

# The Dynamicity of Hamlet Through Hegel's Philosophy of Dialectics and the Epistemological Dilemma in Hamlet's "Antic Disposition"

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## ABSTRACT

Many of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seem to toggle with this idea of seeming and being. We see contradictory themes of skepticism and belief which rely on each other and develop throughout the play, as characters endure their own internal tug-of-war amidst the external "seeming." And, as expected, the characters toggling with such ideas also face the tragic consequences of them: despair, rage, sadness, suffering, and death. After witnessing Hamlet's tragic fate unfold, we are left wondering: is it even worth it to delve into the epistemological and ontological realm of what is? When looking at the tragedy through the scope of Hegel's dialectics, we see the commonly coined plummet of Hamlet become his tragic venture into a plummeting dynamicity, and furthermore, we are met with the consequences of mankind's pursuit of epistemological understanding—ideas which are echoed in works by Eric Levy and Anne Paolucci.

*Hamlet*: the story of a melancholic prince, son to the dead king of Denmark, who tragically falls into madness in his inability to cope with the reality of his father's murder? Or perhaps, *Hamlet* is the tragedy of a man, who desperately searches for answers in his attempt to avenge his father's death, only to drown himself in epistemological sea. Hamlet, much like the majority of the characters throughout the play, bases his understanding of the events around him solely on what *seems*. Many of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, seem to toggle with the idea of seeming and being. In addition, we see contradictory themes of skepticism and belief which rely on each other and develop throughout the play, as characters endure their own internal tug-of-war amidst the external "seeming." As expected, the characters toggling with such ideas also face the tragic consequences: despair, rage, sadness, suffering, and death. The tragedy forces audiences to ask themselves, if there is tragic consequence in making sense of the world by observing it as it seems. Moreover, after witnessing Hamlet's tragic fate unfold, we are left wondering, is it even worth it to delve into the epistemological and ontological realm of what *is*? Contrastingly, how is anyone supposed to grasp life's occurrences without an observation of his or her external surroundings? How was Hamlet supposed to understand the reality of his father's death without trusting the apparition (that was also seen by others at the beginning of the play), observing Claudius' lack of grief, and furthermore his reaction to the poison scene depicted by the players? Shakespeare's answer—complex, tragic, and equivocal—has, for centuries, left audiences with more questions than answers. But, of all things, the burning question for many audiences is this: Is Hamlet truly mad? Has he actually lost his mind in his plot to put on an "antic disposition?" Or he is simply acting? In the realm of Hegel's philosophy of dialectics, the ontological state of Hamlet is clear: he is both sane and insane; his "antic disposition" is both an act and a reality. In a dialectical sense, the progression of Hamlet's character, depicts not a plummet, but a *growth*, as he gradually encapsulates two elements in opposition to each other, reaching what the philosophy of dialectics terms the Hegelian "synthesis." When looking at the tragedy through the scope of Hegel's philosophy of dialectics, we see the commonly coined plummet of Prince Hamlet become his tragic venture into a plummeting dynamicity, and furthermore, we are met with the consequences of mankind's pursuit of epistemological understanding—ideas which are echoed in Eric Levy's "The Epistemology of Ignorance in Hamlet," and Anne Paolucci's "Bradley and Hegel on Shakespeare."

In the opening scene, sentinels discuss "this thing" that has been appearing. Horatio, according to Marcellus, expresses his skepticism in the apparition "twice seen" of the other guards, claiming, "'tis but [their] fantasy' ... not let[ting] belief take hold of him," (1.1.22-3). When the ghost appears, Horatio's skepticism shifts towards slight belief, as he says, "So I have heard and do in part believe it," which is later echoed when he explains the apparition to Hamlet, and when they encounter the ghost once again in 1.4. Horatio, while believing that the apparition exists, grapples with his trust in the ghost, telling Hamlet, "What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord/ Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff" (1.4.69-70). Here, Horatio's epistemological thinking is first challenged by the sight of the ghost who was assumedly King Hamlet. Horatio's initial doubt shifts to shocking belief in the "thing." Thereafter, in his belief that the ghost exists after witnessing it for himself, he questions the morale or intentions of the ghost. This shift in one belief to another based on the foundation of an initial principle is mentioned in Levy's, "The Epistemology of Hamlet," as the idea of "priority sequence" plays a role in one's epistemological

understanding of the world. The concept of “priority sequence” relies on, “the fundamental assumption of any logical epistemology or morality” (Levy 192). In order for Horatio to make assumptions about the ghost’s character, he must first believe in the ghost. Horatio, like many of the characters in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, pursues “the passage from ignorance to knowledge and from doubt to certainty,” making his understanding of the world built upon a logical amalgamation of what seems (Levy 192).

