
Hamlet And The Protestant Reformation

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England on April 1564 to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. According to the historical record, both of Shakespeare's parents were practicing Roman Catholics. However, after King Henry VIII's son, Edward VI took power after his father's death in 1547 at the early age of nine. Due to his young age, the Nation was ruled by a council of regency. Which was controlled mostly by his uncle Edward Seymour (mother's side of the family). Hiding behind the mask of King Edward VI, Edward Seymour helped add fire to the Protestant Reformation of England. However, when King Edward VI became of age he too showed his devotion to the Protestant faith and pushed the reformation. This created religious persecution for Catholics and more than likely lead to Shakespeare being a closet Catholic. (even though most of the citizens were Catholic) Due to his environment, it can be seen in his writing that he leans between Catholic and Protestant beliefs to suit both audiences.

Shakespeare shows two distinct Catholic beliefs in regards to Purgatory in Hamlet. King Hamlet brings attention to his situation as a time of purging and preparing for entrance into heaven. This idea of purging and preparing for heaven is directly a Catholic belief. After Hamlet asks his father about his situation, he answers:

GHOST: I am thy father's spirit,

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. (1.5.14-18)

His position appears to be explicitly Catholic in that he is confined to roam the night "For a certain term", which will relieve him of his "Foul crimes... are burnt and purged away." The ghost even goes as far as explaining his place of confinement as a "prison-house". Shakespeare uses the idea of Hamlet's father's ghost to convey his Catholic beliefs.

King Hamlet's Ghost can be seen as the main reason for Hamlet's personal struggle with his religious identity. In the play it is stated by his mother,

QUEEN: Let not thy mother lose her prayers,

Hamlet. I pray thee, stay with us. Go not to Wittenberg. (1.2.122-123)

That he was living and studying in Wittenburg during the time of his father's death. Wittenburg is the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation. Implying that during his studies he adopted the Protestant Faith. Protestants do not believe in Purgatory but do believe in Angels and Demons. Explaining Hamlet's line in his soliloquy:

“May be the devil, and the devil hath power

T' assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps

Out of my weakness and my melancholy,”

Hamlet's religious beliefs are seen as only including Angels and Demons. This shows that he could be in fact Protestant, creating a difficult moral question. Will he trust the possible Demon or will he make his own decisions? This moral question drive the plot of the play and ultimately leads to Hamlet's downfall.