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## “How Is It That the Clouds Still Hang on You?”: A Rhetoric Reading of Hamlet’s Revenge

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### Abstract

It is commonly acknowledged that Hamlet kills Claudius to avenge his father’s death. Nevertheless, following Paul de Man’s interpretation strategy, the paper presents a rhetoric reading of the revenge theme in Hamlet, proposing that the real revengee is Gertrude rather than Claudius. The old Hamlet is posthumously informed that his death attributes to the queen’s perfidy. He accordingly demands Hamlet to kill the new king in order to terminate the incest between the new “couple”. Also at the ghost’s command, the prince revenges his natural mother by the means of verbal sarcasm so as to leave the latter, whom the old king hates most, to suffer the cruellest divine punishment instead of any secular trial.

*Keywords:* Hamlet, revenge, queen, rhetoric reading

Revenge is an important theme of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, which critics have traditionally interpreted as Hamlet’s seeking revenge on his uncle for the murder of the old Hamlet (Sterling, p. 4). Despite the surface action, the play still hides another deep revenge. That is, Hamlet deciphers the code given by his father’s ghost, killing Claudius to terminate the incest between the new “couple” and relegating Gertrude, whom the old king hates most, to secular verbal disgracing during her lifetime and to the cruelest divine punishment posthumously.

### Gertrude: The Real Target

At the beginning of his recollection, the old king lays down the keynote of heavenly cycling and punitive karma. He stands at the terrace and speaks:

I am thy father’s spirit;  
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confin’d to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg’d away. But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (I.v.10-21)

The ghost tries to tell the prince: there exists a God in the world. He is watching us all the time and truthfully recording our crimes. The people who commit crimes will definitely

receive posthumous punishment in accordance with their wrongdoings. They will not be relieved and released until all crimes have been purged through divine penalty. Since even sketching it in a few words can scare listeners to death, the heavenly punishment surpasses all penalties in the secular world.

Measured against the tension between the harshness of divine penalty and the ghost's reiteration of instant revenge, the old king's request of killing Claudius accordingly implies more than its superficial directness, as the above quotation suggests that killing Claudius will inevitably have the prince confront the unnecessary heavenly punishment, while temporal revenge on the new king is far inferior to his afterlife penalty. Actually, the old Hamlet explicitly expresses his intention, namely “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest” (I.v.83-84). His real purpose is to terminate the incest between his brother and his wife by killing the former.

Contrary to the old king's claim, Draper observes that the queen has never been unfaithful and that the marriage between Claudius and her is a concrete instance of her contribution to the stability of the country at the cost of her personal happiness. In his eye, the queen's wisdom, elegance, chastity, and dignity exemplify the model roles of wife, mother and queen, and she is the perfect embodiment of Elizabethan feminine essences (Draper, p. 121). However, Draper's interpretation overlooks the cultural background of Elizabethan regime and its particular treatment of sex-related depiction. No matter whether Gertrude has played an active role in murdering her former husband, the marriage between her and the new king cannot escape the doom of self-destruction since the marital bond of such a kind was constantly regarded as incest and prurience (Ranald, p. 7). Further, the circumbendibus of conspiracy revelation is oriented to conform with the social taboos in the Renaissance period where sex is “not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it” (Foucault, p. 35). The latter might partially reflect why some other critics suspend their judgement by expecting Shakespeare to offer more affirmative information (Burnett, p. 30).

Taking the narrative function of the ghost and the dramatic rift between his lifetime and posthumous performance, we are more ready to suggest that Gertrude is the determinant of the whole incident. The old king is posthumously informed of the severe cruelty of divine punishment and how Claudius kills him by pouring poison into his ear. The latter which is initially beyond his knowledge deserves readers' special attention as it grants the old Hamlet with the transformation from an inner-story character to an omnipotent third-person narrative voice. He transcends perceptive limit, pierces through guileful mist, indirectly reveals the underlying intention, all of which persuade readers into accepting his role of an analytical yardstick. However, the old king, though he knew the truth, intends to save the imperial dignity by keeping the skeleton in the royal closet. Even when the prince at the bedchamber is on the verge of forcing the queen to give up the truth (III.iv.9-224), the ghost immediately appears to interrupt the prince, making it impossible for the others to know the true story (Cahn, p. 226).