For Hamlet, epistemological understanding of the “outside world, with all its arbitrary events” *is* in ceaseless pursuit (Paolucci 221). His toggle between what reality seems to be and what it truly is appears in the first act of the play. We see Hamlet—surely, with consideration of ontological thought—responding to his mother’s ridicule for his incessant melancholy, saying, “‘Seems,’ madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76). He then elaborates on all of the grieving “actions that a man might play,” such as wearing “customary suits of solemn black,” or exhale “windy suspiration of forced breath,” explaining that all of such things “can denote [him] truly ... But [he has] that within which passes show”—meaning that he both seems to be and is grieving (1.2.78-85). Epistemically, Hamlet’s outward appearance mirrors his inward emotions, much like Claudius and Gertrude’s external unmourning mirrors their lack of despondency in King Hamlet’s death. Hamlet’s mother nonchalantly dismisses King Hamlet, her previous husband’s sudden death, saying that Hamlet should not “forever with thy vielèd lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust ... ‘tis common, all that lives must die (1.2.70-2).

Such reactions make sense in the scheme of the play, as we know, that Hamlet’s mourning and lasting melancholy over the death of his father is directly related to the fact that he genuinely loved him. Likewise, the lack of such emotions, from his mother and Claudius, logically imply that they are either advertently contented with or behind the former King’s death. The conclusions drawn from the seeming, which are fueled by Hamlet’s, “need for knowledge,” takes over the plot of the play in 1.4., when Hamlet encounters the ghost of (supposedly) his father (Levy 193). Upon seeing the ghost, Hamlet says, “Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell / Why thy canonized bones, hearse in death / Have burst their cerements” (1.4.46-8). Hamlet, “preeminently in the interrogative mood,” and not wanting to be, “torment[ed] by ignorance,” follows the ghost (Levy 193).

Aware of the risks of following the apparition—that is, the potential wavering of his seeming sanity and the chance that the ghost is evil or deceitful—Hamlet’s “fate cries out” to pursue the ghost regardless (1.4.82). Levy argues that moments like this in *Hamlet* “emphasize [makind’s] cognitive urge” to know the truth. Not only that, but Levy’s essay confronts “the madness risked by reason, as a result of the shock of knowing” (Levy 193). Hamlet knowingly follows the ghost *because* of his desire to decipher his convoluted thoughts and emotions. Does he get the answers he wants? Or, does he get the painful truth that leads him into insanity, and more so, his death? For Levy, “*Hamlet* emerges as an epistemological tragedy in which the need to know collides with the need to maintain the security of ignorance, which, in turn, intensifies the turmoil caused by unexpected knowledge” (Levy 193). In other words, the play demonstrates the conflict between our desire to find truth and to remain comfortable in our own ignorance, which, furthermore contributes to the disastrous events that unfold throughout the play. In the

tragedy of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare implies that mankind's search for the truth, may not always lead us to the right answers and even more so, a peaceful resolution. By the end of the play, we see the desperately melancholic, emotionally vengeful, and passive yet aggressive Hamlet fall to his plummet, along with the rest of the royal family and other imperative characters. Undoubtedly, *Hamlet* exposes the disastrously harsh consequences of characters who, in their fraught pursuit of the truth, blind themselves to the ontological works of the complicated world around them. The ending of *Hamlet* suggests that our pursuit of epistemological understanding and our relentless reliance on what seems to be, could in turn be our own destruction—thus revealing the tragic reality of mankind's pursuit of truth.

But—should Hamlet's character maintain its notoriety, as the desperately vengeful prince who just couldn't sanely cope with the loss of his father, or the man who suffered the heartbreaking consequences of unveiling the truth of the world around him? Does his obstinate need to bring balance to the imbalance of justice in the name of vengeance bind his fictional legacy to the fate of adversity's descent? According to Hegel's theory of dialectics, it shouldn't. The theory relies on the concept of mighty opposites that “sublate” each other, meaning that they, “both cancel (or negate) and preserve [each other] at the same time” (Maybe). Hegel's theory consists of two opposing concepts, or contradictory elements, that lead to some form of the truth. This idea derives from the premise that one cannot fully understand a single concept without understanding the concept in opposition to it—meaning that the two ideas contrastingly rely on each other. In terms of epistemology, Hegelian knowledge relies on a form of “priority sequence” that amalgamates conflicting ideas to derive a merged truth (Levy 192).

