

Can't Stop "Livin' on a Prayer"¹ – Beliefs and Their Limitations in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*

Nava Karimi, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Torsten Kehler's English 210 course, *Reading and Writing Identities*. The assignment asked students to compare the revenge acts of two characters from different plays by William Shakespeare, specifically in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In this paper, I argue that both plays use their respective revenge plots to emphasize the limiting effects that commitments to external beliefs can have on one's ability to reach personal fulfillment. More precisely, I argue that the protagonists, Titus and Hamlet, find themselves on roads to inevitable tragedy due to the fact that their beliefs in tradition and religion, respectively, impede on their abilities to explore deviations from their expected courses of actions.

In his plays, *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare explores the impact that commitments to external powers can have on one's ability to reach personal fulfillment. The eponymous protagonists' meet their tragic fates as a result of intense devotion to their beliefs in tradition and religion, respectively, which provide them with a sense of stability whilst simultaneously impeding on their ability to deviate from expected courses of action; the commitments thus permanently prevent the ability to avoid potential self-destruction by obfuscating the existence of alternative outcomes.

The men find themselves trapped in commitments to structures outside of themselves in an attempt to seek comfort, looking to greater forces that can act as guides to navigating unstable situations. Titus Andronicus clings to tradition and conventional expectations when making decisions, choosing to appeal to a clear existing source of order rather than careful critical thought. His decision to

¹ Bongiovi, John Francis, Jr., Child, Desmond, Sambora, Richie. Lyrics to "Livin' on a Prayer." Performed by Bon Jovi, Def Jam Recordings, 1986.

sacrifice the son of Queen Tamora, Alarbus, stems solely from a desire to fulfill a traditional duty, explaining to her that “for their brethren slain, religiously they ask a sacrifice” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.126-127). By having a simple justification for the sacrifice, Titus is able to paint his choice as seemingly mandatory without needing to consider potential repercussions. He is able to claim that the balance of their society simply asks for a sacrifice, which he must provide – an attempt to absolve himself of responsibility. Tradition functions as a guide for assisting with difficult decisions, as Titus is able to ignore “the tears [Tamora] shed[s], a mother’s tears in passion for her son” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.101-102) and is instead able to maintain clarity, sacrificing Alarbus easily “to appease [his sons’] groaning shadows” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.122). Furthermore, trusted with the mammoth task of selecting Rome’s next emperor, Titus quickly selects Saturninus, explaining that the people should “elect the emperor’s eldest son” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.224). Titus is able to navigate a complex political decision by appealing to the traditional belief that the eldest son should be chosen as emperor, freeing him from any possible blame that would be directed towards him if he were to make a choice perceived to be incorrect. This once again functions as a way to emphasize the practical benefits that committing to belief in tradition has for Titus; an external guide becomes a ‘safety net’ to protect him from the repercussions of his actions by providing rational justification for difficult choices.

Similarly, Hamlet finds solace in his own intense religious beliefs, serving as a way to prevent him from going too far while additionally providing a similar justification for his actions. Spiraling into deep depression due to the death of his father and his mother’s remarriage, Hamlet does not wish to live, lamenting over “how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to [him] the uses of this world” (*Hamlet*, 1.2.133-134). Existing causes him to experience deep despair, but he is halted from ending his own suffering by the fact that “the Everlasting ha[s]...fixed his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter”’ (*Hamlet*, 1.2.131-132). His commitment to God allows him to remain tethered to a source of rationality and prevents him from ending his life by attaching him to a power he perceives to be greater than himself. Hamlet’s understanding of God and his rule outweighs his own personal grievances, serving as a beneficial form of restraint which protects him during a time when his emotions seem to be taking control. Despite its function as a form of personal restriction, Hamlet also appeals to his beliefs in order to justify his actions. Faced with a potential opportunity to finally kill his uncle, Claudius, Hamlet stops upon considering that Claudius is praying, realizing that “a villain kills [his] father, and, for that, [he], his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven” (*Hamlet*, 3.3.76-78). He refuses to “take him in the purging of his soul when he is fit and seasoned for his passage” (*Hamlet*, 3.3.85-86), stopping himself from committing the brutal murder because he wishes to prevent Claudius from reaching heaven. Hamlet is therefore successfully able to refrain from the overwhelming act of having to kill his uncle despite having a clear

opportunity to finally complete his revenge. It protects him from possibly seeming cowardly, rationalizing his refrainment from violence by attributing it to a greater force beyond any mere individual. Thus, providing comfort, justification, and protection, Titus and Hamlet are understandable in their commitments to intense beliefs, but these beliefs become impediments on their abilities to find simple ways of avoiding conflicts.