On the other hand, comparing the sharp contrast of the old king's pre- and post-death behaviors might facilitate the conclusion that he knows the affair between his brother and wife starts before his death. Horatio ever introduces the old king has bet a thousand miles of land on his son's victory (I.i.86-99). It is a sign not only of his love and trust for the prince, but also his majestic magnanimity of win and loss. But such a heroic king, who turns into a ghost after death, unscrupulously swears at his wife, accuses her of prurience, and curses her self-indulgence (I.v.47-58). Suppose that the queen marries Claudius for stabilizing the kingdom surrounded by hostile states or the latter forces Gertrude, who has been deprived of self-sustenance and protection upon her husband's death, to accept the

proposal, how could the old Hamlet demonstrate such fury and wrath, given his lifetime kingly generosity? His rage in return reveals that the queen and Claudius have been in an affair before the murdering. At that time, the old king is still in power. If Claudius persists in seducing Gertrude and the queen is virtuous, she could take herself under the old Hamlet's wing. The latter might drive his brother away from the queen or even exile him. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to claim that the queen's treachery determines the development of the whole event, and that the death of the old king can be attributed to the queen's infidelity which arouses Claudius' vicious desire of possessing Gertrude and dauntless evil of murdering his elder brother. This rhetoric analysis of such an irredeemable crime explains to a great extent why the ghost resents the queen more than his brother.

That the ghost's hatred is primarily oriented to Gertrude than Claudius is partially demonstrated through the length of his swearing at the two respectively. Discourse pragmatics maintains that the textual pattern, written formality, and sequence arrangement of a discourse may exert great influences over its expressiveness and communicative interaction. In addition, the “intentionality” of the author's attitude is a very important standard for discourse interpretation (Huang, p. 55). The ghost acts as the “author” of his own discourse, and his intention directly determines the composition of his swearing discourse. The ghost merely assigns three lines to the condemnation of his brother's brutality and wickedness (I.v.43-45), while the curse on the queen is extended to more than twelve lines (I.v.47-58). Probably, the cursing would continue if it weren't interrupted by the advancing dawn. The old king reluctantly suspends his swearing and instructs his son about the following steps of their revenge, since time is pressing. This is a convincing proof that the old king hates the queen more than his brother.

The means of terminating incest implied by the old king is another direct proof of the real orientation of his hatred. There exist three choices for the termination: 1) killing Claudius, 2) kill the queen, or 3) killing both. Why does the ghost choose to kill his brother? To answer this question, we need return to the origin of this thesis, namely karma. Since there is no punishment in the world a wee bit harsher than the heavenly one, the best choice for revenge-taking is to let the revengee confront god's great judgement. At the same time, Claudius and Gertrude must be cut off from each other to curb their incestuous affair. In weighing the pros and cons, the old king would choose the person whom he hates most to face god's punishment and kill the other who is relatively less detested. Therefore, even if old Hamlet urges his son to kill Claudius, the real target of his revenge is his wife, however, the ultimate revenge would later be accomplished at the hand of god.

Although the old king reveals his intention in a cryptic style, the prince also successfully restores his father's true purposes. Having a close reading of ghost's behest, we would find that the old king pushes Hamlet more to take revenge on the queen than leave her alone by saying:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,  
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
So lust, though to a radiant angle linked,  
Will sate itself in a celestial bed  
And prey on garbage. (I.v.53-58)

The king is telling Hamlet that the queen is a pernicious woman in nature and that the prince should keep an eye on her. After hearing the ghost's narrative, Hamlet first curses the queen, and then Claudius (I.v.106-9). This implies that the prince realizes whom his father hates most is the unfaithful queen. Hamlet also understands that old king's setting the queen aside does not mean forgiving but revenging in a moderate manner. “Howsoever thou pursu'st this act” (I.v.85), the son should “not let thy soul contrive\ against thy mother