With that said, Hamlet's understanding of the world around him and furthermore, his archetype in the scheme of the play do not depict the fall of his character, but the *growth* of it. Hamlet, in his attempt to, “put an antic disposition on,” encapsulates sanity *and* insanity—both of which become an imperative part of his character (1.5.173). In his acting like a madman, Hamlet puts himself at an advantage in the pursuit of vengeance for his uncle, making others more susceptible to revealing their vulnerabilities and their true character around him—this is very much a conscious, sane, and deliberated decision towards achieving the revenge he so desperately seeks. This also shows his understanding of the process of regicide, which, again, suggests that his seeming madness is simply an act or, in other words, the implementation of his plot to kill the newly crowned king.

Later, in 3.4., Hamlet encounters the ghost for the last time in the play, his mother, also present, during the supposed “encounter,” saw “nothing at all” (3.4.132). Here, scholars debate whether or not Hamlet is sane or insane, wondering if the ghost was actually there, or if it's a result of Hamlet, “wax[ing] desperate with imagination” (1.5.87). For such reasons, audiences often fail to see that Hamlet's destruction (his fall into madness) is also his archetypal growth. While the ambiguities in this scene in particular point more towards the conclusion that Hamlet's sanity has dwindled, it does not dismiss his dynamicity in dialectical terms. Despite his questionable sanity, Hamlet's realization of the world around him and his deliberate actions to achieve vengeance make his plummet an evolution. In other words, this dialectical toggle between sanity and madness may be paradoxical, but (despite his outward insanity) he never loses sight of his

mission to kill Claudius.

With that said, through the scope of Hegelianism, he can certainly be both mad *and* sane. If this is so, then Hamlet's common characterization of a man who desperately falls in his own vengeance and pursuit of the truth should be seen as a dynamic archetype, that is, a character who has grown from the opening scene to the tragic ending of the play. Hegel's theory explains that "[this] contradiction ... does not lead to the rejection of both concepts and hence to nothingness ... but leads to a positive result, namely, to the introduction of a new concept—the synthesis—which unifies the two, earlier, opposed concepts" (Maybee).

By the end of the play, Hamlet is the culmination of his own seeming and being. In his "antic disposition," he abandons the secure realm of ignorance and unveils the harsh truths around him. He realizes Claudius' plot to kill King Hamlet and, relying on the epistemological thinking that led him to the play's final scene, he allows these supposed certainties, one after the other, to guide him in his regicide. The answer to the debate, if, whether or not, Hamlet is mad lies then in dialectics. His intentions to seem mad lead him to his insanity (and whether or not Hamlet's apparent madness is an authentic depiction of his actual mental state), these actions, in turn, lead him to achieve his initial goal: to avenge his father's death. Not only has Hamlet succeeded in his mission to obtain justice for his father, but he furthermore transforms from a tragically lost, purposeless, and suicidal character to a character who has found purpose in his adversity and even more so confronted the falsehoods of his life in the opening act.

Such ideas are seen in Paolucci's essay, "Bradley and Hegel on Shakespeare." While the purpose of the essay is to challenge Bradley's, "conviction that Hegel preferred Greek tragedy to Shakespearean and modern drama", she brings Hegel's philosophies into the conversation of *Hamlet*. In debunking Bradley's claims, Paolucci delves into Hegelian discourse on the ancient and modern world, furthermore likening the paradoxical elements of the "Shakespearean figure" to Hegel's theories. For Paolucci, it is "[through] the outside world, with all its arbitrary events ... [and] through its seeming confusion ... [that] the Shakespearean hero is forced to reveal himself in the fullness of his emotional life" (Paolucci 221). We see that our tragic hero, with his intentions to encounter the vulnerabilities of the world around him—for example as he stages a death similar to his father's in *The Murder of Gonzago* in the hopes of tapping into Claudius' guilt—reveals his own vulnerabilities. This reinforces the dialectical idea of opposing concepts, as the vengeful Hamlet also reveals his own fears and his epistemological vulnerabilities. Paolucci claims that "Nothing in the action of the play brings him relief. His hidden feelings flash out in 'involuntary expressions' which light up, momentarily, deeper doubts and fears (Paolucci 224). This is seen in his contemplation of life and death in his famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be: that is the question" (3.1.55). It is here that we see Hamlet confront the unconceivable aspects of life—envisaging the terrifying concept of the unknown: death. Throughout the play, Shakespeare gives us glimpses of the epistemological Hamlet and also this contemplative, confused, and interminably desperate version, yet again embodying the theory of opposition in Hegel's philosophy of dialectics.