Their intense commitments to faith become increasingly counterproductive as they serve as a catalyst for tragedy. Titus' vicious cycle of revenge begins with an action only mandated by tradition, highlighted as Tamora weeps over the "cruel irreligious piety" (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.126) of Titus' actions. To those with less severe ties to tradition, it is evident that Titus' behaviour may be perceived as barbaric and worthy of sparking immense outrage. This is not apparent to Titus, who obeys his commitment above all else. This frames him as simultaneously responsible for his own destiny due to his choice to abide by cruel tradition, while also absolving him of guilt due to his unawareness of the consequences of his beliefs. Moreover, Hamlet's commitment to his religious beliefs becomes the very obstacle preventing him from finding peace by avenging his father. His task of killing Claudius becomes increasingly complicated during instances when he is forced to navigate the conflicts between his duties as a son and his belief in what is right under the eyes of God. Claudius recognizes this, utilizing Hamlet's strong faith in an effort to manipulate him, arguing that "to persevere in obstinate condolence is a course of impious stubbornness...a will most incorrect to heaven" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.92-95), attempting to cease him from grieving his deceased father. Claudius is aware that there exists a tension between Hamlet's familial and faith-based commitments, and attempts to use this to his advantage. Hamlet is also unable to kill his uncle while Claudius is praying, preferring to wait for a moment that will cause "his soul [to] be as damned an black as hell, whereto it goes" (*Hamlet*, 3.3.93-94), emphasizing the limitations that religion places on him. This conflict between the desire to kill his uncle and the protection that religion provides Claudius does serve as a means of justifying his potential inner cowardice, however, it also negatively functions as an obstacle to the single act he desires to perform above all else. Hamlet is unable to freely avenge someone he cares for, as he is too focused on the posthumous repercussions that may be awaiting him on account of his religious beliefs.

These beliefs force Hamlet to overcomplicate the reasoning behind his actions, even justifying an unnecessary murder by claiming that "heaven hath pleased it so, to punish [him] with [killing Polonius]" and that [he] must be cruel only to be kind" (*Hamlet*, 3.4.171-176). As a pious believer, Hamlet is able to look at his vengeful task through the framework of religion, shifting his understanding of his actions and serving as an additional layer of complication for him to navigate. Through commitments to tradition and religion, Titus and Hamlet are forced to consider an additional element when determining their actions, and the

seeming inevitability of their beliefs obfuscates the potential to deviate from their expectations.

By intensely devoting themselves to their respective beliefs, Titus and Hamlet successfully eliminate alternative outcomes in which they would be able to avoid the death and destruction that each revenge cycle invokes upon their worlds. The severity of their commitments embed them within a structure that forces them to see escapes from these structures as immoral. For Titus, this causes him to understand actions that go against tradition as being absolutely incorrect. His belief in the sanctity of tradition forces him to kill his own son who disagrees with aspects of his political declarations – forcing Lavinia to do as the emperor wishes by becoming Saturninus’ wife. Titus’ commitment to tradition outweighs familial bonds, as he expresses that “Nor [Lucius], nor [Mutius], are any sons of [his]; [his] sons would never dishonour [him]” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.299-300). Titus punishes attempts by his children and Bassianus to go against tradition in hopes of achieving happiness by harming his own family, highlighting the control that his loyalty to tradition truly has. There is no formal system forcing Titus to adhere to historical customs, but the voluntaristic aspect of his commitment is overshadowed by the way it appears to him as being inevitable and inescapable. His belief causes him to not only begin a devastating cycle of revenge by sacrificing Alarbus which eliminates a large portion of his family, but also impacts his interactions with those he cares for as he chooses loyalty to abstract power forms over real individuals.

In a similar manner, Hamlet’s determination to consider God in the context of all his decisions severely limit his ability to satisfy his desires. Refraining from killing Claudius while he is praying due to it being “hire and salary, not revenge” (*Hamlet*, 3.3.76) results in his “rash and bloody deed” (*Hamlet*, 3.4.25) of stabbing Polonius, representing the ways in which the limitations caused by his beliefs have severe consequences due to the constraints they place upon Hamlet. The tragic fates of each individual can be directly traced back to the strong beliefs they hold. Titus’ sacrifice of Alarbus, followed by his selection of Saturninus as emperor are the two actions which result in barbaric mutilation, both caused by him and done to him. Both of these decisions were made in a desire to appease his internal commitment to tradition, and ultimately result in his downfall as Titus begins a spiral into a battle of revenge that does not end until all parties are eliminated. Contrastingly, Hamlet is prevented from completing the two actions that would have placed an end to the intense revenge he was in search of, due to his awareness of God in the context of all his decisions. Killing Claudius while praying would have provided a perfect opportunity to complete his task, but his determination to avoid presenting his uncle with a pleasant afterlife obstructs his ability to consider this properly, instead immediately eliminating this act as an option. Furthermore, ending his own existence would have both ended Hamlet’s

suffering and eliminated the vengeance he had been tasked with, but he likewise does not consider this as a possibility due to the fact that “the Everlasting [had] fix’d His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (*Hamlet*, 1.2.131-132). The strong beliefs held by both Titus and Hamlet in the form of tradition and religion embed them in seemingly inescapable commitments, burying other possible actions under layers of obvious standards they must adhere to.

The comfort provided by intense devotion to belief is outweighed by the ‘tunnel-vision’ it causes in Titus and Hamlet as they find themselves unable to escape their tragic fates despite the existence of potential paths that do not lead to identical barbarism. By utilizing stubborn attachment to belief as a common thread in his tragic works, Shakespeare is able to emphasize the limitations of beliefs which prevent those who hold them from even considering deviating, permanently veiling alternative worlds from them in which their suffering is not inevitable; thus, individuals become responsible for their own turmoil, consequences of voluntaristic commitments to all-consuming “higher powers,” leaving them doomed to be unaware of the freedom that deviation can bring.

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