ought” (I.v.86), namely not physically harm the queen. He should instead “leave her to heaven” (I.v.87) and have her experience all the cruellest punishment of god. At the same time, Hamlet should also not let Gertrude feel good but suffer “those thorns that in her bosom lodge\ to prick and sting her” (I.v.88-89). As Paul de Man suggests, all writings and readings have necessarily been misconducted because both processes cannot be fulfilled without the use of language which is not transparent but rhetorical (de Man, p. 5). The rhetoricity of language provides us with some special way of reading. The above-mentioned advice could be seen as two parts: the first line constitutes the first part, and the remaining lines the second. It is commonly accepted that the king is the son of God, so “heaven” could also be an analogy of basilica. “Leave her to heaven” suggests confining the queen to her closet and not letting her get away from punishment. And the other two lines imply how Hamlet should take his revenge. “To those thorns that in her bosom lodge” means that the best way suggested to punish the queen is spiritual affiliation, while “to prick and sting her” asks Hamlet to annoy her verbally from time to time.

Another point requires illustration is why Hamlet is willing to kill Claudius, regardless of afterlife divine penalty. That Hamlet dares and is willing to take revenge on his natural mother fundamentally lies in his extraordinary affection for his father, although it entails the inevitability of posthumous penalty. As the playwright did not provide us with enough direct descriptions of their great filiations, we could still feel them through the conversation between Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo and Hamlet’s constant distress on his loss of such a great father. When Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo are waiting for the arriving of the ghost of the old king, Horatio tells the story about the war between Norway and Denmark. The Danish king does permit the contract that his throne and the whole kingdom will be taken away by the winner if Hamlet loses the duel with Fortinbras, and vice versa (I.i.80-105). This bet reveals two things: first of all, Hamlet is always willing and able to take responsibilities when the heavy burden is put on his shoulder, for the prince is a so brave and strong-minded man that he constantly has his own way to solve all problems. Secondly, the king completely trusts his son. The trust between the father and the son weighs more than the whole kingdom, and thus surpasses the range of love into faith.

The old king has faith on his son. In return, the prince has the deepest love for his father. Hamlet can never forget the merits of his dead king:

A’ was a man, take him for all in all,  
I shall not look upon his like again. (I.ii.187-188)

.....

Yea, from the table of my memory  
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter. (I.v.74-81)

Merely from these two stanzas we should have been strongly moved by his affectionate recollection. The image of the king will everlastingly remain in Hamlet’s mind. Perplexed by his remorse, the prince is eager to have one more chance to meet the old king, confiding his endless yearning. So it is reasonable for readers to assume that Hamlet will not let it go at any cost if such an opportunity does come.

Here goes the chance. When Horatio tells Hamlet that they have seen the haunting ghost of the old king, the prince expresses his unchangeable determination to talk with the ghost:

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If it assume my noble father's person,  
I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape  
And bid me hold my peace; (I.iii.244-46)

Then at the sight of the ghost of his father, Hamlet puts all things aside. He even turns deaf to Horatio's advice not to follow the ghost in consideration of the safety of the prince. He curses his best friends who persuade him not to go:

By heaven I'll make a ghost of him that lets me:  
I say away; go on, I'll follow thee. (I.iv.85-86)

Curse is a way to choose the side. In the mind of Hamlet, no one can replace the importance of the king. His passion overvalues his rapport with remaining friends. No matter how many words used to portray this kind of father-son relationship, all language fails the love.

Hamlet is so affectionate of his father that he cannot help doubt that the queen is a conspirer of the complot. He suspects and curses:

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
She married. O most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (I.ii.154-57)

.....  
My father's spirit (in arms) all is not well,  
I doubt some foul play (I.iii.255-56)

.....  
O most pernicious woman! (I.v.90)

A confluence of Hamlet's personal doubt and his father's narration is completed here. Consequently, when the ghost asks the prince to initialize the revenge, he has been more than ready to set the fury against his natural mother, the real target.

### **Verbal Sarcasm: The Means of Revenge**

The old king warns his son not to kill or physically harm the queen, but to take revenge on her by the means of verbally breaking his heart. According to this request, Hamlet deliberately uncovers and satirizes the queen's unchastity, which humiliates Gertrude in public, tortures her with sarcasm, and harasses the queen out of her wits. The prince's satire on the queen can be divided into two categories: in-person and indirect sarcasm.

