "...it is language which speaks, not the author..." ultimately freeing a text to become greater than what any Author could have intended (1467).

Upon a first reading of *Hamlet*, it would seem that God and God's law acts as an Author figure who directly influences the physical actions and decisions of even the most powerfully royal character: Claudius. In Claudius' weakest moment, that of shame and fear prompted from the presentation of *The Mouse-Trap*, his first instinct is to pray to God in hopes of reconciliation:

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)

Claudius laments on the state of his "limed soul" that "art more engag'd." He's internally tangled up and he calls out "Help, angels!" making a plea to the agents of God, presuming that only the divine holds the power to help him, and his own earthly powers are too lowly. The power he prays for is that of reconciliation: a promised transformation of the soul if one presents oneself in deference to God. The words Claudius uses to describe his current physicality suggest rigidity: "stubborn," "steel." However, he wishes to be transformed into a new, softer state, like that of a "new-born babe." The juxtaposition of these words suggests a radical transformation is needed, a transformation that would take great power. Through his pleas for transformation, Claudius puts all of the power in God's hands, making the statement that God has this ultimate power. His fate and well being is not his own to control, but that of God the Creator. The bowing of the most politically powerful man in the play most ardently seen at the end of his speech, when Claudius physically kneels, giving himself over to the power of God's totalizing authority.

While it appears as if God's authority is all encompassing, even dictating Claudius' physical reactions, the circumstances of Ophelia's death and burial invite us to reconsider how powerful God actually is as an Author in this play. The gravediggers, or clowns as they are textually referred to, first begin to deconstruct the notion of God's ultimate and present authority with their discussion of the allowance for Ophelia to have a Christian burial, despite the questionably suicidal nature of her death. A seemingly inconsequential exchange because of its rustic humor, this scene actually houses a neutral space where two outsiders ruminate over the main events of the play and directs us as readers to do the same:

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)

This twisting conversation—where initially the Second Clown assures the First Clown of the kosher nature of Ophelia's burial, but then the uncertainty of the topic leaves the First Clown assuring the Second—uncovers the ambiguous yet intricate nature of the mortal and divine relationship in *Hamlet*, but ultimately points to a human authority over life rather than a divine one. The language used in this passage puts power into the hands of the humans themselves, suggesting that in the present moment, they are in control of their own destinies. 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. This goes directly against the notion of the Author figure, God, masterminding the story of her life; the power is Ophelia's to write her own story.

However, Ophelia isn't the only one to transcend the appearance of God's earthly authority in this small exchange. What was then regarded as Christian law, the refusal of a Christian burial for one who committed suicide, is broken by the coroner. 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, formally putting humans in the place by which to act and thus giving them the physical power over their lives (and others' deaths) on Earth and not God. 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. 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 an active, authoritative voice on Earth. God doesn't intervene to

stop Ophelia from dying, doesn't intervene to change the nature of Ophelia's burial. Whatever happens on Earth, is in the power of the human characters.

These revelations of God's lack of physical omnipotence on Earth invites a second consideration of Claudius' initial deference to God. What is once read as an admittance of the authority of the divine over the fate and actions of mortals is interpreted differently after the gravediggers deconstruct the notion. Claudius' kneeling seems like an admittance of God's power, and it is, but recognizing who is making Claudius kneel reveals who has the stronger earthly power. Claudius pleads for help, saying "Make assay, / Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinew of the new-born babe" which seems like he is asking the angels to bow his knees, but it is the observation of the grammar surrounding "bow" which flips the notion on its head. Claudius is not asking God to bow his knees, but Claudius himself is telling his knees to bow. "Bow," comma, "stubborn knees" makes "bow" a command on Claudius' part, and not a plea. God doesn't actively put Claudius on his knees, Claudius willfully puts himself there. This doesn't mean that God doesn't exist for Claudius. God is still present because it was Claudius who sought out a holy space to pray, but God is simply not puppeteering Claudius. There is no actively present God forcing him to his knees. Claudius, just like Ophelia and the coroner, has the power to dictate and assess his own actions as well as the ones of those around them. The birth of these "readers" then necessitates the transformation of God from Author to Scriptor.

And if none of this isn't already evidence enough of God's role as Scriptor rather than Author, let us look once more at the comedy of the clowns for an even more obvious portrayal of the power of the reader over the Author as the two 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)

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, but the 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?” This simple question opens up a whole can of hermeneutics; it suggests that there is more than one way to “understand” or interpret the Bible. This goes directly against the fundamentalist view of the Bible which firmly holds to the belief that God physically dictated the words in the Bible to the scribes who wrote them down. In this view God is the Author, and the Bible is God's Word, so there can be only one meaning. However, the clowns suggest that this is not the case. With their comical misunderstanding they transform God from the Author to a Modern Scriptor. God is still present in the text, but the text is free to be interpreted by the readers in innumerable ways. The true, lasting power lies in the hands of the readers and their ability to interpret.

A slippery, ambiguous topic in *Hamlet* just as in reality—the role of the divine on Earth—is brought into partial light through Barthes by taking his microcosm of the Author and reader and scaling it up to represent God and God's creations. Just like a Modern Scriptor, God's

authority is presented as existent, yet incomplete. Because of the conflicting language and images used throughout the play, a solely tyrannical Author-like power of God in *Hamlet* is impossible. By being both the God Claudius respects and seems to seek honest help from, and the God that the gravediggers unwittingly dismiss as the harbinger of divine law on earth, God is kept from being an Author, and then must be more like the Modern Scriptor: present in the respect the characters show for God's existence, but not physically present. Casting even a single doubt on God's authority on Earth keeps God's role from true, totalizing power. However, the lack of a totalitarian God is not a negative within *Hamlet*, but rather a positive, because it respects the sanctity of free will. It is not that divine law means nothing in *Hamlet*, but the characters are free to adhere to it, bend it, or even ignore it. With no Author-God to prescribe the ultimate meaning and outcome, humans become more powerful and meaningful, morals become more diverse, life becomes more authentic. While this play was written in a time which championed the classical view of God who had a divine plan, the revelation of the power of freedom these characters have to dictate their own lives resonate more with modern theological thought, illustrating that any theological discourse that *Hamlet* presents should not be ignored simply because of its antiquity. To ignore it would be a detriment to the advancement of contemporary theological discussion surrounding the relationship of God and humans.

Works Cited

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