

The Problem of Hamlet  
By Chris Wood

“And I do think—or else this brain of mine / Hunts not the trials of policy  
so sure  
As it hath used to do—that I have found / The very cause of Hamlet’s  
lunacy.”  
–Polonius

“O, speak of that! That do I long to hear.”  
–Claudius

A sense of mystery permeates the plot of Hamlet, beginning with the mysterious appearance of the ghost of his father. Hamlet from that point on is in a state of complete tension and will contradict himself in thought and in action. In Hamlet’s first “soliloquy,” a term for the Elizabethan stage convention that permits a character to speak directly to the audience his inner, silent thoughts. Hamlet begins with the anguished wish that his “sullied flesh would melt” away by itself. Since this cannot be, he wishes that God had not given a direct law forbidding suicide. He continues with an anguished general cry against the will of heaven:

“O God, God / How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all  
the uses of this world!”

He is led to this cry of despair by his recent recognition that justice does not rule the world that “things rank and gross in nature possess it merely.” The world appears to him in this light because his “excellent” father has died and Claudius, so far inferior to his father, has succeeded to his place, not only to his father’s throne but also to his wife. However, his mother’s behavior has most disillusioned him. It leads him to reject any love for or from Ophelia whom he had previously loved, and causes him to cry out “frailty thy name is woman.” He has projected his disgust for the actions of his mother onto all women, and removed himself from those who love him.

The ghost of Hamlet’s father presents the turning point in the play where Hamlet assumes the guise of madness, though the sight of his father’s spirit has caused his already unstable spirit to totter on the brink of actual insanity. Hamlet sees his mission to revenge his father’s murder as one of social reform. We glimpse this impulse to change the world rather than to accept its evils in his earlier moments of satire, and the ghost has now given this impulse a positive direction and purpose. Nevertheless, however much Hamlet may desire to cause a drastic change in the world, the other part of him desires only to withdraw from this evil world.

In Hamlet’s person, there is a constant tension between the “honor” code and the “religious” code. The honor code was the mark that distinguished the

aristocrat from the “peasant slave” particularly during the Renaissance period. The honor code demanded that any sign of “oppression” or “humiliation” be stomped out and denounced immediately. The man who followed the honor code was always ready to bravely risk his life to vindicate the code itself or his family. One of the obligations of a man of honor was to revenge the death of his father; not to do this was to be a “coward,” the mark of the “peasant slave” who desired only to preserve his life, whatever the cost. When, however, dishonor was inevitable, the honor code preached suicide as the only way of proving one’s superiority to his fate. The man of honor aspired to greatness and was only afraid of shame. In contrast to this, the religious code preached that goodness was superior to greatness. The signs of the “great soul” according to the honor code and its willingness to commit murderous revenge or suicide were mortal sins according to religious interpretation. Goodness expresses itself not through an egotistical superiority to fate but a humble acceptance of whatever heaven may send. As Job says, “naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). As a Christian gentleman, the demands of honor and heaven pull Hamlet in two different directions. It leaves him in a state of inactivity altogether, which leads him to long to be delivered from both codes, yet he finds himself emotionally bound to them.

It seems Hamlet’s religion is more harmful to him than it is helpful. He does not carry out the will of God because of reverence for the Almighty and love for his truth. Rather, Hamlet is afraid of the consequences of heaven’s judgment upon the wicked. We find this attitude prevalent in Christendom today. Someone once said, “there was a time where we didn’t leave the light, we didn’t leave the commandments of God. But, we didn’t love them either.” This is the attitude that I am talking about, the one that finds God’s commands *constantly* being a burden to the soul. John speaks against such a thing in 1John 5:3 when he says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.” John does not mean to say that they are always easy. Rather, he means that they should become easier as you grow in your understanding of the commandment Giver. God’s commands are never void of his love, or in spite of it. John tells us that God *is* love (1John 4:8), and whatever that means, it means that God cannot do anything apart from love. To say that God is love is not the same as saying God creates, or God judges. Both of those statements are true of course, but God does not just love; God *is* love. Therefore, when God creates, he does so out of love. The same is true about the commands of God then, when God commands it is because he loves, not because he wishes to be a tyrant or a burden to us. God’s commands are his heartfelt desire for his children, through which he wishes to keep us from the pain and suffering that sin has brought into the world. He wants us to be able to walk with him in the cool of the garden and not be separated from him and so he pours out his heart to us and reveals his will for us that we may live. To rebel against the commands of God in the name

of “the good life” is to rebel against life itself.

There are many Hamlets in the world, those who totter on the brink of anguish at all times because they are trapped between two “codes.” The law of God and the law of self are the two realities that exist. If you rebel against God’s law, you rebel against the very fabric of the universe and to set yourself at odds with reality. We were not meant to be the center of the universe, and so when we set ourselves as the center we suffer. As the old proverb says, “he who spits against the wind, spits in his own face.” Our task in the search for the full life, the God call life, is to have the proper attitudes toward God and self. The view of God’s commands will shape the response to God’s commands, and will shape our appreciation for the paths that set us free (Psalm 119:32).