In-person sarcasm refers to Hamlet's verbal satire directly spoken to Gertrude so as to achieve the disgracing effects on the spot. The most impressive example of this kind, through which the prince harshly and publicly pricks his mother, is the play in the play of Act 3 Scene 2 when the whole royal family is watching his well-prepared dramatic performance. The prince sees highly of the scheme:

for any thing so o'erdone, is from  
the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and  
now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature,  
to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and  
the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III.ii.19-22, quoter's italics)

Here readers are informed that play is not a frolic game for pleasure but a means to see through the truth, to take revenge, and to restore the justice. The first step of verbal

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revenge by the means of the play in the play is to have the player queen repeats the wrongdoings of the real queen, exposing the crime to sunlight, abashing Gertrude. At first the player queen swears that she will never betray the player king. But just a few minutes later he marries the murderer of her husband (III.ii.140-215). What a sarcasm! No matter how many sweet words you have said, and no matter how noble a man you live with, slut is slut. This coincides with the old king's comment on the queen from I.v.53-58, which serves another proof that Hamlet carries out his revenge according to his father's demand. Hamlet pushes the queen into the corner: the public would laugh at this licentious woman and her ill relations with her son. Moreover, Hamlet carelessly casts a few comments on the performance. His words curse Gertrude's abandoning herself to lust and her hastiness to get remarried (“how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours”, III.ii.123-33), satirize her pretentious but transient affection for the old king and all cheating disguise (“Tis brief, my lord.\ As woman's love.” III.ii.151-52), condemn her eating her own words and throwing the vows of marriage into the sky (“Oh, but she'll keep her word.” III.ii.250).

In addition to in-person sarcasm, Hamlet also makes several indirect ones to disgrace the queen. The indirect satire refers to the prince's “crazy words” or criticism against others rather than the queen, but the actual purpose of the articulation lies in hurting the “outsider” Gertrude. The dialogue between Ophelia and Hamlet in Act 3 Scene 1 is an example of this type. Before meeting his love, Hamlet has been confronted with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, two spies sent by Gertrude (II.ii.293). The prince is equally alert to the casual encounter with Ophelia, suspecting that the latter is another queen's spy or that the queen has already sent someone around to keep them under surveillance. Accordingly, the prince more takes the opportunity of satirizing the queen than expressing the deep affection to his sweetheart.

When Ophelia is about to continue the dialogue, Hamlet abruptly asks, “Ha, ha! are you honest?” (III.i.103). The abruptness of the question lies in that Ophelia has nothing to do with the issue of chastity. On the other hand, it is just the queen's stigma. To have the dialogue make sense requires new interpretative angle: Hamlet has directed his words at the queen, as he knows that walls have ears. He is not speaking with Ophelia but rebuking the queen for her destructive beauty (“That if you be honest and fair,\ your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty”, III.i.108-9; “for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness”, III.i.112-13;). He curses that Gertrude would utterly be deserted alone (“To a nunnery, go”, III.i.141).

The death of Polonius and Claudius' comments on the conversation between Ophelia and Hamlet to a great extent demonstrate that these two young people are not naively talking about their love affair. As his mind is occupied with the idea, sometimes what the prince says betrays himself. The following lines are an excerpt from one conversation between Hamlet and Polonius.

One fair daughter, and no more,  
The which he loved passing well. (II.ii.387-88)

.....

As by lot, God wot,  
And then you know  
It came to pass, as most like it was (II.ii.396-99)

Polonius interprets this as Hamlet's madness for Ophelia. The minister ever says “take this, from this, if this be otherwise” (I.ii.162). At the first glance, Polonius' death must be attributed to the impertinence of the prince, but it is equally acceptable to attribute the

killing to his misinterpretation of Hamlet’s madness. Shakespeare, a great mind of dramatic structure, just utilizes Polonius’ death to imply the error of his explanations. If Polonius misinterprets these few lines, what do they actually mean? The first line may really refer to Ophelia, when the prince sees her father. But as he is occupied with his revenge, the following lines reveal his curse on the queen and determination to avenge. The key to all puzzles of this kind is the keyword of chasity. More importantly, Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius, especially the last two, know the development of the whole incident, while the queen’s infidelity remains unknown to the outsiders. Even when the rest attach no significance to Hamlet’s gibberish, the new king keenly senses the connotation. He realizes that the prince’s gabbling is not naively about love but a verbal revenge against the involved individuals. Thus Claudius is ready to drive Hamlet away from Denmark in case of any dangerous results (III.i.165-72).