As explained earlier, while Hamlet's sanity is up for debate, "He is at once ready to seek revenge; 'his sense of duty is always before him reflecting the innermost craving of his heart.'" (Paolucci

224). In the opening act of the play, Hamlet swears to avenge his father *to* the apparent ghost of his father, saying, “I with wings as swift / As mediation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge (1.5.29-31). For the remainder of the play, we see Hamlet encounter morally questionable characters, such as Gertrude and Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, never losing sight of his plan from the beginning. While Hamlet is skeptical of the world around him, the growing skepticism of his sanity (from characters within the play and readers and audience members of the drama itself) works towards his advantage to transform his doubts into certainties. It is imperative to acknowledge that Hamlet’s complex scheme—this game of deciphering the seeming and being—is cracked in the end, despite the fact that his actions may or may not derive from his “antic disposition.”

While Hamlet toggles with suicidal thoughts, the meaning of life and death, and avenging his father’s murder, he reveals his wit, but like Paolucci explains, he also reveals his vulnerabilities. Paolucci states that “his self-absorption, his overwhelming desire to justify to himself all that he does and thinks, makes him misjudge the realities of life” (Paolucci 224). It is quite difficult for audiences to watch as, in 3.3., Hamlet has the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius, but chooses not to because of his overwhelming sense of contemplation. He says, “Now might I do it, but now ’a is a-praying / ...And so ’a goes to / heaven” (3.3.72-4). Here, Hamlet approaches the vulnerable King Claudius (in his prayer of confession) and rather than ending the revenge tragedy once and for all, he falls into his own vulnerable state—a state that many consider to be Hamlet’s greatest flaw. Because Claudius is in the middle of prayer, Hamlet—a character of harrowing uncertainty in his own faith—suddenly reasons that the murder of a man in prayer would inevitably result in his place in heaven. Hamlet resolves that, if he was to kill Claudius in this moment, he would be sending “this same villain .../ To heaven / ... [which would be] base and silly, not revenge” (3.3.77-9). As Paolucci says, “When the crisis comes, he too is helpless” to act rationally (Paolucci 224).

Although this is seen to be one of Hamlet’s greatest flaws, it is also a reason that Shakespeare’s characters and plays timelessly maintain the raw and relatable humanness of generation after generation. Characters, such as Hamlet, “are able ... to see themselves objectively, in the same way that an artist contemplates his own work” (Paolucci 221). Throughout the entire play, Hamlet both suffers and rises, plummets and grows, as a result of this tragic trait. From the beginning, his actions are aggressively driven by his hunger for vengeance, but he is unable to overcome his overbearing awareness and innate urge for self-examination—which is both frustrating yet relatable for audiences. In addition, these opposing characteristics depicting a driven yet terribly self-aware Hamlet both contribute to his fall in the end—making Hamlet the bearer of a dialectical flaw.

For Paolucci, the real tragedy of Hamlet lies in the fact that “The events that unfold—although reflecting very often Hamlet’s tragic self-mistrust—do not succeed in rooting it out” (Paolucci 224). By the end of Hamlet, the “External determinations resolve the tragic action,” but there are still unanswered questions and more abstract elements of the tragedy that leave audiences with a certain level of moral dissatisfaction. Paolucci argues that “in no other Shakespearean play [is the resolution] so ineffectual in solving a moral dilemma” (Paolucci 224). Even though the

play “allow[s] us to gaze into the inexplicable paradox of human consciousness,” it’s difficult for audiences to find a sense of satisfaction in Hamlet’s final words: “The rest is silence” (5.2.356).

Despite the common reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* which coins the tragic hero as a man doomed suffer his unending internal conflict between epistemological thinking and constant doubt, or the reading of Hamlet as a character who, in his surrender to open his eyes to the truth, is unable to bear the reality of the world around him, the play captures the consequences mankind’s pursuit of knowledge and also the repercussions of trusting what the world around us seems to be versus what it truly is. Until we acknowledge the applicability of Hegel’s philosophy of dialectics to a plethora of elements within Hamlet, including Hamlet’s character himself, then the tragedy of *Hamlet* will remain but the story of a melancholic man who suffers the plummet of his own tragic flaws and not the complex development of a figure that embodies what it means “To [both] be [and] not to be.” Like Paolucci says, “There is nothing in all ancient tragedy to compare with the figure of Hamlet; in fact, there is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Shakespeare” (Paolucci 224).

#### **WORKS CITED**

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