If the dialogue between Ophelia and Hamlet reflects the latter’s deliberate attempt to cut off the linguistic relationship between signifiers and the signified in terms of the identity of the real hearer, the conversation between Guildenstern and the prince then indicates the rhetorical characteristic of Hamlet’s sarcasm which hovers around between verbal paradigm and specific context. Truly hurt by the play and the conversation with Hamlet in her closet, the queen’s send Guildenstern to persuade the latter into changing his attitudes toward both his mother and uncle in vain. Nevertheless, Hamlet’s determination never changes. When Guildenstern tells the prince “the queen your mother, in greatest affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you”, Hamlet replies “you are welcome” (III.ii.293-295). Hamlet’s reply is complicatedly meaningful. This is due to:

A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other denies its own illocutionary mode. It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. (de Man, p. 10)

As a result, the prince’s reply could make sense in different ways: 1) welcome, and you are welcome to come and tell me the good news of the queen’s agony; 2) welcome, but only you rather than the queen is welcome; 3) I’d like to see Gertrude is suffering. To say so means, like applied in previous talks with Ophelia, Hamlet considers Guildenstern as a mouthpiece. The prince is supposing that all his words would be transferred to Gertrude. So the real receiver of the sentence is the queen. So having a tormented hearer is something of great pleasure.

Then Rosencrantz informs Hamlet that the queen is struck by the prince’s words and behaviors. Hamlet only replies, “O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother!” (III.ii.326) and then adds that “we shall obey, were she ten times our mother.” (III.ii.331). The word “wonderful” again highlights the rhetorical characteristics of Hamlet’s discourse in the context of a verbal paradigm or a specific context. Such a seemingly ridiculous sentence embodies an understandable logic: he considers himself merely as a good son of his father and frees himself from any liability to his mother. In that case, he must be filial to the father and verbally take his revenge on the queen. So the seemingly comforting reply of obeying his mother is no more than another satire since only the most sluttish woman would repeatedly remarry and be “our” mother “ten times”.

Although Bradley insists that the above sentence is a word play which Hamlet adopts to show his sense of humor (Bradley, 1992, p. 138), it must be pointed out that he ignores the tragic atmosphere of the play and fails to detect the continual dissociation in Hamlet’s articulation. The play begins with the king’s sudden death, the haunting ghost, and the

menacing enemy, all of which result in the overwhelming insecurity across the kingdom. Caught in such a desperate predicament, shouldered with heavy responsibility of revenge, Hamlet has no spare time to make fun, as all his words and deeds are oriented for that specific purpose. In addition, Hamlet has revealed the rhetorical characteristics of his speech in the first act. When Claudius asks him, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” (I.ii.66), the prince deliberately distorts the metaphor of the word “cloud” and adopts its literal meaning by misinterpreting it as a real cloud in the sky. Then he replies, “Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun” (I.ii.67). This trivial example reveals the connectivity between the revenge circumstance and the multiplicity of Hamlet’s words, whose hints invite readers to “rewrite” Hamlet’s revenge from the perspective of linguistic ambiguity. It also urges readers to divert our attention to the rhetoricity of his verbal articulation and evacuate the deeper intention of verbal revenge on the queen.

Roland Barthes puts forward in his *S/Z* the classification of “readable text” and “writable text”. He maintains that there exist two kinds of literary texts: the former is “transitive” and orients readers’ imagination in the real sense towards the exterior world of factuality, while the latter is “intransitive” and lacks certain signified orientation which varies among active interpretation (as cited in Eagleton, p. 137-38). Hamlet is famous for its complexity. On the one hand, the play is a readable text, which tells a story of prince’s melancholy revenge of Claudius; On the other hand, it is a writable text. Going one step further, we might expand the scope of the revenge: Due to Hamlet’s extraordinary passion for his dead father, he could not accept the quick marriage of his mother. The prince presupposes that the queen, his natural mother, is a conspirer of some unknown foul plots, thus sets her as one of the targets of his revenge. Succeeding in reading the implied meanings of the old king’s revenging demand, Hamlet achieves his verbal sarcasm. In other words, such abundant writability enriches the connotation of this revenge play, grants readers with the independence from predecessors’ interpretation, and calls for more active analytical involvement.

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